

Contra Pulse Episode 41 – Keith Murphy

Julie Vallimont

Hello and welcome to Contra pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. Today we speak with renowned guitarist, pianist, mandolinist, and Singer Keith Murphy. Keith is known for his Contra dance playing with numerous amazing bands, for his collaborations with his wife Becky Tracy, and for his concert work. Keith was raised in Newfoundland surrounded by the traditional songs and instrumental music of the island. His mother was a Scottish Country Dance teacher, and that tradition was also part of his musical DNA. During his University years in Ontario he discovered French Canadian and Irish music and the mandolin, banjo, whistles and accordion. He moved to New England in the early 1990s, drawn by the burgeoning contra dance scene, and began playing in many configurations including with Bill Tomczak, Kerry Elkin and Fresh Fish, as a guest in Wild Asparagus, and formed the trio, Nightingale which was active for about 17 years. He also became a part of innovative dance bands big bandemonium and assembly. Keith toured for many years with the Boston based fiddle mega band, Childsplay as well as with Scottish fiddler, Hanneke Cassel. He has also had a solo show of traditional songs that he has toured around the country.

Julie Vallimont

In our conversation, Keith explains how his early influences of Scottish music impacted the precision of his rhythmic approach. He tells us of the first instruments he learned to play, starting with a deep fascination with any piano he could get his hands on until his parents finally bought him one. He shares about how his university studies in Ontario served as the go-between from his life in Newfoundland to playing in the United States, and tells about his first contra dance at an after party at Pinewoods during Scottish Week. We learn about how Nightingale formed, and we get to hear about the meticulous approach that Nightingale had to arranging music. Keith discusses the ways that his song arranging has changed over the years. And we get to hear about his teaching techniques, honed over many years of teaching Celtic music classes in his hometown of Brattleboro Vermont and at camps and festivals around the country and overseas. Let's dive in.

Julie Vallimont

Well, hello Keith Murphy and welcome to Contra Pulse.

Keith Murphy

Thank you so much, delighted to be here.

Julie Vallimont

I am so happy to see you. We don't live that far apart from each other but, you know, in these days of COVID and winter and no gigs we don't get out very much.

Keith Murphy

Exactly.

Julie Vallimont

I was glad it seemed like you got to do some holiday performances just before things started to close down again.

Keith Murphy

We did. We squeaked in with our New Year's Eve concert that we'd done for a long time. Didn't do it a year ago but we managed to do it this year, our annual concert with the Amidon family. We had a small in person audience, but then we streamed it as well so we got to kind of connect with that bigger group out there.

Julie Vallimont

That's wonderful. I'm so glad that you were able to do that. That concert seems like it's been a longstanding tradition here [in Brattleboro, Vermont]. I'm sure for a lot of people it doesn't feel like New Year's without it.

Keith Murphy

Well, that's certainly the case. That's the case for us, anyway. I think this was our 20th year of doing that show.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, wow. You have deep roots in this town.

Keith Murphy

I don't know the exact number but I think it's maybe 27, 28 years or so that I've been here. It's been awhile. You know what, in fact, I'm pretty sure that's longer than I've been anywhere else.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, even where you grew up. It's funny, you reach the stage in life when you're old enough to have lived somewhere else longer than you've lived where you grew up. I remember when I reached that place. For our listeners, it looks like we're in your living room right now and I see your Christmas tree lit up in the background, it's very charming.

Keith Murphy

Yes.

Julie Vallimont

It's early January, 2022 at the moment, and I am just so excited to talk to you. There's so many things we could talk about, I just want to get right to it. I would just love to hear a bit about your youth and growing up in Newfoundland and how you discovered traditional music or what your musical upbringing was and then eventually we'll meander to how you ended up playing for contra dances.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, well growing up in Newfoundland, traditional music is kind of just out there in the public domain, I think, to a greater degree than it is here, for the most part. So, you know, everybody in Newfoundland can name several traditional fiddle players and accordion players, and knows a good number of Newfoundland, traditional songs. So that's kind of part of the DNA of anybody from Newfoundland. I guess more specifically, for me, you know, my mother's from Scotland. My mother taught Scottish country dancing for many years. So that was really my original, traditional dance background. When I was young one of the big sounds around the house was her playing her records getting ready for the classes that she'd be teaching, playing these old ... particularly the accordion based Scottish country dance bands. And then as I got a little older, I became very involved in that scene. And even as a teenager and into my 20s, that was really my first big passion, as a dancer. Which I would say was what I was before a traditional musician. I was very much part of that Scottish dance scene. That's what kind of connected me originally to the States, to New England, was me coming to the Boston area for some of the big Scottish dance events.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, because I remember seeing you at many Scottish events in Boston. I always wondered what that connection was for you. And you play with [Hanneke \[Cassel\]](#) and you've just been at so many events, so that's really deeply rooted for you.

Keith Murphy

Absolutely, I feel like it was really my passion. I feel like there's a lot of aspects of the music and that dance that are very specific, that were very formative for me, you know, even the dancing, which is kind of based around that sort of skipping motion, it's like, you have to be very precise in terms of thinking about where the beat is. You're kind of jumping in the air and you're sort of landing. You're like, timing your landing very specifically. The music is that way as well. I feel like that sense of beat and groove in Scottish Dance music is so precise and that had a really big impact for me, I think.

Julie Vallimont

How did that affect your playing, playing for Scottish dancing?

Keith Murphy

Well, I think it kind of made me think very precisely, like the placement of beats. Like how I tried to think about really playing right to the center of the beat in a very kind of sharp, specific way. You know, those Scottish bands have such snap in their playing. Again, like those accordion based bands, especially. They have the big rhythm section like they often have. They'll have like a second accordion, just playing the chords, and a piano and drums and bass and they're just incredibly tight, and very, very specific in terms of the snap, the placement of the rhythm. So I feel like, that sound really made me think very strongly about just being very precise around rhythm.

Julie Vallimont

How old were you when you first started playing for Scottish dancing?

Keith Murphy

I was older when I started playing. The first time that I played for Scottish dancing, I was in my 20s and I was at Pinewoods. I'm sure many people remember one of those big moments. For me, I was in C sharp minor and I was with [Freeland Barbour](#), Scottish accordion player and I forget how it was that I'd weaseled my way onto the piano. But it was just one of those incredibly exciting, thrilling and terrifying moments. It's kind of like when you drive a car for the first time. It's like, you spend years being a passenger in a car, and you kind of take being in a car for granted. And then when you're actually behind the wheel, you just feel this ... it feels very different. I just remember just how exciting that was. I felt very lucky to be there with Freeland, who was such an amazing, great player.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, there's a lot of things to keep track of at once. Kind of like when you're driving your car for the first time. It's like you have to shift and steer and check the turn signals and look around. I've only played for a few Scottish dances, but it's a lot to take in as a new musician to learn even if you know the dancing.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, exactly. The form of how you use a sequence of tunes in the medley is, again, it's very specific. At a contra dance you start playing a tune, you play it for a while until you feel like you want to change tunes, if you do. But that's not how a Scottish country dance works for the most part.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, there's a whole map sequence and you don't play each tune for very long, and then there's the whole beginning and the end.

Keith Murphy

That's right. It's all very Scottish, ironically.

Julie Vallimont

Yes. So I don't mean to fast forward through your life story. So you grew up in Newfoundland, surrounded by traditional music. What were your first instruments? How did you learn to play?

Keith Murphy

I did classical piano. I was probably nine years old when I started doing piano, but prior to that, for whatever reason I'd just become fascinated with pianos. I remember it kind of became a thing that any house that I went into, before us having a piano, if I went into someone's house I remember looking around to see if there was a piano there. And I would go and I'd start to noodle and I guess it eventually became a source of embarrassment for my parents. My mother decided to actually just get me a piano. So piano was an early instrument. And around the same time, I started taking guitar lessons at the local YMCA, learning folk pop songs of the day. I became quite serious about classical music, and I started playing harpsichord a few years later.

I did classical flute as well, that was another serious instrument for me. I went through a period of serious classical practicing. And then the guitar, that was the one thing outside the classical world for me, and kind of like learning a bunch of those 60s and 70s folk pop songs.

Julie Vallimont

That was a classic era though, the golden era of folk pop songs.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, and by the time I was a little older, when I was a teenager, that became like a big social thing, right? I would bring my guitar to parties, high school parties, and we would sing through our Beatles songs and Simon and Garfunkel and whatever else.

Julie Vallimont

That's fun. How did you end up leaving Newfoundland and coming to the States?

Keith Murphy

So Ontario was kind of the go-between, for me, like the segue between Newfoundland and the States. I went to Ontario for university. First I went to Ottawa, and then Toronto, and I ended up ... I mean, that wasn't one big block of time, because I did other things in the middle of that as well. But I did my undergraduate in political science in Ottawa, and then went to Toronto, still for graduate school in political science. But when I was there, I did a lot of Scottish dancing in Ottawa and Toronto. But that's also ... those places were where I really got into playing Irish music. And by the time I got to Toronto that was a pretty serious Irish scene. And as I say, that became another kind of pivotal chapter for me.

Julie Vallimont

Falling in with the Irish scene, did you go to weekly sessions and things like that?

Keith Murphy

I did. I went to a lot of the sessions. And there was also a big Irish dance scene there as well. I would go to the ceilidhs, that was one thing. But right when I was there, in the early 90s, it was kind of a time when Irish set dancing was really taking off. And if people don't know Irish set dancing, it's kind of like a form of square dancing, four couples in a square formation. And the dance steps, they have this percussive quality. A lot of dancers in set dancing will be wearing hard soled shoes, and they'll make percussive sounds. And I was incredibly lucky when I was doing the set dancing in Toronto. It had become this big thing for young people who had previously been Irish competitive solo dancers, so they were really good dancers and it was a pretty intense scene. Because being in one of those Irish sets, it was like being inside a drum, because they were all so good at the battering at that percussive stepping. And you'd just be in one of these sets, and it was a big, huge percussion instrument, being in that dance set.

Julie Vallimont

Wow. Yeah, for our listeners, if you haven't had the chance to try Irish dancing, you should if you can find it. It's exhilarating. I used to go back when the Burren in Boston used to have

dance classes in the backroom before they turned it into a concert venue. We used to go Irish set dancing every week, and I could never do the footwork, but it's exhilarating, it's like rowdy and exuberant and you get kind of swung around. It's so fun. So fun.

Keith Murphy

It is. It's great.

Julie Vallimont

So then you got into playing Irish music, were you mostly playing mandolin at sessions?

Keith Murphy

You know, the Irish scene, that was sort of a dangerous thing for me because I was all over the map. I was playing everything, you know, I thrived on trying every instrument I could put my hands on. I did play a lot of mandolin. Originally I played some pennywhistle, I had a banjo, I actually played in a ceilidh band. I played accordion in a ceilidh band for a bunch of years. That was my main instrument. Oh, and then I played guitar and piano as well sometimes. So in Irish music, my instruments ... it was kind of a free-for-all.

Julie Vallimont

I love Irish sessions where a piano is welcome. Because there is a long tradition of piano in Irish music, but it's become, a lot of times ... piano is not always welcome, depending on the session. First of all, it's a really powerful instrument that could easily take over the session. But also, I think guitar is more of the sound that people are used to hearing now with the music. Right? You ever studied any Irish style piano?

Keith Murphy

I mean, I listen to a few of the players. You know, [Charlie Lennon](#) was the piano player who seemed to be kind of the most frequent piano player on recordings. But he has like, you know, an idiosyncratic style.

Julie Vallimont

It's very sustained. It's really interesting.

Keith Murphy

That's right. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it definitely has, you know, it has pulse and rhythm in it, but it is also kind of a smooth style playing in a way. I was gonna say, though, I remember, there was this place where a lot of the Irish sessions used to happen in Toronto. And it was a club and there were several different rooms. And there was a room where the sessions typically happened. And there was no piano in that room. But there was another room where there was a piano. And I remember, in that period of time, when I was kind of getting excited about playing piano, we would do the session, you know, in that room without the piano. And then when it was over, I would try to convince a couple of the fiddle players to come with me into the other room, so that I could have a little slot of time playing piano.

Julie Vallimont

I feel like every traditional piano player can identify with that feeling of trying to nudge the jam, the fiddlers to come over to wherever the piano is.

Keith Murphy

Exactly, yeah.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. How did you start thinking about accompanying tunes? Like, did you grow up with tunes in your repertoire? How did you start playing tunes and then accompanying them?

Keith Murphy

I would say no, I did not grow up playing tunes. That was definitely something that came later. And really the first tunes that I played were Scottish tunes. I remember the book, the photocopied book binder that I got, it was called Leaves of Cabbage. It was something that was compiled by [Barbara McOwen](#) in Boston, when she was organizing a lot of Scottish dancing there. It was a book with organized medleys in it so you could actually use this book to play for Scottish dancing. Where a lot of dances actually there was almost like a specific tune associated with a Scottish dance. And then for the rest of the medley you could choose other tunes. So her book, Leaves of Cabbage would have what was called a lead tune for some of the classic dances, and then her selection of two or three other tunes to go in a medley with that lead tune. So that was the book that I used when I was first kind of figuring out chordal accompaniment, and kind of getting a sense of those fiddle tunes. I actually played from the book, that was the thing. And [Susie Petrov](#), great Scottish piano player and accordion player from Boston, she was an early person, for me, explaining to me how things worked, some of the basic vamping style and how the medleys worked. So there was that. And when I was getting into the Irish scene, I initially continued on that same tack, I was a big reader from having been a classical player. I remember someone would talk about a tune, oh, this is a great tune, and I would frantically go and see if I had a book that had that tune in it. Like learning by ear, which has become such a big thing for me and such a big part of what I came to teach as a dance musician, was not originally something that I did in the traditional world. I was, as I say, a big reader and I relied on books in that initial period of time.

Julie Vallimont

I mean, books can be really valuable ways of learning tunes and recording tunes and sharing tunes, especially for people who don't have a scene around them where they can just go out and play tunes with other people. I think it's also important, obviously to play with humans and listen to recordings so you can get the feel right, because it's obviously a lot more than the notes. But there's a lot of really great resources out there.

Keith Murphy

Oh, yeah, absolutely. It's a great way sometimes to kind of find material that maybe is not already in circulation. I mean, it's great to learn tunes from other players. But, digging through

an old tune book, like an old songbook and finding something that maybe, you know, is not being played otherwise, that's a great thing.

Julie Vallimont

It's the same kind of thrill I think some people get from thrift store shopping, or antiquing. Finding the gem in the rough that nobody knows about. It's like looking for a treasure.

Keith Murphy

Yeah. That's right. And including, as you know, all of these tunes come in many different versions. Sometimes you find a version of a tune in a book that's a little different from the version of the tune that's in common currency that people are playing. And sometimes you find something cool in that transcription of the tune in the book.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, the folk process isn't necessarily intentional. Like, we accidentally take out cool parts of tunes and that becomes the common part of the tune, and then looking back and seeing another version you can find a lot of wealth there, for sure. Okay, so we left off, you're in grad school in Canada, you're playing sessions, and then what happened next?

Keith Murphy

So, I was in grad school, and I was sort of working on my master's paper. But at that point, I'd started getting gigs. I was getting dance gigs, I was getting constant gigs. I was getting pulled into all kinds of crazy music. I was playing with klezmer players and people playing Eastern European music and kind of a pretty eclectic range of stuff. And originally, one of the people who I started playing with at that point was a fiddle player who tragically died at a very young age, but [Oliver Schroer](#), one of the great, incredible players and composers and minds in contemporary traditional music, and playing with him kind of became like an education in itself.

Julie Vallimont

I didn't know you played with him, wow. He has some really interesting albums.

Keith Murphy

Oh yeah, he was an interesting guy. But so, I was getting these gigs and then I was basically burning out in grad school. I was kind of reading thousands of pages of dense political theory, and slowly kind of going numb in various ways. And then I thought maybe I just need to take a little pause from academic work. Maybe I'll just sort of let myself play music for a little while, and that's what I'm still doing. [Laughter]

Julie Vallimont

How's the pause going?

Keith Murphy

Yeah, well, it's pretty extended.

Julie Vallimont

What was your master's thesis on?

Keith Murphy

Oh, it was on state theory.

Julie Vallimont

Well, I'm already lost.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, it was kind of on, you know, ways in which different social and economic forces actually influence the structure of states and governments and policies.

Julie Vallimont

I see. So you ended up now taking your break from school and playing a lot. So what brought you to the States and to Boston? Scottish gigs?

Keith Murphy

Yeah, well, so originally, not Scottish gigs so much, although maybe I had a few of those. But at some earlier points in coming down to do Scottish dancing I heard about this thing called contra dancing and did my first contra dance at an after party at Pinewoods during a Scottish week and sort of became intrigued with that. And it's true, [Viveka Fox](#) actually was a person who was another important crossover person for me. She is a great Scottish fiddle player and part of the Scottish scene. She was also going to those Scottish dance events. We started playing some music together and at that point, she was in Vermont. I forget the exact sequence but I think that she had asked me if I would come down and play a contra dance with her and a couple of friends of hers, and those people were [Chris Layer](#), the flute and pipe player, and Jeremiah McLane. So I came down to Bristol, Vermont and we did a contra dance there.

Julie Vallimont

That was your first contra dance? What a great group of people.

Keith Murphy

I think so. I mean, it's quite possible that I've kind of missed some other moment. But that was one of my early memories of playing for contra dancing.

Julie Vallimont

Had you contra danced before besides Pinewoods when you started playing for it?

Keith Murphy

Yeah, subsequently I found the contra dance scene, which was very small at that point, in Toronto. But [Wild Asparagus](#) used to come to Toronto, I think maybe every second year. Somewhere in the middle of my burgeoning awareness of contra dance music and dancing, those guys came to Toronto and I remember going. And of course, that was a big event

because those guys would come and the local group, the ranks were swollen by all these other people from outside Toronto, and from hither and yon coming for the event. So that was a big scene. I have a pretty clear memory of seeing those guys being at that dance, and hearing them play.

Julie Vallimont

That's so fascinating in terms of the timeline that they were one of the first bands ... I just always think of you as happening at the same time, as a contra dance musician, as Wild Asparagus, but they were doing this long enough that you were able to get inspired and influenced by them before you were even playing for dances.

Keith Murphy

Oh, absolutely, because those guys, they'd already been around. They'd been doing their thing for a little while at that point. They were already on their maybe fourth fiddle player.

Julie Vallimont

Wow, that's amazing. So what were some of the first regular contra dances you played for?

Keith Murphy

There was a little series in Toronto. I think at that point there were maybe two bands in town. Emily Miller's mother, [Val Mindel](#), she was in Toronto at that point and I forget how she and I connected but you know that their family moved around a lot. They moved every few years or so because of Emily's father's work with Reuters. But they were in Toronto while I was there, and somehow I connected with Val, and Val was very, very keen to get a contra dance band together. So she and I started playing and she was another great person for me, in terms of learning about contra dancing, and she fed me a lot of recordings that I listened to that again became really influential. I remember, Val was the one who introduced me to the [American Cafe Orchestra](#), which is kind of one of the groups in my pantheon of great, great, great bands of any kind, sort of great dance bands.

Julie Vallimont

Who were some of your other influences? What were you listening to?

Keith Murphy

In contra dance music?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah.

Keith Murphy

Well, you know she gave me some of the people who were kind of playing at that time. So Rodney [Miller], some of Rodney's albums, the Airplang recordings, and Wild Asparagus. I listened to those guys a lot because those guys, they were groundbreakers, you know. They were doing some pretty amazing things. I still remember thinking whoa, like you can do that?

You could do that for dancing? American Cafe Orchestra, they were huge for me, that's another band that just had an amazing groove. I still feel like I hear those old cassettes, those old recordings and there's just a way in which ... that way of playing just resonates so deeply for me. Kerry Elkin, he was another one. I remember getting Kerry's first cassette, [Soir et Matin](#). That was very influential. I listened to Yankee Ingenuity, they had their CD. I remember listening to Kate's [Barnes] piano playing. I remember listening to those recordings and trying to think like, what is going on there with the piano? That was definitely a little puzzle that I spent a while trying to decipher.

Julie Vallimont

Wow, you know, it's funny, because when I was a new contra player, I did that too. I would listen to them and try to decipher things and man, stuff that you and Jeremiah did on the Nightingale things are top on the list of things I tried to decipher.

Keith Murphy

That's funny.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, all these other influences. We all are influenced by people, we work it into our own style, we make it our own, we pass it forward, it's just really cool how that happens.

Keith Murphy

I think that process, though, of listening to something, and kind of being impressed, or that you like it, but you just can't figure it out. It just makes no sense to you. I had that experience also with a guitar player who was very influential for me, [Dáithí Sproule](#). I remember listening to Dáithí's guitar playing, and it was great. But I just could not figure out what he was doing. I would just, like, listen to it and listen to it and then I would go away. And I would kind of like work on my own playing, maybe sort of trying to incorporate something, some small shred of his playing. And then I remember, at one point, kind of going back and listening to it, and I thought, oh, I get it, I understand what's happening now. So you talked about listening to stuff and like initially, it's kind of like this maze, it's this puzzle, then you kind of go away and you kind of work on your own playing. And those sounds sit maybe in your mind somewhere in the back or in the middle of your mind and eventually there's some kind of crossroads and you think, okay, yes, now I get it, that's not that complicated.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, I feel the same way about fiddle tunes. You know, like, for me not growing up around fiddle tunes at first, they're like gibberish. They're like a whole bunch of notes. And when new students are learning tunes, I joke that some tunes to them sound like notes in a blender, like they don't happen in any discernible order. They're not predictable. But the more tunes, obviously, that you play, your brain recognizes the patterns. And then all of a sudden, it's like learning a new language and once you become fluent enough in a language, first you just recognize the sounds and then it all starts to make sense, which is amazing. So, what were some of your first bands when you started doing music seriously?

Keith Murphy

Oh, in traditional music?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, or not? Did you have some other kind of band?

Keith Murphy

Oh, yeah, I played in rock bands when I was in DC, when I was younger, but those are lost to the mists of time. I found a fiddle player to play for Scottish dancing in Toronto. I was very keen to make that happen. So I had a duo with a woman who I introduced to Scottish fiddling, so that was definitely kind of a little learning project for both of us. I had that contra dance duo with Val. I had Irish bands that I played with in Toronto, we had, our version, an American Jigsaw band [the contra band from the Pacific Northwest]. I had a Ceidilh band in Toronto called Jigsaw. But then when I came to the States, I talked about playing with Viveka and Jeremiah and Chris and that was a band, at one point, Peat Fire, somewhat short lived. But really when I was coming to the States, when I made the move to the States it was around the formation of Nightingale. Nightingale was the first big band of mine in the States. Although I'd also started to play with Kerry Elkin in Fresh Fish, that actually was kind of happening around the same time. And again, I learned a lot playing from Kerry, one of the great fiddle players in contra dancing. Um, who else did I play with? I'm sort of trying to think sequentially, if there was a sequence. I played in Big Bandemonium. That was a really fun band and a fun exercise in arranging. I did some tune arranging for that band. The other big band actually, prior to Big Bandemonium that I played in was the band of two names, [Popcorn Behavior](#) initially and then later Assembly. That was a band that I played with for longer, even though I was kind of the last member to join. Sam [Amidon], Thomas [Bartlett], and Stefan [Amidon] had been a trio for years before I came along. But that was a great band. When I look back on it, I was very fortunate to get to play with those guys. Even as young men as they were, they were formidable talents, even then.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, absolutely. I mean, I still love those albums. Everybody listened to them. You can hear the germ of the spark of what all of them have in them to become just incredible. All of them have amazing musical careers now in all different ways. Oh, so many things I would ask you about, I'm going to derail myself. I want to ask you about Popcorn Behavior and Nightingale all these things, and how you ended up in Wild Asparagus.

Keith Murphy

Oh, I married into Wild Asparagus. [Laughter]

Julie Vallimont

That's the easy one. And then you've gone to St. Croix with Wild Asparagus and played all over the place. Quite the adventures. Man, where do we start next? So, how did Nightingale form and what was your approach? Did you want to form a band that played all kinds of music? I

assume you didn't form it as a contra dance band, you just sort of happened to play for contra dance in addition to the other things that you were doing?

Keith Murphy

Well, I guess I could say that Nightingale formed because Jeremiah and I needed a place to stay on our way to New York City one time. Jerry and I were actually going to play in New York with Fresh Fish, we wanted to meet up beforehand and then travel to the city together. We were trying to figure out where we would meet and where we would stay at. And Jerry said, I know this woman, Becky Tracy, she lives just north of the city, near New Haven. And so we ended up meeting there. And of course, that night, we took out our instruments, and we played with Beck and we kind of knew within about five minutes that we were going to do more playing. So you know, we sort of found a bunch of things to play. And then the other part of that equation was that Jerry actually had been asked to put a band together for a dance weekend in North Carolina. And so pretty soon into that session, I think we were at the end of that evening, we realized, well this would be a really fun band to have do that gig. And so we started organizing a tour to go down to North Carolina. I guess we realized right away that there was other stuff that we wanted to play outside of contra dance, formed, structured music. So that first tour was this mix of dances and concerts. I think the first gig that we did was a concert in Montpelier, Vermont. We did sort of form with the idea that we would do both of those things, concerts and dances.

Julie Vallimont

Man, do you have recordings of any of your early rehearsals or your first concerts or anything?

Keith Murphy

I don't know. Maybe we do, I'm not sure.

Julie Vallimont

I just always think it's really interesting to look at the early work from any artist or writer, anybody you know. It's just really interesting, because it takes a while to define a sound and Nightingale had such a carefully crafted, intentional sound. But yet, at its center is just the musical interplay between the three of you, which I imagine you all knew from the very beginning. So yeah, it's like listening to that raw sound before you decide what it's going to be and shape it into something. It's just really interesting.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, right. I think we kind of had that sense of wanting to mess around with the forms of arrangements and things. But really the first thing for us was a sense of groove and just rhythmic connection. I think that was the thing that really got us excited initially.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, I mean, everybody has a slightly different rhythmic groove that they play tunes in which our listeners may or may not really think about. Sometimes some melody players just lock in together like magic and sometimes they don't, and it has nothing to do with how well they like

each other. But to find people who your groove fits in with perfectly, it's amazing. It doesn't happen necessarily that often.

Keith Murphy

Yeah. And even for us. We thought about grooves a lot. There would be times when it wasn't like fixed in stone. It was never a thing that I felt like we could take for granted. You know, if our attention was slightly elsewhere we would have to work to kind of make that thing happen, to make that groove connection happen. I think that that's the thing for me. I mean, I guess there are some great players out there on a certain level where they just totally have it, they don't have to think about the groove. I feel like it's something that I never take for granted. There's always another step deeper that you can go into your groove. So, I felt like it always required attention and some amount of work.

Julie Vallimont

Absolutely.

Keith Murphy

But even then, having said that, you can be playing with certain people and working as hard as you possibly can and still, it's not happening. I feel like we were lucky that we could make it happen.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, when you have that natural proclivity, it makes it easier. But it does take work, it takes learning. I think, as a musician, individually, you have to have the technical skill to be able to play your instrument at the level that you can hold on a solid groove and have your own sense of space and physicality of feeling the music in your body and having your own center. And then being able to listen and respond to other people and to what they're doing. So it's like developing your own technical skills because if your head is worried about where your hands are going, or what you're doing, you can't really be present with other people in the same way.

Keith Murphy

That's right. And that's kind of circling back to part of our conversation earlier on about written music. I mean, that's the thing when I'm part of a teaching workshop, I will often tell dance musicians that if you rely on written music, the single most important thing that you can do as a dance musician to improve your playing, is to learn to play by ear. Because for that very reason, if you want to really connect musically and rhythmically with another player, you have to be able to put as much of your attention on that as possible. And if part of your attention is going through a piece of paper on a stand, that's gonna be an impediment. It's gonna be an obstacle for you.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, and then as you're becoming a band together, some of it is just time. Just spending a lot of time playing together and getting to know each other and kind of learning each other's habits and merging together, and learning to give and take with each other. Maybe someone's usually

on the front of the beat, or the back of the beat. But then also rehearsal, what was the process like where you really became very tight as a band? What kind of things did you work on?

Keith Murphy

Well, what was it like? It was intense. I like to say that no band ever spent more hours of discussion per bar of music than Nightingale. We developed sort of a technique where I think we tried to be open to any possible idea. So we would record a lot. We would record a lot in our rehearsals. So, if we would be playing a thing a certain way, and somebody else would say, "What if we do it this way?" No matter what your initial reaction to that idea was, you would do it. And you'd record it, and then you'd go away and you'd listen back to it because sometimes the way you hear a thing after the fact is not the same as how you hear it in the moment. So there was a lot of experimentation and a lot of reflection, I guess. We would spend a lot of time after the fact. We would let things percolate a lot, and we would try things, and then we would come back and someone would have written some harmony part or had a concept for some riff or groove to go along with it. Or some other piece of melodic material to go along with something else. So there's a lot of writing and thinking, but we did spend a lot of time, and more so as time went on. I think because initially you sit down and from whatever source people have certain ideas about how to arrange something, how to play something. And you kind of go through that initial layer of ideas. And then, at a certain point, then you start digging a little deeper. I think that was one of the great things, Jeremiah especially, I think one of the things that he brought. He's a very eclectic listener and player, but would listen to a wide range of things. He was like, someone who had a real understanding of Latin rhythms, and could play swing music and had a lot of background in Louisiana and soul music and stuff. So he was great that way, in terms of bringing material in, and a great idea generator. I think one of my strengths in that, I would say, I was good as an editor, sometimes. I could see how pieces might fit or I might hear something go by that might have been forgotten but I would kind of latch on to it.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, that's one way to compose or arrange together as a band, is just generate ideas for a while and don't judge them. And like you say, say yes to everything. Just try everything, even if it repulses you, or you have this weird, you know, oh, that won't be good. But you have to resist that feeling, right? And go with it. But then going back, and like collecting those ideas, and listening back to them, and editing, as you say, and choosing what you're going to do is the other half of the process. That's just as important. I feel like, listening to all your various albums, like through what you do with Nightingale, and your amazing, beautiful solo albums, it seems to me it's about taking an idea and just honing in on it and taking it as deep as possible. What other kind of methods do you use in your own creative process to do that? Like, you do a lot of song settings, and you'll take a beautiful song and instead of following the traditional chord changes, you'll put this piano riff under it that just doesn't change for the entire time and I just love it and it's very trance-like. How do you work up those ideas? How do you deepen them?

Keith Murphy

I think it's kind of changed and evolved over time, especially my sense of song arranging. I think that's changed a lot. Because over time, even when I did my initial solo song recording, that was

quite arranged, and had other musicians playing. And I used a lot of textures and counter melodies, and then some of the things that you're talking about, kind of like ostinato, chordal textures and things. But then, as time went on, I actually started doing more solo performing. That was just me playing guitar mostly. And I kind of evolved a different way of playing and arranging those songs, and kind of just a whole other way of thinking about the songs. I think, in many ways, I would have something in my arrangements, even those solo arrangements, maybe it was creative, but also more simple. I think, over time, like with the songs I still try, to have something unique in them, something kind of atmospheric say, but I try to do it with a very minimum of ingredients. It's a different style of cooking. I think I try to get a little deeper, some kind of like more pure emotional connection with the song. I sort of think about the trajectory of how I thought about song arranging with Nightingale, where, in a way, the song was almost just another vehicle, often for some kind of instrumental texture, in some cases anyway. That was sort of one end of the spectrum. In more recent years I just tried to (and you'll hear a lot of traditional singers sort of say this), for me, the words really became paramount. I just came to think much more deeply about the words of a song, just taking them more seriously and investing more of my energy into the actual conveyance of the pure emotion of the song, rather than worrying as much about the shape and the texture and the dynamics around it. Sure, of course, to some degree, still thinking about those things but the balance definitely shifted a lot for me over the years.

Julie Vallimont

That's really interesting. I mean, both the way that Nightingale's song arrangements have the instrumental parts woven in among the vocal parts and sometimes the tune is ... it comes in at a place that's not quite on the A or the B, it's kind of interwoven in this really interesting way. It's just beautiful. But then there's also, like you say, just stripping these songs down to their essence. Everyone has their favorite Nightingale song, but for me, your version of Hills, the Pete Sutherland song. It's just the way all the parts come together. It's just really beautiful.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, well, thank you, that was version 27 of that song.

Julie Vallimont

Right, exactly. I wanted to be a fly on the wall so bad. Like, can you imagine being there and just listening to you figure that out for days, hours, weeks? Probably performing it, tweaking it?

Keith Murphy

Yes. There were several generations of flies that would have gone through the formation of that song.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, they have a short life cycle.

Keith Murphy

I remember, that was a long process, kind of really settling on that groove and then the parts and kind of putting them together. But, you know, it was incredibly satisfying. I mean, that was one of the really great, rewarding feelings and moments. When you kind of feel like you've realized something that you'd started working towards hours and weeks, and maybe months earlier. That was, it was a very satisfying arrangement to do and a great song to start with.

Julie Vallimont

I think people don't always realize there's often a lot of dead ends, or false starts or moments where this isn't working in arranging. I think the trick is, how do you deal with them when you come across these things? Well, this isn't working, or this needs something? Or what do we do here? How do you handle those kind of situations when you're like, got an idea, but the next idea is not coming yet?

Keith Murphy

Well, you can always walk away and come back to it another day. Sometimes those questions kind of get answered quickly, and sometimes very slowly. Sometimes the ones that take the longest to kind of work out, like Hills, end up being worth of the price.

Julie Vallimont

You just have to wait until the time is right when the idea comes, right? You can't force it. So, as a contra dance band, you did a lot of cool stuff. How's that for the understatement of the year? I am no Terry Gross. [Laughter]. But you're doing things that people hadn't done before, necessarily. Like being inspired by Wild Asparagus and Wild Asparagus giving you kind of permission, sort of in the sense, of breaking that ground and saying, well we can do these things. But you were doing a lot of things that hadn't been done before, and what was your approach to that? Where did you get ideas from?

Keith Murphy

I don't you know, I guess I remember more clearly all the ideas that we stole from other people. I think that, in a lot of ways, I guess we had original ideas, but in some ways, it was just kind of throwing together some of the favorite things that we'd heard. [La Bottine Souriante](#) or some Irish bands. You know, there's never any shame in stealing. If you listen to accounts from The Beatles, from Paul McCartney talking about how the Beatles kind of came up with all their different classic songs ... song after song was based on something that they'd stolen from somebody else, then trying to imitate Bob Dylan on this song, or somebody else in that song. I feel like Nightingale, we did a lot of that as well, we were sort of trying to ... we wanted to imitate other bands, things that we thought were really cool, but probably we didn't succeed in imitating them. We were trying to but we didn't and that became, instead, our unique thing. In some ways, I think it was less about us trying to do something on our own. I think it's just what happened, I think, that's kind of how it felt to me.

Julie Vallimont

I think that's really empowering for any new contra musicians out there, especially folks in bands. You know, this is what all musicians do, right? You get inspired by other people, either in

your scene or outside of it and then you say, oh, I want to try this, let's do this and see how we can apply this to contra dancing, and even Nightingale did that. And you know, before them, Wild Asparagus did that, and everybody's been doing that. We all do it.

Keith Murphy

Exactly, that's right.

Julie Vallimont

It's a question of making it your own in a way that is respectful to the source that you got it from, and letting it be its own thing once it's you. I think that's the magic, is not trying to sound like anybody else. And Nightingale inspired so many other bands. There are a couple bands when they started, they sounded a lot like Nightingale. But then over time, they formed their own identity as they played together and learned what to do with those influences and how to make them their own. Not gonna mention names here.

Keith Murphy

My legal team is standing by preparing a brief right now. [Laughter]

Julie Vallimont

Nightingale does all these things for contra dancing that I don't know if other people were doing them at the time. You certainly were bringing in tunes from other traditions, but Wild Asparagus was also doing that and Fresh Fish. I'm curious which of these things Wild Asparagus was also doing, like the classic halftime groove.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, I mean, someone with a higher degree of musicology would have to answer that question, who kind of developed that first? But the other band, we haven't mentioned is the [Clayfoot Strutters](#) which were around the same time. And they were doing a lot of that stuff as well. So again, I don't know who gets the credit for introducing that idea into contra dancing. It might be neither one of those bands, but they were bands that I was aware of doing that. And of course, Jeremiah played in the Clayfoot Strutters. So he kind of had that in his pocket to start with. I mean I think the thing that he and I particularly bonded on was our common repertoire appreciation of pop music from the 60s and 70s. Which I kind of wish I mentioned earlier, that was another big part of my listening. And so, you know, a lot of grooves, a lot of that riff based song was something that I was very ready to kind of ... that wasn't my idea but when someone said, let's do this, I was ready to jump on that bandwagon.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it's important for any band. It's also like the milieu, like the context around the band and who else you're playing with, and who you're hearing ideas from, and who are your contemporaries. And ideas just jump around, they flow from place to place back and forth, especially if you're in multiple bands. What was the reaction when you started doing things like abrupt transitions, which is one of the hallmarks of like, everyone knows, if you start playing a generic tune and it's the last dance of the night, it's not gonna stay that way for very long, right?

Or, you know, trying some more montuno kind of influences or halftime grooves, or all those things. What was the reaction when you started doing those things? Was it already pretty common or did you get some looks or did callers have things to say about it?

Keith Murphy

Well, we were lucky with the callers. The callers who we worked with, they weren't caught off guard. They knew about these things. You know, Steve Zakon-Anderson, he was a great caller for us early on and Lisa Greenleaf from the early days of Nightingale was great. And they were aware of these things, knew how to call them. When we play those things for dances from very early on ... and this was Becky's great strength, Jerry and I would defer to Becky ultimately as the dance decider, the decision maker about what was going to work or what wasn't going to work. Or what, for a given series of dance figures, whether a particular piece of music of ours was going to work or not. She was kind of a linchpin there. But the dancers? I can't say if the dancers were reacting to things that we did because they'd never heard them before, or just because they liked how we did them, or ... it's hard to know. I guess it's true that if we were to do some of those things today, probably, the reaction would be different. Maybe because dancers have heard those things for so many years, that maybe they wouldn't have the same impact. So I don't know how much of the impact of Nightingale was because the dancers hadn't heard those ideas before or not.

Julie Vallimont

I think it had its own impact, right? But it sounds like it wasn't that shocking to people in the beginning, when you were trying these things, it wasn't out of nowhere.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, I don't think so. I mean, dancers in different places would have different frames of reference, I guess. And also, to be fair, the ideas themselves, ideas are important. But execution ... they kind of stand or fall on execution, right? So you can kind of get a reaction from a certain idea if you just kind of muddle your way through it, but if you really want to move people, have people respond emotionally, it takes more than just the idea.

Julie Vallimont

Right. Like, if you're gonna have an abrupt transition, you can foreshadow the transition and build some tension that's resolved when you switch, and rehearse the transition so that you're executing it perfectly, so that no one's confused in that moment about what's happening and other things like that. What are the kind of things you would think about? I know, I just listed a bunch, but ... [Laughter]

Keith Murphy

Well, I mean, the thing, more than anything, for me, is that it's got to be a great groove. A concept of a certain sort of dynamic transition or rhythmic groove, syncopation, transition ... whatever it is that you're doing, if the thing before the transition and the thing after the transition are not dead in the pocket it's not that effective. It's like doing a jig to a reel, an idea that's been around for a long time. That's always going to be exciting, going from 6/8 into 4/4. But boy, if

that beat is rock solid in the 6/8 and that same beat is unmoving, when you move into 4/4, that effect is going to be so much greater. So it's the thing that we would often talk about. I've often talked about when I've done dance workshops. Again, it's sort of like all of those tricks, arranging concepts, they're great, and they can have tremendous impact. But if you don't have the fundamentals underneath it ... and for me, the most important fundamental of all in dance music is rock solid rhythm, and groove. If you don't have that, everything else just becomes kind of window dressing.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. For your dance playing, especially, that's just such an obvious hallmark of your playing. It's just this unassailable groove. It almost seems effortless in a way. But it's also very focused, intentional. Whether you're playing guitar or piano or mandolin, or doing foot percussion. How do you develop that groove as a player? Where did you develop that skill or that centeredness in your own musicality?

Keith Murphy

You know, it's the way a lot of musicians would answer a lot of questions like that. It's listening to other great players, right? It's like having those sounds in your head, and really internalizing them. So, I have a little catalog of sources like this. But I think about those Scottish dance bands, those bands are just trains. An earthquake could happen and those bands would not drop a millisecond from their groove. Those Irish set dances just again, like just that driving percussive sound. The pop music that I talked about. Great pop songs having a really great groove that you just want to nod your head to and tap your feet to. The great French Canadian bands, like you hear [La Bottine Souriante](#) with great groove on the feet. And you listen to things that just move you. I think if you get moved yourself by those sounds, if you come to love those sounds, then they kind of work their way into you and that becomes the thing that you in turn can tap into as a player.

Julie Vallimont

How do you practice? Like, did you practice with a metronome or play along with recordings?

Keith Murphy

I have practiced with a metronome sometimes. I wouldn't say that's been the most influential thing. Have I played along with recordings? Maybe a little bit. Maybe I did French Canadian foot percussion along with some great grooving recordings. I wouldn't have played piano along with recordings, or guitar. Here's another great groove player that I think of as a way of trying to answer your question, you know, [Jeff Claus](#) with the [Horse Flies](#). Jeff plays the banjo uke, and he doesn't change his groove very much from one set of tunes to another, but it is deep. And you used that word, unassailable. That's kind of what you think about when you hear Jeff. He is a machine. And when you talk to Jeff, he talks about, it's kind of like a meditation. I think that's the thing. I mean, there is a practice. You asked about, how do you practice? For me, it's more like, an intentionality. It's almost like sitting down to meditate in a way. It's like, you sit down at your instrument, and you were just gonna try to sit as deeply in the groove as you can. And you're going to try to not think about that car horn outside or whatever, any other sort of

distracting thing. I think it's a practice. The practice is like a meditation kind of practice. It's just like a focus that you work on. It's based on those connections that you make as a listener, for me.

Julie Vallimont

It's really interesting, like thinking of the precision that you talk about, in Scottish dancing, in your love of groove across all these different kinds of music. And yet, it's just channeling it through you and letting it be meditation. Like, let your thoughts go by like clouds in the sky, right? Just focus on the groove. Sometimes if I want to get into a groove, I'll just play the same thing for like, half an hour or something at home. Do you ever do exercises like that or does it just come to you?

Keith Murphy

I don't think I ever did that. I don't think I ever really did a lot of exercise work. I mean, the one thing that I'll say, beyond that state of mind rap that I've given ... like, I mean, there's clearly like a physical ... there is a technical thing that you have to do, to then put those ideas on your instrument. And those are different, obviously, for every instrument that you might play. And it's true in some ways. I think as a teacher I learned a lot, because teaching is another way of making you have to focus on your technique in that process of trying to convey, trying to help somebody else who, physically, is kind of doing something awkward on their instrument. And then kind of like thinking about that, and trying to break it down. That actually ends up refining my own sense of what I'm doing. So, as a piano player, sometimes I'll talk with students about just the actual physical way in which you use your shoulder and your arm and your hand to kind of create this sense of movement, coming down on the instrument. And I think that's something that I probably should have thought about and that came to me in the course of teaching, but then it helped refine my own playing.

Julie Vallimont

Like when you mentioned the Horse Flies and talking about the groove machine. When you hear the name Horse Flies you instantly think groove band. It just pops into my head that way. But the banjo, the mechanics of playing the clawhammer banjo, you know, every instrument has its own groove to it. And, you know, the guitar, you mostly play DADGAD when you're playing dances, is that true?

Keith Murphy

For dance playing? That's right. Yep.

Julie Vallimont

Are there particular things you do on the guitar that help enhance your dance playing?

Keith Murphy

Are there particular things? Well, I'm trying to think of how to answer that. You know, for me on the guitar, like at dances, for better or for worse, there's a lot of different things that I would do. Here so, I have my guitar. So I would sometimes play just like, a very straight groove. A very

straight kind of swingy, kind of offbeat groove. [Keith plays a straight ahead groove]. So that's a certain kind of rhythmic zone, requires a certain kind of physical approach to how I do that. Versus: [Keith plays a jig groove with backbeat]. That's a very sort of different kind of a thing as is [Keith plays a fingerstyle groove], that I might do in setting up kind of a lighter texture. Or if I was doing kind of a more syncopated groove like [Keith plays a syncopated groove]. I guess if I was to try to answer your question, if I was trying to sort of focus on one thing in my guitar playing, for most of those things, certainly like in reel playing, sort of whatever the groove is, if it's an offbeat swing groove. If it's like a percussive thing, if it's a more open sustaining thing or more syncopated thing like that last thing, I do sort of try to think of my strumming arm as kind of like this pendulum. When I teach guitar classes I talk about a lot of what I do, a lot of the different sounds being underpinned by this down, up, down, up, down, up, down [Keith plays the syncopated groove slower and then mutes the notes until it is just rhythm], like this thing is down, up, down, up, down, up, down, up, down, up, down, up, down, up, down, up. And it's part of what anchors me, even if it's a very syncopated thing that kind of, like anchors me into a very steady groove, in the same way that this thing: [Keith plays the straight ahead groove and then mutes the notes so it is just rhythm] has a very different ... comes across as a very different sound. But it's still down, up, down, up, down, up, down, down, like my hand doesn't go down, down. It doesn't sort of stop. There's no stop motion, even if I skip a strum in one direction, my hand is still tracing that motion all the time, down, up, down, up, down, up, down, up.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. And then you're changing the emphasis, you could put a lot of backbeat if you emphasize one way.

Keith Murphy

That's right. And so if I teach a guitar class, [Keith plays an up and down strum with muted strings], I'll do this thing where I'll just have people do a very unaccented thing, 1 2 3 4. And then put emphasis on the downbeat or the offbeat, [Keith strums with an accent on the offbeat], 1 2 3 4. Or on the downbeat, [Keith strums with an accent on the downbeat], 1 2 3 4. And then we'll do a syncopated thing. [Keith strums with a syncopated accent]. But it's still down, up, down, up, down. I guess that's like, a thing that kind of holds a lot of my guitar playing together, is that notion of kind of a physical underpinning. It's just kind of like a steady pendulum.

Julie Vallimont

Do you ever play boom chuck on the guitar for dances?

Keith Murphy

Never really a thing that I did. No, not so much.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. I mean, it's like, you don't have to, you know what I mean? There's a lot of contra dancing music has that underpinning of boom chuck underneath it and some people play it. But contra dance doesn't need that to dance to. I call it the DADGAD strummy strummy for lack of a better technical term. It's a very forward moving, kind of propulsive feeling, instead of the up and down

of boom chuck whether it be guitar boom chuck or piano boom chuck. This seems to be more your aesthetic. It's partly just a stylistic and aesthetic choice it seems like.

Keith Murphy

Yeah.

Julie Vallimont

Now, when you're playing piano, what tradition is at the heart of most of your contra dance piano playing?

Keith Murphy

I think I sort of tried at different times ... I kind of dip into different traditions, but maybe French Canadian is kind of a pretty central thing for me that I gravitate towards. There's a couple of elements to that sound, but one of the things that comes into play for me in addition to the rhythmic thing, which, as I said, almost feels like the fundamental thing. But the technique in French Canadian playing that you'll know, is that notion of an inner voice that you typically kind of create with your right thumb. So rather than just have the left hand playing a bass note and then the right hand playing a chord, your thumb, the right thumb, is going to go down at the same time as the left hand often, and it's going to trace a little ascending or descending line kind of in between the rest of the two hands. So it's like that little counter melody kind of a thing.

Julie Vallimont

It's also called thumb leading or the third hand. The interesting thing about that is it gives this very downbeat, centered kind of feeling because now you're marking the downbeat, both with the bass and with a counter melody or harmonic element. And yet, you still have the lift of the other chords lifting off. So it's a very centered kind of thing. I could see that being something you could build a really deep groove around if you like, sink into it enough.

Keith Murphy

I think it's true, I think part of my thing is really feeling that downbeat very strong, and the thing I talked about earlier about like really thinking about, like, placing those notes right in the middle of the beat. And I think it's true that having that right thumb kind of accentuate that downbeat with the left hand, I think kind of helps achieve that emphasis.

Julie Vallimont

Do you ever play in a Cape Breton style piano, like rocking octaves and stuff like that?

Keith Murphy

I have a kind of a fake Cape Breton thing that I do. But ... yeah, yeah.

Julie Vallimont

It's fun, the day I discovered Cape Breton piano, and just that rocking left hand, it was a revelation for me, because it's a way to keep that rhythmic engine going in your body, like you talked about with guitar strumming. I wanted to find a way to strum a piano and I couldn't figure

it out. That was the closest way I could do it. Where in Cape Breton piano, both hands are involved in the rhythm in so many different ways on the downbeat, not on the downbeat, like syncopations, subdivisions. They can always go even if you're just playing one note, you can just rock your left hand on the same octave and not change notes, which is kind of like strumming to me.

Keith Murphy

Right. I think that's the thing. I think that the guitar is sort of set up ... when you do all of those down, up, down, up, down up strums, you kind of have more immediate access to a lot of those subdivisions and access to syncopations in these little micro places that you have to work a little harder at to achieve on the piano. But you're right. One of the ways of doing that is separating your pinkie on your left hand and your thumb, and kind of having the left hand create notes in two different places, as opposed to just one time with the octave.

Julie Vallimont

What are the kinds of things you do on the piano? Do you do things where both hands are doing different things in terms of like counter melodies, or chords or harmony parts in one hand and rhythm in the other hand or are you mostly accompanying with both hands together?

Keith Murphy

There's some arranged things that I have that I've done over the years where I have a little counter melody thing that I'll do. I'll often sort of, sometimes do a thing in sixths in my right hand if I have kind of a slower kind of counter melody thing. But I would say my technical repertoire is not really wide as a piano player. I don't do like a lot of fast moving stuff. I don't do like fast, melodic work for example, like on the piano.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, but there's that unassailable groove, right? That's how I can always tell when you're playing the piano, I could be walking into a hall from 100,000 feet away and I would know it was you. It's just that groove, always, which is just a really great underpinning.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, well, it's true. I have to say, I think over time, I came to enjoy playing the piano more at dances, I think than the guitar. I think over time, yeah. But then with Wild Asparagus ... which honestly, the most dance playing that I've done in the past, I don't know, 6, 8, 10 years, it's probably been with Wild Asparagus. Because in a lot of ways I've done less dance playing over the years and the playing that I've done has been a lot with Wild Asparagus. The instrument that I play, mostly there, is mandolin. That's like another kind of rhythmic thing that I worked out. Partly with Nightingale, I did a lot with Assembly and then again with Asparagus. Being in these bands where basically, all the rhythmic jobs were covered, where somebody else was doing all the heavy lifting in the rhythm section and the melody was being taken care of. The mandolin, I discovered was this instrument that I could sort of use to sit in the middle and sometimes kind of play some of the melodies. But then to kind of do this in between thing, where I was sort of doing rhythmic stuff, but maybe more of a riff that wasn't the same as what the piano player was

doing, but kind of locked in with that, and was kind of like this little piece of counter melody, counter rhythm. So that became another fun place for me to sit rhythmically in a band.

Julie Vallimont

That's a fun place because you can go in so many different directions depending on what's happening. Mandolin can be a very rhythmic instrument. I love the interlock of piano and mandolin together. Sometimes I feel like piano plus mandolin equals guitar but better, you know. It's like the strummy-ness of one, but they don't get in each other's way very much sonically. Whereas sometimes piano and guitar can kind of step on each other's toes, if you have a thoughtful piano player who leaves room for the mandolin, but it just really adds a lot of that kind of high frequency brightness that it adds.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, it can just bring a lot of punch into the mix, to the arrangement.

Julie Vallimont

I think on some recent episode of Contra Pulse, I was talking to somebody else, and I was talking about, I love the thing you do on Flying Tent with the mandolin where you're just going chicka chicka, chicka. You're playing it like way up or something. So great. It's just like, pure rhythm.

Keith Murphy

Well, there's a thing that I used to do on that where I would play ... you know, you'd normally strum in front of the bridge, and I think the thing that you're talking about that kind of creates this kind of wild, chaotic, jangly sound is when you switch to playing on the other side of the bridge. So it's not really tonal. It's just kind of like this weird, jangly percussive thing. Which I would always have to be very careful to do very near the end of the dance, because it would always throw the instrument pretty wildly out of tune. Anything that I did after that ... the more I did that, the more out of tune the instrument would become.

Julie Vallimont

Wow, you have to use it sparingly.

Keith Murphy

Yeah.

Julie Vallimont

Now, when you're thinking about chords for a tune, do you chord tunes differently, depending on what instrument you're playing? Do you think about chords differently if you're on the piano versus the guitar?

Keith Murphy

Yeah, and I think that that's like a very natural thing. It's funny, I play with this fiddle player, [Hanneke Cassel](#), a great Scottish fiddle player in Boston. And Hanneke is also a great piano

player. She writes a lot of tunes and so she also often has very specific ideas about how she wants tunes to be chorded, like the chords that she wants behind her tunes. She'll often have these pretty detailed charts. I always have to kind of hash it out with her, because a lot of times the chordal ideas that she has, I mean, not a lot of times, but sometimes there'll always be like a place or a couple of places where there's like, a chord or a chord inversion that sounds great on the piano, but just doesn't really make sense on the guitar. I think just naturally ... there are certain things that are going to work on one instrument and not on the other, and vice versa. So things kind of tend to come out differently.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, just the patterns they make in your hands and the shapes that are comfortable and the way the instrument resonates at certain times, all these things can affect those inclinations. You've done a lot of arranging for really interesting groups like the Celtic Sojourn and [Childsplay](#) and lots of different things. How do you approach an arrangement like that? Do you have, like, a process? I don't even know how to ask this question of how do you do it? But I think that's something a lot of people would wonder about.

Keith Murphy

Well, again, it's easier for me to kind of think about it in very specific terms. I mean, if I had an arranging idea for Nightingale, it would be because I imagined the sounds of those players playing their instruments. That's something that I learned in Childsplay also. Like Childsplay would play arrangements that people had sort of just done for multiple strings and stuff. I think the thing that I figured out was that I knew the players, and I knew things that certain players did really well. And I could sort of think of arrangements that catered a little bit to the strengths of specific players. So I think that's an important thing. Of course, I'm also just kind of doing things that -- you know, basic ideas, chordal ideas, rhythmic things -- that I gravitate towards, and then I'm sort of trying to kind of translate them in ways that are going to work with, as I say, the players that I know and how I think they play.

Julie Vallimont

Do you hear arrangements in your head before you write them down? Do you like audiate the music?

Keith Murphy

I would say, I'm not ... it depends on the scale. Like maybe for a trio, or if Becky and I are ... like, if I'm thinking about something that Becky and I are going to do, I can think of like, a fiddle line. That's pretty easy for me then to kind of actually think of how that's actually going to sound. If it's a bigger group, like Childsplay, even if I know the players, and I'm kind of like, thinking that I'm writing to what I think those players sound like, that's a bigger reach. I remember, I would kind of arrive at some of those rehearsals with these pretty big arrangement sometimes. I wouldn't totally know if they were going to work, or I wouldn't totally know really how they were going to sound. Which was always ... again, it was one of those terrifying and very exciting things. I think there are other musicians who are much better at doing that, at kind of like, hearing, really hearing clearly how those things are gonna play out. Big Bandemonium, it was the same thing. I

got to try my hand a little bit at some arrangements for them, for that brass section. I would kind of have an idea, but because I'd never done that before I didn't know those instruments really well, and didn't know how to voice things particularly well. It was a little bit of a shot in the dark. I think in the end they were fairly simple ideas, simple but hopefully effective ideas. I think they tended to work. But no, I didn't imagine them really clearly.

Julie Vallimont

Because I think we all hear stories of these famous classical composers, like Mozart or Haydn, hearing all the music in their head before they ever wrote it down. But, you know, to demystify it for people, a lot of times, you can kind of hear, sort of imagine what it would be like, but it's also just using experience and probably trusting your instincts about things you've tried in the past that have worked and haven't, and then being able to adjust things right in rehearsal, wherever, if need be.

Keith Murphy

I'm also just thinking ... so I've done that thing. I've done that thing of showing up with an arrangement for players. But I realize the thing that I enjoyed, that I feel more comfortable at, and enjoy more, is really like, a more organic thing. I mean, even if I feel like I'm in a leadership position, sitting down with a bunch of players, and playing through something, and then saying, what if you ... could you play something higher there? Could you, you know ... kind of sketching out an idea, rather than notating it note by note. That always feels ... it really feels more comfortable for me.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it is more organic. And that's also kind of a process that you could follow with a band too, right? It's like listening to each other and saying, oh, what if you do this? And what if I do this? It's like, hearing those sounds, and then collecting them, and then editing them and refining them into something, pulling out the ideas and taking them deeper like what you're talking about. You've done a lot of coaching, teaching, leading band workshops, teaching your students ... you and Becky have a music class. What are some of the things when you're teaching dance musicians specifically? What are the most important things that you teach? Spoiler alert, is groove going to be in there?

Keith Murphy

[Laughter] You know, I think one of the big concepts that we come back to is that basically most musicians are going to define themselves in one of two ways. They are either there primarily as a melody player, or mostly as a backup player. I think one of the concepts that we've brought to teaching dance workshop playing, is trying to make everybody think about the other side of the equation more. So, to get rhythm players thinking more about the melodies. Actually getting the rhythm players to learn the melodies, with the idea that you can't really figure out what the harmonic possibilities for a tune are if you don't know how the tune goes really well, and to know what the rhythmic possibilities are, if you don't know the tune. And then for melody players to kind of understand what goes into the shaping of a rhythmic concept so that they can in turn kind of play to that. And in some cases underpin it, that, you know, that a fiddle player doesn't

only have to play the melody, that fiddle player can be part of the rhythm section. I think that makes a huge difference in an ensemble playing, intense playing. It's just another kind of level of being a real ensemble player. That's part of that process. But I think it's a big hurdle for a lot of players, there's a lot of rhythm players who've never played a melody. So that feels like an important thing to kind of tune into. And a lot of melody players who don't necessarily think about an offbeat groove. Playing over an offbeat groove versus playing over a syncopated groove. Those are all the things that I think determine just how strong an ensemble is going to be.

Julie Vallimont

What kind of exercises would you do with people to help them develop those skills?

Keith Murphy

When we do the workshops, everybody learns the tune, we start by teaching a tune. So everybody learns the tune. If you're the piano player, you play the tune. If you're a guitar player, you try to play the tune. If you can't play it, you sing it, right. So you just invest that time. You put the time in that the melody players are putting into learning the tune. And then the same thing, we wouldn't send the rhythm section off to kind of work out the chords, everybody talks about the chords. And the melody players listen to what it sounds like to move to the IV chord here, instead of staying on the I chord and then have them vote on what chord do you want to have happen there? I think the exercise is to just do that process with everybody. Everybody's involved in all those different levels of arranging.

Julie Vallimont

That's true. I've seen a lot of workshops where the rhythm players have to learn the tune, everyone learns the tune together. I feel like it happens less often where the melody players have to sit and go through what the rhythm players go through. I think that's really valuable. Like you're saying, even if you don't know what the chords are, learning what they feel like, like the IV, the V, or the vi minor, whatever. They all have a different feel.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, and often, as you know, chord choices are often part of like ... hopefully it's not a random thing. It's because you're trying to create something. Maybe not going to the IV chord, you're going to do that because it's kind of creating tension and that's kind of a cool thing. Well, if you're trying to create tension in the chords, then everybody wants to be part of that process. Whether you're playing the chords or not, you want to be aware that you're trying to make this thing happen. You're trying to create this build.

Julie Vallimont

And then you can support what the whole ensemble is doing more consciously. At the heart of it, how can you get to the essence of a tune or a song or something without knowing it inside and out first by heart? Otherwise, you can't be in the moment because you're trying to think of how it goes instead of being able to react to it and look at it from different angles and experiment with it and things like that.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, and I think you can't understand what the possibilities are in those little technical ways rhythmically, harmonically, but you can understand what the possibilities for a tune are emotionally. That it's something that is going to be fast and driving, or maybe not fast and driving. Maybe you can take that same tune and you kind of play it in a more gentle way. Maybe that's going to work as well, maybe, especially if you choose this particular chord to kind of play under it. So it's all part of a process of, what are we all trying to achieve with this tune?

Julie Vallimont

When you're on stage playing for contra dance what's going through your mind as a dance musician. What are the kind of variables you're thinking about besides the music itself?

Keith Murphy

Well, I'm often ... the variables. I'm kind of thinking about how well the dancers are connecting. I may be thinking about the tempo, is this tempo good? Are the dancers connecting with what we're playing? If they're not, is there a problem with the tempo, is the tempo too fast or too slow? I often try to keep my eye on the caller to see if the caller is looking happy with the tempo. But I'm thinking about that. And then maybe the tempo is good, but maybe I feel like the dancers are not super locked in with what we're doing. Like this thing that I thought was going to be a great punctuation point, the dancers are not really tuning into that. So maybe I need to over emphasize some big hit, to kind of really make that connection. Because sometimes I think in dance playing, I like to sort of think about a lot of possibilities, about a lot of nuances. But at the same time, I feel like often in dance playing, you've got to paint in big colors. And big bold colors. Because there's a lot happening out there on the dance floor and it's easy for this little cool idea, musical idea, that you've had to not be registering on the dance floor, because there's too much noise on the dance floor or there's too much, whatever. And so I think, well, what do I need to do to get that idea across. Maybe I need to punctuate that phrase harder. Maybe we need to play quieter to kind of like, make the dancers work a little harder to listen. I think that's the thing, that's an important range of things for me while I'm playing on stage,

Julie Vallimont

I think the volume thing is often forgotten about. I remember when I was a teacher, and I learned this teacher trick where if your kids aren't listening, it's easy to want to raise your voice over them. But if you just change your voice to whisper, all of a sudden, they're going to be like, wait, what's going on. It forces them to tune into you. It's such a simple trick and it's so counterintuitive. But it's absolutely ... unless they can't hear you at all, it's very effective.

Keith Murphy

Right, and it can be a little harder to do that midstream. But I do remember kind of making that discovery. Like, if you start to play towards the end of the walkthrough, or maybe at the end of the walkthrough but before the dance is actually started, and you're playing something very quiet. That effect, often and if you're lucky, maybe of just how the vibe on the dance floor can

come down, the dancers will think oh, okay, this is gonna be quiet, I've got to bring my attention, sharpen my attention here on the music. I remember that feeling very powerful.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, you're bringing back wonderful memories for me of sitting on the stage at the Guiding Star Grange and just watching you do rolling starts or Jeremiah, like whoever was playing rhythm at the time. And like you're setting a whole mood for the dance before it starts, like subliminally. It's like you're calming everyone down, you're amping them up, you're drawing them in, whatever, before even the four potatoes happen.

Keith Murphy

Right. But that is the power of that technique, that's not something that we invented by any means.

Julie Vallimont

But you did it to excellent effect. And it's amazing as a dancer, because then when the potatoes go, your body can already like glide into the move, because you kind of already know what the feeling and the groove are gonna be.

Keith Murphy

It's also, the other thing about making those moments really work is kind of having good communication with the caller. Because I've had those moments where even sort of trying to do like a little setup, but the caller kind of has some other notion in their mind about where they're placing their energy. And I've felt those moments where we've started to dance right away, where we're trying to sort of do some kind of atmospheric quiet thing and the caller is kind of like, [Keith exclaims loudly] "Balance and swing! Forward..." you know, like, just the tone of their voice is just completely out of sync with what we're doing. I'm just reminded you know, you cannot overstate your intentions.

Julie Vallimont

So we've all learned, don't spring a rolling start on the caller if they're not ready for one or if they don't want one. Like it's nice to ask them. Unless it's a caller you've worked with a lot before and you know like exactly what each other is up for. I feel like when Noah and I play with Will Mentor he's up for pretty much anything. We know what we can do to surprise him. But I've seen bands start a rolling start without talking to the caller and then the caller stops everyone to do a demonstration on the floor, then your rolling start has to come to a halt. It's always good to ask.

Keith Murphy

There's lots of opportunities for awkwardness.

Julie Vallimont

I'm sure you've been ... we've all been through these moments where the dance is running off the rails, or the tune is off from the dance or ... have you tried any ideas for dancing that just didn't work? Have you had moments where you felt like things weren't working?

Keith Murphy

Well, this is not exactly necessarily the kind of scenario that you're thinking of. But I'll tell you that, you know, in the Caribbean for many years now with Wild Asparagus, we've had this thing, David and I especially but also Becky sometimes, try to write a tune every day. It's just like a little personal goal. And so sometimes, that tune gets written kind of late in the day, and then there's a kind of a scramble to teach the tune to the rest of the band, and then figure out what it's going to go with. It can be a pretty frantic process. I remember being very excited about a tune that I'd written that we had just kind of pulled together at the last second and it was the last tune in a medley. We played it, it was going well the first time. Then the second time was kind of a little more awkward. And then the third time people were like, the caller was looking around shaking her head. Anyway, it turned out that I'd written a crooked tune and hadn't realized it. That's right. The editorial proofing process was not in full function. Anyway, so that tune is called the Missing Beat because even though I went back, and I rewrote the tune and made it square, I had neglected to notice that it had originally been missing a beat. So that's an example of a tune that I was very excited about that didn't go quite as expected. And again, this is not an answer to exactly what you're thinking, I'm guessing. But I'll tell you, I had written another tune, brought it to the Guiding Star Grange to play with Wild Asparagus. I was very excited about the tune, I thought it was gonna be a great tune. We played it and I thought, oh that was not as good as I thought, maybe that's not a keeper. Ann Percival was like, that is a great tune, we've got to play that again next time, that was On The Danforth. But for a moment there I thought, well maybe, maybe not.

Julie Vallimont

And you'd taught it to everyone, and no one had caught it until that moment. That's funny. For those who don't know, that tune has become part of the legendary contra dance pantheon of beloved tunes played all over the place. It's a very popular tune. You don't always know what you have. Sometimes the simple ones, you don't know how good they are in the beginning, because they're not flashy. But then yeah, that tune has a lot of repeatable playability, it just withstands repetition and has a nice emotional arc. So, good for Ann, that you didn't bury it forever. Well, that's a perfect segue because I've been wanting to ask you about your tune writing process and everything. You've written so many wonderful tunes that we all know and love. You have your tune books, which are now I believe, compiled all in one big book.

Keith Murphy

That's right.

Julie Vallimont

[Black Isle Music.](#)

Keith Murphy

I'm just working on figuring out how to make it digitally available but that hasn't come to pass quite yet.

Julie Vallimont

Via PDF or something like that? Yeah, get with the modern age, everyone can put it on their iPads. [Laughter]. I think for a lot of people who write tunes, to say what's your process is kind of reductionist, like most of the reductionist questions I've been asking you for this whole interview. It's just, how do we get to talking about something is really what the question is for, right? You probably write tunes in a lot of different ways at different times. But what are some of the ways that you write tunes?

Keith Murphy

So in no order of frequency or importance or anything, sometimes I write tunes that are very chordally based and it's kind of based on a chordal concept. Sometimes just kind of like a certain sort of rhythmic kind of a thing, like the Flying Tent. That kind of has this certain motif of this sort of syncopated thing. Like the tune itself doesn't particularly go very far but the melody kind of has like a certain syncopation. Sometimes I'm sort of thinking of a certain kind of genre or certain other kind of tune, that I want to sort of write something almost like in the style of. Sometimes, for me, a tune can either be very instrument specific, it can be very tactile. I'll try to write tunes on different instruments sometimes, because ideas will pop out. I've written tunes on the pennywhistle, because there are things that happen under my fingers on a pennywhistle that I never would have thought of on another instrument. So on any instrument, the mandolin, or the piano, there's certain things, just like physical paths that my fingers might find, I might stumble on a little thing, I might have no concept, I might just sit down and just be moving my fingers and then kind of find something. Or I might write a tune away from an instrument. Sometimes I'll write an instrument in the car. I'll try to think very melodically. I have a bunch of tunes I feel like ... I like the idea of like a clean melody line, something that's very singable, and sometimes that's kind of where those tunes came from. They were singing ideas that I had. And then sometimes the tune kind of comes fully formed. Sometimes I have fun going back to some of my voice memos, and I hear myself trying to kind of work out a certain tune. I can kind of hear how I'm sort of moving towards what the tune ultimately became, but sometimes it's more of a process. More of kind of shaving off an interval here or there, sort of nudging things around a little bit. So I feel like those are the sort of a range of ways that I kind of try to get at it.

Julie Vallimont

I think having a voice recorder, something around seems to be useful for you. There's some people who can write tunes and just remember them forever but I would immediately forget everything I wrote if I didn't have a way of recording it.

Keith Murphy

Sometimes I'm working on something, and I get overly bold, and I think, oh, I'll remember that, I don't need to put that down. And that's usually not the case.

Julie Vallimont

And so just like arranging, it can be two different processes. It's like the generating ideas process, where you're generating part or all of a tune, or even just a little riff or a little motor

pattern, that then you can later invoke the editing process and go back and choose the best moments from that voice recording and craft a tune around them. Do you do things like that?

Keith Murphy

I often will find if I get a great A part of a tune, I'll often walk away because I feel like I know that a B part will come to me. I don't need to force the B part. I could write a B part at the same time but sometimes I think, I just need to kind of like walk away and come back to it and really feel, kind of get a sense of where the tune needs to go from that A part. It's not exactly like an editing process. I guess that it's another slightly different thing. But even in the editing process, I think sometimes, for me, like walking away, I know if I get a certain germ of an idea, I don't need to force it right away. I can walk away from it and I know that I'll come back to it with a certain clarity.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, taking the time to internalize what you've already written because often we haven't memorized that yet, right? It's just come out and taking the time to really get inside it and get to know it before ... the rest of the tune will just kind of come out sometimes. Right? It can be a better tune that way.

Keith Murphy

It's funny how the end product, in retrospect as I say when I listened back to some of those earlier sketches of a tune, I realized how the end product, it almost feels inevitable. I think, well of course, of course, that's where it was going to end up.

Julie Vallimont

Do you have a way of testing out your tunes before you play them? Do you play them on different instruments?

Keith Murphy

I make Becky play them. That's my test. [Laughter]

Julie Vallimont

Oh, you have a built in fiddle tester. And she has a really good ear for tunes, so you have a ringer in the house there.

Keith Murphy

She does. And sometimes I have to defer to her on versions of my own tunes. Because like any player, she'll sometimes change a couple of notes here or there as part of that process. And the truth is, ultimately, she ends up playing my melodies more often than I do because I'll write them, I'll play them for a bit, and then usually I end up accompanying them. So I end up deferring to her in terms of the definitive version.

Julie Vallimont

Right. Whether that be just the mechanics of playing it on the instrument, sometimes changing a few notes make it so much more flowy, easier to play. And then also, her playing has such a wonderful lyricism in the way that she plays melodies. I imagine that would fit your tune writing style well, she has a good sense for that. When you write tunes do you hear chords in your head at the same time? Do you ever write chords first, and then write a tune to the chords so they can come back together?

Keith Murphy

I think I have sometimes written chords, like I've had a chord concept. I think also, though, like, I was actually just working on a tune today. I feel like, subliminally, sometimes when I'm just working on a melody as I move from phrase to phrase there's a certain chord pattern that's already being implied. Sometimes I actually try to make myself ... if I'm working on a tune, I try to stop myself sometimes from thinking, or not even thinking or not thinking, or subconsciously thinking, in terms of chords. I have to force myself sometimes to write something that is less chord specific.

Julie Vallimont

There's some Irish tunes like that. Especially that just seem completely ambiguous, and they don't imply any chords at all. And as a chord player, I'm just like, I don't know, I don't feel like this one needs chords. There's Scottish tunes like that too.

Keith Murphy

Yes. Or that Irish tune is like a blank canvas which you can put any chords that you want.

Julie Vallimont

Absolutely. I remember asking Jeremiah about that. You know, talking about some of the Nightingale arrangements. Was it Golden Wedding Reel that I'm thinking of that you guys did like a kind of montuno kind of riff underneath or something. But sometimes it's the simplest tunes, and finding these simple tunes that allow you to do all these different things with them.

Keith Murphy

I think the big Nightingale example of that was Lady Anne Montgomery, which was a big tune for us. Jerry and I, we had kind of a whole suitcase of alternate chord progressions that we could impose on that. That kind of was a big part of the sound of that tune for us was stretching it every possible way we could think of harmonically.

Julie Vallimont

There's all these different chords, and then there's also playing with the harmonic rhythm of when they happen and how often they happen and when they change. As a rhythm player, you seem focused on building an arc or building a mood. Like the groove extends beyond just the rhythm. It goes into the chords and the tone and the presence. And so, what are some of the other things you play with when you're kind of creating an arc? Like in terms of changing chords, or not changing chords, or harmonic tension, those kind of things?

Keith Murphy

Yeah, I think texture. Like textures/dynamics. Sometimes if my intention is to try to create a big arc, then I'm going to try to think at some point in the medley or arrangement of where maybe I can do something lighter, kind of in a middle register or high register, and try to like sit there for a while. Because I feel like often, to create a sense of movement, you have to first establish a sense of place. You've got to establish yourself in a place. And then once you have that, then you can kind of create a sense of movement away from that place. So a big thing might be, rather than play in the standard hand positions on the piano, for example, maybe move both hands up into like the middle register, or a slightly higher register and try to think of some voicings. And maybe that's going to kind of affect how frequently I change chords, or what the chords are. Maybe the chords are more spare and higher. Now it all becomes part of like, this kind of quieter, more gentle kind of place. And it leaves room to move then, at a later point in the arrangement down into like a bigger register, maybe that's kind of got a new rhythmic thing that kind of also comes into play. So it's really about kind of like mapping out places where you can go.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, dancing to the kind of arc that you would make with Becky or Wild Asparagus or with Nightingale it's really just, it's like being on this ride. It feels so intentional. You're just floating on this rhythm, this groove, and you're being swept along. You're holding everybody in the palm of your hand right there, like putty in your hands at that point, right?

Keith Murphy

Well, that's the ideal.

Julie Vallimont

But it's very intentional the way you create those arcs. Were there other people doing that when you started besides, like, I think Wild Asparagus was also doing that kind of thing. I wasn't around, then. How did you come across that way of playing for contras? Or is it just kind of how your aesthetic meets with contra dance?

Keith Murphy

I don't totally remember. I don't know if that sense of a big arc was something like ... I don't want to claim that it was something that we did first because I don't know that that's the case. But I can't remember. That's an idea that I can't remember stealing, that kind of big arc. I remember working on that concept with Bill Tomczak. Becky and I did a lot of playing with Bill for a bunch of years at one point, and Bill used to play one tune sometimes for a dance. And so then like, kind of thinking, okay, well, what are we going to do? Like, honestly, I want to say as an article of faith I don't think you have to do a lot of different things. I think a great band like the Horse Flies are not going to go to a lot of different places necessarily over the course of them playing a tune, and you don't want them to leave. They just create this zone from the start of the dance. And you just don't want to go anywhere else. You're in this hypnotic state. But for whatever reason, maybe that didn't feel as accessible, as easy of an option when we were playing in some other situations. We kind of gravitated towards this idea of like, well, so what can we do to

kind of stretch this out? And you know, what's it going to be? Is it going to be a sudden shift even if we're playing the same tune? Is it going to be a sudden shift from one texture voicing rhythm into like, some syncopated version of the same tune? Or is it going to be a more graduated build that's going to be a slower kind of thing that starts simply and then kind of intensifies somehow. The thing that Bill would have brought to that equation was his improvisation. Because Bill would start playing a tune, just the straight melody, and then he would kind of improvise a little bit. He would stretch that tune a little bit, and then a little bit more. And then he could graduate like degrees of improvisation away from the tune to kind of create a lot of energy. And so the rest of the band, me at the piano or whatever I was playing, that was a strong cue, a strong lead, to sort of try to figure out what can I do to kind of follow along with that?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, that's really fascinating. It's like you say there's a lot of different ways of doing it. Like there's a lot of different ways for playing for contra dance and they're not necessarily better than each other. There's just different strokes for different folks. Right?

Keith Murphy

Exactly.

Julie Vallimont

Some dancers love the feeling of dancing on this very controlled arc and some dancers love the feeling of an endless roller coaster of improvisation where no one knows what's about to happen, the musicians, the people on the floor. I feel like those things affect people in different ways. Like when the music is kind of off the cuff and loose and raucous. I feel like people interact with each other differently on the floor. They might talk to each other more as opposed to when you're dancing in this very focused experience where everyone is on this ride together, which builds community in a different way because you're all having the same incredible experience together. So they're just all different things. I remember when I was in a new band, we were trying tricks, you know, I had never done all these things before. So I was all excited about trying jigs to reels and all these tricks. And this older dancer came up to me who had been dancing for a long time and he said, you know, he was sort of giving us his opinions on what he thought of us as a new band and he's like, "I like you guys. But man, all you new bands, all you want to do is shock and awe contra dance music". I was like, "Oh yeah," he's like, "You know, it's just all fast and it's shock and awe." That really stuck with me, because I feel like, that's one way to do it and it's super fun. There are a lot of dancers who love that. But it just clued me in that not everybody actually likes that. Some people just want to go and just dance a dance to good tunes that aren't trying too hard and that's also okay.

Keith Murphy

Right. I think that was a thing that we learned early on. For better or for worse we liked to kind of program our whole evening. And one of the reasons that we'd like to do that was so that we could kind of try to establish a balance and a range, so that it wasn't too much of a certain thing and that we'd have a little sorbet between other main dishes, some palate cleansers.

Julie Vallimont

Have a cheese course once in a while. So not a lot of bands would get to program a whole night, or you'd have to work that out with the caller. But that gives you this amazing flexibility to make like a meta arrangement out of the whole arc of the whole evening.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, and that was kind of what we would often aspire to do.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, taking people on a journey. So while you're doing all these things, where's it in your mind about like, what's traditional? Or what is traditional? And do you ever worry about that or wonder about it? I mean, a lot of tradition infuses so much of what you do. And I feel like it seems like a combination of repertoire and finding good repertoire, and recovering, rediscovering tunes, or songs that have been neglected for a while. Or reinterpreting them in new ways. But then also adding all these new tunes and new compositions and new arrangements together. What are your thoughts about tradition and innovation?

Keith Murphy

Well I guess the thing is, my first impression of the contra dance scene and the contra dance music scene was that there were like almost no rules, it seemed. Coming from ... as I was, coming from listening to the Scottish dance bands, and these Irish bands, contra dance music, it just seemed to be like you could do anything you wanted. And so that was part of what was really attractive to me, like, all this range of possibility. If you were to play for me some cutting edge Scottish country dance band that was doing all kinds of radical things, I might be a little more sensitive to that. Because I have that attachment to a certain sound, to a certain tradition and sound. And even in Irish music, although it's probably more rule breaking Irish bands. But I kind of feel like I sort of like a more traditional Irish sound. I don't need to hear Irish music in that context, messed around with too much. I like a really traditional sound, I really appreciate the technique and the style of a great Irish fiddle player, a great Irish flute player. There are people who have that attachment and that history with contra dancing. And I remember years ago a lot of people ... there are a lot of people in New England who still I think kind of held on to ... they had a connection with an older style, a simpler approach to playing. But I didn't have that connection and I still don't really feel that boundary. So when you ask me what do I think about a sense of tradition in contra dance music, it would be hypocritical of me, I think, in a way to kind of say that I think that there's some boundaries. I guess I just know, I would stop at just saying what it is that I'd like to listen to or what I would enjoy dancing to. But I could never, ever bring myself to kind of say that I think it's wrong to do this or that for contra dancing. That's violating some basic precept for me and that's just because of the history that I have or don't have.

Julie Vallimont

It seems like it's a flourishing living tradition, if you don't have to worry about whether what you're doing is traditional, and you just feel free to do anything you want. It's wonderful and that

atmosphere helps create a lot of innovation, right? When you can just be free to write tunes and then people like them and they play them, it's that simple.

Keith Murphy

The thing that ultimately I'm going to respect more, it's a thing that we've kind of like said a few times, when radical ideas are underpinned by actually good playing. When it's players who can play, have taken the time to kind of work on the craft of their instruments, and can play rhythmically, and that they kind of have those fundamentals. And then if they choose to kind of do something crazy and wild with it maybe I like it, or I don't like it, but I can respect it a lot more.

Julie Vallimont

And through all of this, you're being aware of the dancers' experience, keeping that in mind.

Keith Murphy

Yeah, but the thing about that is that different dancers like different things. There are some dancers who are going to respond to certain kinds of playing and other dancers are gonna respond to something different and that's fine. We don't have to have one way of playing, people can choose what it is they want to gravitate towards as dancers or musicians.

Julie Vallimont

When you were a contra dancer, what was your favorite music to dance to?

Keith Murphy

Well, I remember one of the first big contra dances that I went to was the Boston ... it was the VFW dance. Although they were in a different place on that particular summer. They moved out of the VFW. But it was David Kaynor and Mary Cay Brass and Bill Tomczak. I remember that it felt like heaven. It was great groove, it was wild. Bill was doing his wild improvisational thing, it was great. That was probably my favorite thing. I remember, not contra dancing which you asked about but I danced to the Horse Flies. Some of those experiences stand out because they're early experiences for me. And they're kind of tied up with just that phase of kind of discovering the whole scene. But I do remember those sounds, I think if I could still dance to those people playing that way I'd be happy to.

Julie Vallimont

It has been so wonderful talking with you and hearing your thoughts about all these things.

Keith Murphy

Oh, thank you.

Julie Vallimont

Is there anything else you'd like to touch on while we're here? Anything we haven't talked about?

Keith Murphy

I don't think so. I think I've pretty much emptied my bladder. [Laughter]

Julie Vallimont

I certainly asked you enough questions.

Keith Murphy

You did, you asked good questions.

Julie Vallimont

Well, thank you so much Keith. It's been so wonderful to have you here.

Keith Murphy

The time has flown by Julie. It's been fun to kind of think through all those things with you.

Julie Vallimont

So many memories, take care.

Keith Murphy

You too.

Transcript may be edited for clarity. Apologies for any typos. Thanks to Ellen Royalty and Maia Gilmour for their help in preparing this transcript.