

# Contra Pulse Episode 42 – Bill Tomczak

## Julie Vallimont

Hello and welcome to Contra Pulse, this is Julie Vallimont. This episode, I sit down with clarinetist, saxophonist, and arranger Bill Tomczak. Bill started playing clarinet at the age of 9. After a typical round of high school bands and concerts, he entered Northwestern University as a music major and studied under several teachers from the Chicago Symphony. In 1979, he discovered the world of International Folk Dancing and has been playing for folk dance of one kind or another ever since. He developed a reputation as a tasteful and innovative improviser who learned to blend seamlessly into a wide variety of fiddle styles, practically defining a whole new tradition for contra dance clarinet and saxophone playing. Bill now plays for contra dancing and English Country Dancing with [The Latter Day Lizards](#), Campaign for Real Time and Fine Companions. He has recorded with The Latter Day Lizards, BLT, [Wild Asparagus](#) and Yankee Ingenuity and appears on recordings with Mary Lea and friends. In 2020, Bill joined the Portland Megaband and is now the chief arranger for the horn section. Bill has performed throughout the United States and in Canada and Europe and has regularly appeared at dance festivals and camps all over the country.

## Julie Vallimont

In our conversation, Bill talks about his time studying clarinet at Northwestern University and how this eventually led him away from classical music and then to traditional music. Weaving us through his path between computer programming and music, we learn about the pivotal moments that led to his deep involvement in the international music scene. And he tells us all about how he forged his way as a clarinet player in the world of contra. We explore the technical nuances of his style, in which he studied numerous kinds of dance music to ultimately create a style all his own, and his strategies for playing for Contra dances. And we look at the Musical tradition of contradancing from a few different angles. Let's dive in.

## Julie Vallimont

Well, hello, Bill Tomczak, and welcome to Contra Pulse.

## Bill Tomczak

Howdy doody. What a treat this is.

## Julie Vallimont

I am so happy to have you here. This is so great. Are you in Portland, Oregon at the moment?

## Bill Tomczak

Yes. Not the other Portland. The Portland that actually was named after Portland, Maine. In fact.

## Julie Vallimont

It was named after Portland, Maine?

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah. From a coin toss.

**Julie Vallimont**

What was the other choice? I'm really curious.

**Bill Tomczak**

Oh, gosh, I can't remember what the other choice was now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Anyone could Wikipedia it. I guess I'm sure it's on there.

**Bill Tomczak**

This is the internet age. It's all out there for you.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, all the answers are there. Yeah. Well, hello. This is great because we have never met before. Never. I feel like it's ... how is it possible? Just because I've heard you play so many times. And when I was like, a new dancer, and dancing a lot, I danced a lot to like, Latter Day Lizards and you with other folks in New England? And ...

**Bill Tomczak**

Did you ever come up and say hi?

**Julie Vallimont**

I was shy.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah, I know, I know that works.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, everybody is. Also what would I say, you know? And then when I'm on stage, I'm like, how come people don't come up and talk to me? Talk to me [Laughter]. But it's the same thing, right? Like, I feel the same way. Or I'm not interesting to talk to [Laughter]. You know, but anyway, so this will be fun. I'm really looking forward to it. So, a lot of folks know you as a clarinet player. You play a couple other instruments. But I would just love to start from the very beginning of how you started playing music, and then eventually how you found your way to playing for contra dances.

**Bill Tomczak**

Well, when I was a young lad, I actually started playing the clarinet for all the wrong reasons. It was like third grade. And this guy who I think of as my nemesis was promoted to the third grade from a lower grade. It had to do with birthdays and the way they were handled. And there was

this, kind of, music man thing happening. This guy showed up at our school site, we're going to start a band and he's going to teach everybody all these instruments, and he got us all to buy instruments. And the only reason I started playing the clarinet was because my nemesis, whose name also happened to be Bill, started playing the clarinet. So of course, I had to because we had this whole little competitive thing going. And just like in the music man, Mr. Music Man got us to buy all the instruments, taught a few lessons, disappeared.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh!

**Bill Tomczak**

It's just like in the play, in the Broadway play. So. So that was that. But I actually at that point was into it. So I started taking lessons at the Carnivale School of Music And my teacher was fantastic. And I credit him with keeping me playing music for the rest of my life because I had so much fun at his lessons. I don't know that he even played the clarinet. Because my lessons consisted of him playing the accordion, and me reading out of the polka book that we worked with. And he was a blast. I was having a blast. It was just great. And then, you know, he moved on with his life after a few years, a couple of years, whatever. And he was replaced by this guy. The main thing... I didn't remember his name, all I remember was sitting in this dank, completely windowless room, and him waving his cigar around saying "Breathe, breathe!" So anyway, I hated him. He had this idea that I was going to become some famous, you know, classical clarinet player in some major symphony, and I really didn't care. I was having too much fun with the other guy. So I quit. But my mother would take me to the high school band concerts, and I was fascinated, loved them. It was like one of my favorite times of the year when the high school band was having their concerts, and it was eighth grade, and I was getting ready to go into high school. And I thought, I want to be in the band. Of course, I haven't played the clarinet in, I don't know, three, four or five years or whatever it was. And so I, you know, pulled it out of the case and played like shit, it was just terrible. And this is a story I have never told anyone publicly. My mother's dead, so I can say it now. My father as well. I was so frustrated, I took the clarinet and I broke it over my leg.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah. And so. So it looks like... so I went to my parents like, "I don't know what happened. It just kind of broke." You know, it was like just completely broken in half. And God bless the guy at Carnivale School of Music He was like "Oh yeah, these things can happen." He was getting a new purchase out of there. He's getting a new sale, right? So I got a new clarinet. And for summer school, the high school band had a summer school band class. And I weaseled my way into the upper level band class somehow, and I will never forget Mr. Erst, Mr. Ernst? Mr. Ernst, Mr. Ernst Yeah. It was always like Erst or Ernst, I can't remember. Anyway. I remember him greeting me at the door to the band room. He walks me over, doesn't say a word. Walks me over to the very last seat in the last row of clarinets. And just points, like, that's your seat. So it

turns out shockingly, I was very talented. Which a later teacher basically accused me of as an insult, more than anything else. But it meant that I rose up through the ranks of my high school band really quickly. And by my sophomore year, I was playing in the Chicago All-City band. By my junior year, I was playing in the first row of clarinets. And there was this big competition between me and this guy, Mitch. You know, which one of us was supposed to be first year clarinet. And he always got first chair because he went to the right school. And, and that year, they also started the All-City Theater troupe, in which I got to play bass clarinet, regular clarinet that I knew, and the piccolo clarinet, the E flat clarinet, for West Side Story. That is one of the greatest, most fondest memories that I have of playing music. And then, between my junior and senior year, the plan was already laid out. I had actually already gone to colleges and stuff. I was going to become an engineering student, because I've also been messing around with computers throughout high school. And I went to this three week long program at Northwestern University. And it was great fun, met a lot of great people. It was the first time we've been away from home more than, you know, like a half a day. And it was just like, this whole new world opened up to me. And I discovered I was this whole other person that I didn't even know who I was, and it involved playing music. I met these great people, ended up dating this person from St. Louis, Missouri, who I ended up driving down to visit her every weekend during summer break the following year. It was great. It was fantastic. But you know, it was just kind of like, okay, I got the music thing out of my system. Back to engineering, you know, this is just not ... I'm never gonna be a musician. John Painter was the director of that whole program. And at the very end of that week, that three weeks, one of the counselors came and talked to me, said, "You know, Mr. Painter specifically picked you out as someone that he would love to see come to Northwestern as a music major." And I was like, ridiculous. You know, it's like, I'm going into engineering. I've already like, picked out some schools that I'm going to, you know, apply to and everything. And he says, "No, really, it's like, you should really consider this because he thought you're like, far away and above, you know, one of the better students that were here this summer." Which, you know, this is the first time an adult ever said to me, "You should do this!" Up until then, it was like adults where it was like, "yeah, you could do that if you want." So I really thought about it, and said yeah, but I don't know if I can afford it. Northwestern is an expensive school. He said, don't worry, Mr. Painter has already said he'll do whatever it takes to get you to come to Northwestern financially. How can you say no to that?

### **Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's pretty amazing.

### **Bill Tomczak**

It was amazing. My mother didn't quite think that. After a couple of weeks at home thinking about it, I will never forget, sitting in the kitchen with my mother working away doing something with the stove, and I'm sitting at the kitchen table and I made my decision. I said to my mom, "Well, I have decided I want to go into music school. I want to become a music major." And this image is burned in my head, my mother is working at the stove, she just like, throws down whatever she's got in her hand, turns to me and said, like, "Why do you want to do that? You're not a musician." I did it anyway, I ignored her. So I was a music major at Northwestern for two years. And the first year I was there, the great God of all things clarinet had just arrived as the

primary clarinet professor at Northwestern, this guy Robert Marcellus, who played for the Cleveland Orchestra. So all of a sudden, all the best clarinet players in the world have descended on Northwestern. And here I am, this guy who just kind of messed around with clarinet most of his life. And now I'm like, in the middle of this hotbed of clarinet genius, and actually did pretty well. I was like, kind of middling good in that crowd. Which of course made me feel like well, I suck, right. And people say it's like, yeah, well, but you suck among some of the best clarinet players in the world. Yeah, I still suck. [Laughter] And by the time I ... I think about two weeks into my junior year, I decided to ... I was reading a thing about Buddhism. I was taking an intro to Buddhism class. I finally cracked a book about two weeks into my junior year. And I started reading this thing, I think I was like, 10 or 11 pages in and I realized, I don't remember a single word, concept, idea, thought that I just read. This is wasting everybody's time and money. And I just put the book down, walked across the street where the registrar's office was, quit school, and then called my parents and said, oh, guess what I did today? Wow, I can imagine how thrilled they were. And then I went hitchhiking around the country for a while. I came back to Northwestern. I started talking around to all my professors. It's like saying, Okay, I don't know what I'm doing right now. I don't know where I'm going. And, you know, I'm just like, looking for what kinds of options might be available for me in the music world, because I still have this idea that somehow I'd be involved in music in my professional life. And Robert Marcellus, the great God of all things clarinet said to me, "Oh, it's too late. You'll never be a clarinet player." Or no, he said "You'll never be a musician." So it's like, okay, so ... [crosstalk]

**Julie Vallimont**

Was he serious about that?

**Bill Tomczak**

Oh, totally.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because he thought you were too old. Or why did he say that?

**Bill Tomczak**

I wasn't good enough. And it wasn't serious enough. And I wasn't, blah, blah, blah, whatever.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, by musician I'm sure he meant a very specific kind of musician.

**Bill Tomczak**

It took me a few years to figure that out. But you know, I was in my 20s. I was, you know, still in college. I didn't really understand how any of this worked. But yeah, you're right. That's exactly my assessment of where he was coming from. Nonetheless, I just stopped playing entirely. And this was 1976. Fall of 76. So, fall of 77 I started thinking of working as a waiter. And thought, gee, I probably ought to think about what I'm doing with my career. And I thought, well, I used to mess around with computers when I was in high school, maybe you can get a computer programming job. And, shockingly, I did. So I got my first computer programming job in Chicago,

worked in downtown Chicago for about a year and a half or so. And then realized I needed to go someplace else to ... I hope this isn't too long and deranged, but ... [laughter]

**Julie Vallimont**

Don't worry, I will steer if need be. You just talk and I'll interrupt you if I have to.

**Bill Tomczak**

So, after about a year and a half working that job, I just decided I was more interested in sort of the inner workings of the computer and I should go working for some, you know, major computer company. The computers that I was working with happened to be built by Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC), which is based in Massachusetts. And lo and behold, just as I was thinking this, DEC was doing interviews right in my building in the lobby of my building. So I went, did an interview, this guy went over my resume. Went over the, you know, my background, everything, said, you know, I think you should come and interview. And he says I'm sure we can find a job for you. And I was like, okay, so I went to Massachusetts, I interviewed for a job in Maynard, Massachusetts, and a job in Marlborough, Massachusetts. And I got a job that paid astonishingly more than I could ever imagine getting paid for doing anything, especially when it didn't really feel like I knew what I was doing. But I took the job. First time I've ever left Chicago for any length of time, I'm living in this like entirely different part of the world. And at some point, a couple of my coworkers said, Hey, why don't you come folk dancing with us? And like a lot of people who discover this for the first time in their 20s. My reaction was "What?"

**Julie Vallimont**

[Laughter] Yeah. Say, what? Pardon?

**Bill Tomczak**

Why would I want to do that? But here I was, I didn't know anybody. I had no idea how to meet people. I didn't know like, I had absolutely no social skills whatsoever, outside of my job, right. So I went. Oh, and one of the guys was actually my housemate. We got a house and rented a house in Maynard, Massachusetts, and one of them was my housemate, Dave (kind of a little bit of foreshadowing there), and Barb, (my other coworker), and we went down to Framingham, Massachusetts on Wednesday night, and went folk dancing. And I was completely blown away. I mean, almost literally, my head exploded. We, one of the dances we did, there's a Hungarian couple dance called Székely Friss. And it's a couple dance. Just a couple of things. And it's done to this, you know, Hungarian sort of folk recording. Very scratchy on an old 78. And at some point while I'm dancing this dance, it hit me it's like, you know, we studied Bartok, we talked about how he ran around Hungary and Romania with his little wire recorder recording all these folk bands. And not only is this the first time I've ever heard anything like that, I'm dancing to it! I, just the whole way home from that dance, I just was like, oh my god, oh my god. And then, and here I am. [Laughter]

**Julie Vallimont**

That's incredible. Yeah. For listeners who may not know, Maynard, Massachusetts is one of the towns to the west of Boston proper. It's very close to Concord. It's only like a couple towns west

of Concord where the Scout House is and there's a lot of dancing out there, contra squares, international folk dance, all sorts of stuff.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah, I got plopped down in the middle of all of it. And I was so into dancing. So that was my first dance, at the Framingham international folk dancers. And that would have been sometime early 1979. This is the first time I've come across this, the beginnings of this whole scene. Which by the way, it was at that dance that I got to watch Dan Pearl call his first contra dance to the Yankee Ingenuity recording Kitchen Junket.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow. Yeah. It's interesting that like ... because when I started dancing, I danced to Dan Pearl calling, it seemed like he'd been calling a long time. It's fascinating that the Yankee Ingenuity recording already existed before Dan was starting to call. It's crazy.

**Bill Tomczak**

Right? In 79. 79 or 80, someplace in there. Anyway. I got so enamored of dancing, and certainly in that era I very quickly got up to the point where I was literally dancing, and I'm not exaggerating, I was dancing eight times a week at one point.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah!

**Bill Tomczak**

People who know me know are like, you danced? Oh, yeah, I danced a lot. Yeah, it was Monday night was Scottish. Tuesday night, was a contra dance at the Brimmer and May School. Wednesday night was ... what was Wednesday night? English. English and, well I didn't do any Morris, initially. Thursday was Tod Whittimore's contra dance in Watertown, Massachusetts. Friday night was the international folk dance. And Thursday we'd either go to the Advanced international folk dance or Tod's dance depending upon how I felt that week. So see, that's Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, there was a contra dance almost always. And Sunday was the MIT international folk dance. And/or I joined the Scottish demo team, and we had our practice on Sunday nights. And at one point, I joined the Pinewoods Morris Men, and was in a Morris team on Sunday afternoon. So literally eight times a week.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, so this is your life. You're working full time doing computer work, and then you're dancing. Sounds like every moment that you weren't working basically, you were dancing.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah, and now, how did I do that? [Laughter]

**Julie Vallimont**

I know, right?

**Bill Tomczak**

I can't imagine doing that now! Anyway. And believe it or not I left a lot out. But that's the story, basically

**Julie Vallimont**

Broad brushstrokes.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yes. I didn't even talk about how I started playing for folk dancing. But, you know, that's how I got started with all of this in general, so.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, how did you get started playing for folk dancing?

**Bill Tomczak**

Well, at the International folk dance in Framingham, Nancy Reid and Lee [Morgan], can't remember her last name. They were the two women who ran that dance. And Nancy took a shine to me. And she started making these little hints. It was like, "Have you noticed how much clarinet there is in all this eastern European music?" It was like, "Yeah, so?" [Laughter] It was like, "Have you ever thought of playing it?" "No. Why would I do that?" And she ended up ... I don't remember the details of this anymore, but I actually was a little resentful of her for a little while after this. She engineered the environment around me. So I actually did pull my clarinet out. A bunch of us got together and just started playing these tunes. And I had a lot of baggage to get over. And still do as a matter of fact. But all the experience from music school, you know, came flooding back. And it brought up all the frustrations and tensions, stress and just anger at my old teachers and stuff. But I got past it. And then I started getting into it. And eventually that led ... I started transcribing stuff, you know, started listening to recordings and just transcribing madly. And learning a lot in the process and just writing this music down and writing it down again when I could hear better. And then writing it down a third time when I could hear even more.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah!

**Bill Tomczak**

And these are the days ... so you guys have the the Amazing Slow Downer now and I'm so jealous, because all we had back then was the morris dance tape recorder that had an adjustment dial where you can adjust the pitch and have a little switch so you could play at half speed. So I'm listening to these Bulgarian tunes going in, you know, trying to, you know, figure out what they're doing and transcribing it. And sometimes with Romanian music, which was so insane. I would actually record it being played at half speed and then take that down to half, another octave. So I got it down, you know, like, two octaves, whatever, a quarter speed of what was going on. But anyway. So I'm writing all this stuff down and learning these tunes. And then



Marianne Taylor and I had become really, really good friends. And we cooked up this scheme where I would play for one of the dances on... I think it was Thursday night, might have been Friday night. I don't remember. But I do remember the very first time I played for dancing ever in my life. Marianne was at the piano. I was playing clarinet. We're in the corner of the room and everybody was dancing to Die Alta Kath, the zweifacher, and that was my absolute first time ever playing for dancing. And then there was a group called the Cambridge Folk Orchestra, who I think are still around, actually. But they were certainly the thing. They were doing live music for international folk dancing. And so I joined them. Met a bunch of musicians there, playing for dances. They had a monthly dance, I think it was, and we would play for international folk dances there. And then let's see. Susan Worland was the fiddler in that band. I think she's the one who introduced me to Alan Bern. He's this accordion player and piano player. And he was is a genius. I mean, he's just like, he's one of those people. He walks in a room and everybody in the room just ignores everything else but starts talking to him. You know, he's just one of those people. You know, and I'm like, Hi, I'm here. [Laughter] But we formed this band, which we, you know, because we could never come up with a decent band name we ended up calling ourselves the Boston Folk Ensemble. And we were playing for the Pinewoods weekends, the [Folk Arts Center's](#) Pinewoods weekends.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like the July 4 weekend?

**Bill Tomczak**

No, this is, the Folk Arts Center had their own weekend before Labor Day. It was a weekend at Pinewoods.

**Julie Vallimont**

I see.

**Bill Tomczak**

And again, I think that also is still happening. And then they also did, oh, this will be a nice segue into how I got involved with contra dance music. So I'm playing all this music and playing with Susan Worland and playing with Alan Bern and playing for dances on Thursday. Oh, yeah. So now I'm not dancing eight times a week. Now I'm playing one of those nights. At least partly, right?

**Julie Vallimont**

A slippery slope.

**Bill Tomczak**

A slippery slope indeed. [Laughter] So the Folk Arts Center also had this thing called Oktoberfest, and it was basically an international folk dance weekend. And one of the regular perform ... and we'd have these jam sessions. It's just a bunch of people sit around playing international folk dance tunes in this lovely cabin up in ... what was that town up in northern ... Stowe, Vermont! It was in Stowe, Vermont at the time, it's gorgeous. I still have like, lovely

memories of just driving around up there in the freezing October and the colors and everything is just gorgeous. One of the regular dance leaders that the Taylors had at that weekend was Ralph Page, who at that point was calling to recordings. And so one year, one time, Marianne said, wouldn't it be great if we could like put together a set of contra dance tunes and play for Ralph and just surprise them? And Susie and I are like, Yeah, sounds like a great idea. So we learned a tune or whatever. And Marianne sort of talked us through it. And Ralph was getting ready to call one of his dances. And we just walked out to the stage, you know, where we had already had some microphones and stuff set up. Because we were already doing live music for this at various points. And, we just turned to Ralph and we just said, Hey, Ralph, we're gonna play for your contra dance today. He was like, whuh? So we played the dance and he was just, he was so happy. He just thought it was the greatest thing that ever ... And so that became a thing that we were doing. So now I'm not only playing fairly regularly for these international folk dances. I'm starting to get into contra dance music. At that point, I have all sorts of wonderful stories about playing for contra dances. So Andy Woolf, and I think Kate Barnes and Cal Howard, I think were sort of like one of the regular bands that remained at Brimmer and May, like, this is the open band. If you want to play you sit in with these guys. They were the ringers. And there was never anybody more than you know, if ever... And I showed up one day and said, "Hey, can I sit in here?" This is a place where I could sit in. And I remember Andy Woolf, like being very grumpy. It's really funny because Andy and I became good friends later, but this first time I met him, he's like, well, you have to know the tunes. You don't have any music. [Laughter] And I was like, Oh, okay. I know, you know. So I take the clarinet case out and I start putting my clarinet together. His eyes get really big. And he says, "With that?"

**Julie Vallimont**

Did that seem an apprehensive or an excited ...

**Bill Tomczak**

No, he was apprehensive. [Laughter]

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's like, I wish our listeners could see the face you just made, eyes wide.

**Bill Tomczak**

Really, he was, he just looked like, "I can't believe this is happening to me." So I did, and he apparently didn't hate me after that. And, you know, as I say, eventually, we actually even became friends and stuff.

**Julie Vallimont**

I guess the bar was pretty low too. It's just nice. He had very low expectations for you as a clarinet player.

**Bill Tomczak**

[Laughter] I didn't know what I was doing. I mean, you know, it was like, I was just getting the hang of this. And at some point it was even ... I was sitting in with Yankee Ingenuity, it was

becoming a regular sit in with Yankee ingenuity on Monday nights. Because they were doing the contra dance during the year. And for that I always had to sit as far back in the stage as possible, play as quietly as possible, because Donna [Hébert] would keep saying, "I can still hear you."

**Julie Vallimont**

This being Donna Hébert...

**Bill Tomczak**

Yes. Oh, Lord, good old days. So I'm getting more and more recognition. Well, okay, so getting more recognition playing for contra dances. One time at Stowe, and I know that some of the ... I mean, this is like 40 years ago, right? So my brain is like conflating things and getting all the dates and stuff wrong. But I do remember one time... Ralph... because as I was playing more and more for contra dances, I had already been getting a lot of criticism. Like, who does this guy think he is that he can play fiddle tunes on the clarinet. And literally, there was apparently a... I've never seen it, But I heard a story about... someone wrote a letter to one of the callers and it might have been Ted Sannella, it might have been David Kaynor, I don't know who it was. But some caller I remember telling me that they got this letter from some dancer saying exactly that. It's like, there's this guy who's trying to play contra dance music on the clarinet, tell him to stop. [Laughter]. So of course, I didn't. Actually the caller, whoever the caller was, I remember they actually were very encouraging. Like, I just wanted you to know, you're causing some controversy out there, but I think it's great. So that was encouraging. So I'm getting all this feedback like, you know, what is a clarinet player doing playing contra dance music? So at Stowe, Vermont at Oktoberfest this one year, I was talking to Ralph Page, the dean of contra dancing, the legend, the guy who kept contra dancing going through the 30s and 40s, inspiring people like Dudley Laufman and blah, blah, blah, right? Says to me, it's so great to see the clarinet coming back into this music.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's what I was gonna say! Exactly!

**Bill Tomczak**

Right? [Laughter] So, yeah, then fast forward a bit. Susan [Kevra] and I were running our Greenfield dance. And so like, at one point, we were running it twice a month. I think we definitely were running once a month by the end, because we just felt like two twice a month was too much.

**Julie Vallimont**

This being Susan Kevra?

**Bill Tomczak**

Susan Kevra, right. And I will never forget one time... this is pre-Lizards [Latter Day Lizards]. But you know, it was great for me. I mean, I loved running that dance, because basically, I hired whoever the hell I wanted. You know, that I could play with them, you know. And I remember

someone coming up to me after... during the break, and they said, You know, I just can't imagine this music without a clarinet in it. And I remember my reaction was like, "Score, I won!" [Laughter]

**Julie Vallimont**

So thinking about the role of the clarinet in contra dancing, obviously, there used to be like big bands and horn sections and clarinets. We have this amazing ability to constantly redefine what we think our tradition is based on what it looks like, in that moment.

**Bill Tomczak**

We're gonna talk about that word tradition, honey. [Laughter]

**Julie Vallimont**

[Laughter] Right?

**Bill Tomczak**

Let me tell you. I've been listening to you talk about tradition on all these podcasts. And I have opinions. [Laughter].

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm so glad you have all these pent up opinions.

**Bill Tomczak**

Someone finally wants to hear them!

**Julie Vallimont**

So, did you know... because you're probably learning about contra dancing as you're playing it, like some folks do. Like, that's what I did when I started. I had to learn about the tradition as I was learning how it worked. Did you have like, did you buy into that whole clarinet stuff? Like there's no clarinet? Or did you know that there was a tradition? Or who were your like, idols or things that you listened to when you were learning to play?

**Bill Tomczak**

Oh, man, idols. Pee Wee Russell, except he's a jazz clarinet player. But well, it's funny. I mean, and this gets actually just kind of get into the whole idea of tradition. I fought that whole battle, the whole, like more and more during my international folk dance music days. Because this came up all the time. I mean, we're playing this music from Bulgaria, right? We're playing this music from Norway and Sweden and whatever. And there was definitely this line of thought of, you can't change this music because you're not native. You know, so you have to do exactly what you're hearing on the recording, which I didn't buy into that. And on the other hand, I remember once I was playing with the Mandala orchestra [Mandala Folk Dance Ensemble] one year, which, by the way, is where I met Larry Unger in fact. And one of the pieces we were doing was a Greek suite. And I was supposed to be playing the melody, the lead on this Greek suite on the clarinet, which is you know the clarinet's a very, you know, popular instrument in

Greece, except for the kind of Greek music we were playing for this one dance. There's no clarinet in that music. So here I am playing clarinet. But that was a nicety I didn't really know about at the time. All I knew was like, I'm playing Greek music and playing clarinet. I have to do this, right. And, and so one of the guys in the Mandala band turned to me said, you know, you're taking this way too seriously. It's just folk music. And I don't buy that either. So here's the extremes, right? And, and I'm getting criticism that I'm either being too loose with the music, or I'm being too anal retentive about it, depending upon who's talking. And, you know, my attitude was that, you know, we're listening to these recordings. This is a snapshot someone took of some guy that everybody liked. Or maybe not, maybe it was just some doofus, you know, just happen to get in front of a recording.

### **Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, who wasn't even having a good day. Like, it could have been a great musician, on an average day.

### **Bill Tomczak**

Right! And I'm supposed to play every note exactly the way he played it? What? That seems goofy. And especially in Greek music, which is a really highly improvisational form of music. And I gotta say, I mean, you know, having studied that music really intensively for a while, the way they improvise, just still blows my mind. The things that they do and the way they... it's just gorgeous. So my feeling was, okay, figure out what the melody is, listen to the recording, kind of get some sense of what the embellishments are, or the phrasing or how they think about the music and everything. What made you, you know ... what we used to talk about was, what makes this music swing? You know, there's a way that Bulgarian music swings, there's a way that Greek music swings. It's not the same swing at all, obviously. But there's, there's a way that, you know, the authenticity of the tradition is that feel. The way that music swings, but it's constantly evolving. It's always been evolving. Every once and a while Dick Pleasants was a radio host on the local PBS station in Boston. And I would come in with my armful of recordings, and we would talk about international folk dance music, and I'd like have some kind of an idea or theme that I would want to talk about. And one session we did, I was talking about Middle Eastern music. And one of the things that I said, and this is like, this is after years of like, really thinking through this and having arguments with people. Always having arguments, god. But I really was firming up my attitude about what tradition means to me based on various conversations with a lot of different people. And so I walk into this studio with Dick Pleasants, and I'm playing these recordings. Some of them are Egyptian, some of them are Arabic, some of them are Turkish, some of them are, you know, I don't, I can't remember all the ones they were. But it's all these cultures in the Middle East, who are often like trying to kill each other, you know, politically, right. But if you listen to the music, you can hear how there's this kind of sensibility about all that music that they all share. And you know this, we're musicians, we hang out. And whatever, you know, our dear leader is doing, we're playing music, saying, Hey, do you know this tune? Right? And so ... or they teach each other tunes, right, and they learn a little bit from each other in terms of like, tunes, how they're played. They affect each other in all kinds of ways. And now all I was saying was, musicians really aren't paying a whole lot of attention to the political scene and worrying about that so much. They're just like hanging out jamming, you

know. Let's let's have some slivovitz and, you know, play some tunes. You know, I don't care if you're Turkish or Israeli or whatever, right. But I just imagine, you know, it's like the way musicians relate to each other now. It's the way it's always been, you know, like, why would I think it's different anywhere else? Susan Worland used to go to these international festivals, and there'd be musicians from all over the world. And they all just would they get together and play tunes. You know, totally, completely, like unrelated traditions. But they would play with each other, right? So the tradition is, you know, musicians who are playing it. The tradition is whatever they're doing now, basically, as far as I'm concerned. And I will leave you with one other story. And, of course, you always face out when the time is critical, right? Andor Czompo, he was a regular teacher of Hungarian dances at those at those Stowe weekends, at the Oktoberfest weekends that the Folk Arts Center was running. And I was talking to him. He left Hungary because of the 1956 revolution. He basically he was one of those people who, if he stayed in Hungary, he would have been shot or something. So he came to America, it's like, well, what can I do, and it's like, he ... the Taylors, you know, caught up with him and said, hey, teach some folk dance. So he's, he was like this premier Hungarian folk dance teacher that they hired every year for the Oktoberfest. And I was talking to him, and he said, one of the things that he was doing in Hungary, he was in, you know, an academic, and he was a dance leader. And this is like his thing, you know, collecting dances from the Hungarian countryside and stuff. And there were some old dances that they were kind of afraid were going to go away. So they wanted to get recordings of these old guys doing these dances, right? So they hired a hall, they provided plenty of booze, they got these old guys to show up, and they had a band playing. And, and then they sat around talking to these guys, who showed absolutely no interest in doing any dancing whatsoever. And Andor is kind of like hmm, you know, we're kind of ... the whole point is to get these videotapes of these guys dancing. And this is looking like it's not going to happen. So he tries to encourage the guy he's talking to and he says, hey, why don't you show me some some of the steps for those dances that you used to do when you were younger? And the guy kind of like, sighs and gets up and goes, okay. Kind of like a basically does a few steps here and there. And then he walks up to the band, you're going to love this. He walks up to the band. And he says, "You get your father, he knows how to play for me." He just wasn't inspired by the music at all. These young whippersnappers were playing it all wrong. All right. Hungarian music in a small town. One generation removed. It's already moved on.

### **Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. It's not what he wants to dance to.

### **Bill Tomczak**

Right, didn't inspire him at all. So now when you ask me about like, or you're asking people about, so you know, what's the tradition? It's like, we're making it right now. Tradition is a living thing. If you want to talk about snapshots, we can talk about snapshots of that tradition. But ... okay, I'm getting too excited. I'm sorry. But I really, I really believe that it's like, as long as people ... this is one of Dick Crum's things. As long as people want to dance to beautiful music, people will dance to beautiful music. They will figure out a way. I mean, on some level, I feel like this is my own 'fakelore', right, that the whole New England tradition was a bunch of people who came here from other countries playing different music from different parts of England, France,

whatever, wherever they were coming from, and said let's have a dance. And so that's why I think of it as a kind of a mongrel dance form. It was just from the get go, it was just a bunch of people figuring out how to dance to beautiful music. They used the dances that they knew, they used the music that they knew. I mean, how many of the contra dances that we, that we used to ... the chestnuts we used to call them, are almost direct descendants of Scottish dances? Chorus Jig, you know, what's another one ... is it Chorus Jig? I can't you know, I can't remember ... Money Musk, probably. But I've done some of those dances at Scottish dances. And it's like, oh, this is whatever contra dance that we've always been doing ... completely different format ...

**Julie Vallimont**

Money Musk being like a modified version of a Scottish tune. Very modified version.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah, who knows, and I don't know specifically about Money Musk. Like I say, I've forgotten a lot of...stuff drips out of my ear. I can't remember stuff after 40 years. But I do remember dancing at Scottish dances at the RSCDS dances on Monday nights. And they, we'd do a dance that was just, it was exactly the same as a contra dance. That, you know, we were doing a lot at that point. So which one is correct?

**Julie Vallimont**

To me that thought of a tradition... and I'm not an ethnomusicologist and so my opinions on this are worth zero...

**Bill Tomczak**

Exactly. Yes, me too. Thank you.

**Julie Vallimont**

When I think about to me, what this tradition is, what it means to me is that it has roots of some sort. Like it's not a new thing we just made up. People have been doing it for a long time and it involves some kind of community, which is also what makes it a tradition instead of just an activity. Within those things, what the nature of the activity is can change and the people change. If it if a tradition is part of a culture, then as the culture changes, the tradition also changes. It can change in lots of different directions at once, right? Like there's a million different ways to contra dance now. Because of all this diversity, there's modern choreography and simple, more classic choreography, and there's some people who like it the way it was done in Nelson, New Hampshire and other people like it the way it's done in California from the Dudley dancers, and you know, there's all these different ways to do it. And I love that right now they're all similar enough that they're still under one umbrella. We can call them all contra dancing, still.

**Bill Tomczak**

They all have the same roots. Right? They all kind of come from the same funnel. But yeah, to say that this is about, you know, it's like, and I've come across is like, well my way's right? Like, no, sorry. Your way, it's just your way. And that came out of, and it's true, I actually spent, I will

admit, I spent a lot of the 80s and 90s kind of angry about what I saw happening with contra dancing. Because when I started - Oh, and speaking of, I'm going to give a plug to the new podcast for callers. I heard about it, I was thinking I'm not gonna listen to this. But the first person she was interviewing was Phil Jamison.

### **Julie Vallimont**

This is by the way From the Mic with Mary Wesley, also sponsored by CDSS.

### **Bill Tomczak**

Plug, plug, plug. But, the interview with Phil was just brilliant. And Phil actually is an academic who has studied the history of all this stuff. And he knows things that you can't, you and I can only guess at. And listening, I highly recommend that interview because it's just...he says some things that just blew my brain away. But he actually came up with ... because he was talking about the changes that I saw happening at around the same time. And in fact, one of those articles on my [Musaïque website](#) is the original Dare to be Square essay that he wrote in 1987. He says it was 1988. But I have 1987. I'm sticking to it. But I was totally enamored of that essay because it just felt like he was saying all the things that I felt like I saw going on in contra dancing at that time, myself. And I know a lot of New England contra dance musicians really were pissed off at him about that, which I have to admit I took a certain glee in.

### **Julie Vallimont**

So can you fill us in a little bit about the substance of that?

### **Bill Tomczak**

Well, what he, what the the main point for discussion here that I was getting to is he talked about community dances turning into dance communities, which I thought was a brilliant way to factor it in. And it was like, you know, it was a community that had dances when I started. It was like, there was a group of people who were part of, you know, whatever I mean... however loosely, community was already, you know, being kind of wiped out in the early 80s. It was still, there was a sense of like, this is a group of people. One of the things we do is dance, you know. And then sometime in the mid 80s, I feel like it switched over into dance communities where it was like, we started talking about how to create good dancers. We started talking about technique, we started talking about... I heard people, and this drove me nuts, people would talk about doing their social duty by dancing with new dancers. So when did this become a social duty? You know, it's a community dance, right? Maybe not.

### **Julie Vallimont**

I mean it is nice to dance with new dancers. If you want your dance to continue, someone should dance with them and enjoy it. But if you don't enjoy it, don't dance with them, because then they'll have a bad time.

### **Bill Tomczak**

Well, yeah, exactly. Right. So yeah, so that's, that's kind of, you know, my thing about tradition is kind of like, there are snapshots. And there's the living breathing tradition of which we are a



part. And I choose the latter. Not the snapshots. Kate Barnes, actually, and I don't remember if she mentioned this in your in your interview, but we call it the the Barnes Theorem of Inverse Stiffness to Tradition. Remember that? It's like the people who are playing Irish music in New York City are very serious about how it should be played. Meanwhile, the Irish are kind of like, let's play this tune. And not worrying about whether it fits the tradition or not. Oh, and another conversation I just remembered. I was talking... I had become good friends with a Scottish fiddler. He runs the Scottish camps in California in Mendocino. Oh, and I hate that I'm spacing on his name. [Later in the interview, Bill remembers that it was [Alasdair Fraser](#)] Well, hopefully it will come to me anyway. He grew up in Scotland.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well if you don't remember, for our listeners, we will put it in the notes.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yes, hopefully it will show up at some point. But he grew up in Scotland. He grew up in a small village in Scotland. He was a Scottish fiddler. He was the real deal. He was traditional. And he told me that he used to get criticism from the people around him because he went to like the next county over something and was playing all this music. And so the purity of his tradition was being polluted by going over and playing with these other people who play differently. So he wasn't really traditional. It's like, what do you do with that?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yep, exactly. So I'm curious to go back to what that meant for you in your world when you were learning to play for contra dances? You know, like, some people could say that you sort of brought the clarinet into the mainstream of contra dance. It just, or it just so happened that no one else was playing it at the time that you entered the contra dance scene. But then you did sort of also make it popular or acceptable again, maybe through persistence in addition to sheer talent.

**Bill Tomczak**

Well, I will definitely admit to stubbornness.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Bill Tomczak**

Talent is an iffy term. But it's not like I was the only clarinet player. I think it's just there was a certain crowd. You know that, you know, just thought it was anathema. There was a guy Rich Blazej, up in Brattleboro, in fact, who played clarinet for contra dances. But at the time... I remember at the time when I was living in the Boston area, it was like living in Somerville or Arlington at the time. And Becky Ashenden was one of the famous people out in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts. And she kept trying to get me to, you know, find a way to get me to come out and play for dances in Pioneer Valley. And if my recollection is correct, this is a quote from Nick Hawes... who again, I later became friends with him, so it's all very hilarious in the

long run... but I believe it was Nick Hawes, who said, "We don't like clarinets here." So I was like, that's it, I'm not going to end up... I'm never going to play in Pioneer Valley. Which, of course, turned out to be completely inaccurate. And also, I believe ... were they in Philadelphia? Hold The Mustard was a band that was playing. Barbara Greenberg, and Bob Pascarello and Dan Beerbohm, who was the clarinet player. And I remember, they came and played Tod's dance one time. Wow! A clarinet player at Tod's dance. Yay! You know, yeah. So I certainly wasn't the only one. But I think living in New England, where we did New England contra dance, and played New England music, whatever the hell that is, I just kept showing up everywhere. I was at the NEFFA [Festival] Orchestras playing with the orchestra a bunch. And after a few years, at one point, we had like three or four clarinet players playing at the NEFFA Orchestra. And that was fun. So I can't take full credit for like, bringing the clarinet back, because it was kind of there. But maybe I did something to make it acceptable. Or more acceptable.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. So in the beginning, when you were starting out, what kind of tunes were you playing? What did you learn first? How did you approach learning all these tunes on the clarinet?

**Bill Tomczak**

Do you have a copy of Randy's New England Fiddler's Repertoire?

**Julie Vallimont**

I sure do. Everybody should.

**Bill Tomczak**

Those tunes. A lot of those tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

The New England Fiddler's Repertoire, it's like one of the Bibles of New England contra dance tunes. Randy Miller.

**Bill Tomczak**

Of course, right? And the Portland Collections were just not even a fantasy in anyone's mind yet.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right.

**Bill Tomczak**

At that point. Oh, and still kind of harping on this tradition thing, part of what happened to me was... it was at NEFFA. I met an old friend of mine who I was in college with. And it turns out, she was into, you know, all kinds of dancing and folk dancing and stuff. And we were talking about this thing of like, playing music from other countries, and playing music from other cultures. And she made the point, as someone had made it to her I think at some point in her life, you know, there's all this music all around you, why aren't you playing that? She plunked

that into my brain right at the same time that I was just... the way I put it at the time was, I'm really tired of arguing about how to play this music. Is it traditional enough? Am I taking too many liberties? Do I really know what I'm doing? Is this correct? Is this right? I don't care. Hey, maybe if I play for contra dances in my backyard, because I'm in New England, and I'm playing for contra dances with contra dance musicians, it won't be an issue. But then, of course, you know, clarinet doesn't belong in contra dances at this point, right? So that's really the inception of it. And so when I started doing it... well, there's no clarinet tradition, right? I mean, look at Irish music. Is there a clarinet tradition there? No. What about Scottish music? No. New England... I didn't know of one, or if there was one I didn't know what that would be really, or where I would get recordings like this. So yeah, I kind of made it up all on my own. I just kind of listened to what the fiddlers were doing. I decided my breath was their bow. And I could do some of the embellishments and stuff like that. So I spent years basically trying to sound like a fiddle. And turns out that's kind of not a great idea in the long run. But it was all I knew how to do. It's like I'm playing with these fiddlers, I'm listening to what they're doing, and I'm just trying to do what they're doing, right? But I think when I finally relaxed and realized, oh, I'm a clarinet player, I'm not a fiddler. Maybe I should try sounding like a clarinet, you know? But you know, it's like taking little bits and pieces of ideas from here and there. It's like, embellishments from Irish music and you know Scottish music. I mean, I played for Scottish country dancing for a long time too. And one of my favorite memories from that was playing at Pinewoods at Scottish week. And it was ... the Scots just ... they cannot have enough fiddle. Just like, fill the stage with fiddles. We don't have enough fiddles. We need a bigger stage, you know? Or maybe we can have them go off on the sides, even it's like ... giant fiddle orchestras. And - Alasdair Fraser, that's the Scottish player I was thinking of!

### **Julie Vallimont**

Oh! Of course I would have known that...

### **Bill Tomczak**

So Alasdair Fraser and this woman Arlene Leitch was also like, a really well known Scottish Fiddler at that point. And I remember being in the middle of this giant clot of fiddlers playing this for some Scottish dancing at C Sharp at Pinewoods. And Arlene was standing next to me, and she just kept cracking up. And I finally said, what's so funny? When she said, you know, you play beautifully, sounds really, really great. But it's kind of like, you know, talking to an Indian man and when he speaks, he's speaking in a perfect Scottish accent. [Laughter] I was like, I think that's a compliment, right? But it was because, you know, I was trying to sound like the fiddle. I was trying to do what the fiddles were doing. So when I played Scottish music in the Scottish context, I pulled out my, you know, sturdiest Scottish stylings that I had figured out how to do on the clarinet. And then the same thing with practically everything else I played, you know. I listened to someone playing Irish music, all those rolls and trills and stuff like that, and I just kind of figured out ways to do that on the clarinet. One of the things that I surmised when I was doing international folk dance music... I played bagpipe for a while. I played the Bulgarian bagpipe for a while. And what I noticed was, what's happening on the bagpipe in Bulgaria, is what the clarinet players were doing in Bulgaria. It's like the ornamentation, everything was directly drawn from the bagpipe playing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Bill Tomczak**

And Betsy Branch and I talked about this too, that you see that in Irish and Scottish music, too. It's like, a lot of what the fiddles are doing, you can see the line going right back to the bagpipes in those areas.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely.

**Bill Tomczak**

So you know, the bagpipe helped. Just listening a lot and trying to imitate the fiddle as much as I could. I sort of basically just created my own style. So that's the other thing, too. One of the things that I've heard you talk about a bunch is the mixing of styles, right? You don't mix Irish with French Canadian. And my feeling is like, hey, if the tunes go together, why not? I don't care. Do they work together? Then let's do it. Kerry... as has been said before, Kerry Elkin was famous for never, never mixing the streams, you know. And I've done gigs with him, where it's like, we can't do that to him because it's a different style from the other tune. It's like, okay, we'll find something else. But yeah, so I pretty much invented it. And then by the time I let go of trying to sound like a fiddle, then all of a sudden this whole new world opened up, and now I play the crap I play now. [Laughter]

**Julie Vallimont**

Where you could kind of play in your own style, whatever that is.

**Bill Tomczak**

Whatever... yeah. I mean, it's just like, I just gave up working so hard at it and just decided this is the way I play. And as long as people keep hiring me to play for their dances, I'm happy as a clam.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, well I mean, we could think about just some logistical things about ... like, matching ornaments is nice if you want to have a good unison melody. But then there's also a groove. And unison melody is a groove in and of itself, but it is not the only way to have a good groove.

**Bill Tomczak**

Absolutely. Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

When you're playing with people. And so I feel like matching your bandmates is important, either to get a good groove or to get a good melody lock, but there's lots of different ways to do it. So if you're not matching their ornaments exactly, what is your musical role in that case?

**Bill Tomczak**

Well, there's a term that I fell in love with at one point that justified the way I play contra dance music, so of course, I love the term. You know, there's homophony which is what you're talking about, everybody plays exactly the same thing, all together. Polyphony, which is, you know, written out different parts or whatever, you know, completely different parts. And then there's this lovely thing called heterophony.

**Julie Vallimont**

[Laughter] That's great.

**Bill Tomczak**

And it's basically... yeah, they're kind of the same, but not really. And in fact, in some of the arrangements... like when we BLT was doing a whole bunch of vintage music for a while through the 80s and we worked from a lot of arrangements, that music was just like, we played what was on the page. And pretty much, that's it. And what you see happening in some of the arrangements is like, the violin and the clarinet are playing in unison, and then there's a little breakout, and then they come back together again. It's a really cool effect. And, you know, we don't have to be playing the same thing all the time, straight through. It's like, you find something to complement the melody that kind of follows the melody to some extent.

**Julie Vallimont**

So is that what you would do these days in a contra dance is kind of, play the melody for a bit, play around the melody, under it. Like what would you do?

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah. I have this thing about once I get on stage, I stop thinking. You know, it's like, I've been practicing, I've been playing for dances now for... what is that? 40 years? 1979, 1980? Yeah, so that's 40 years now. I don't... again, I don't really fuss with what I do, or how I do it anymore. It's kind of like, I'm doing what I do. I learn some new tunes, and then ... there was someone, this guy in Massachusetts. Rich. He was an architect. We were in a jam session once, I think it was probably at David Kaynor's house. And someone said, hey, how about if we play Reel Béatrice, this French Canadian minor tune. And I had learned it, in some way that I learned it. And I remember Rich, saying, okay, that's the Bill-ified version. So, someone else ended up teaching the tune or whatever.

**Julie Vallimont**

You folk process it, you Bill process it.

**Bill Tomczak**

I am totally a, like humongous folk processor. You know, nothing escapes. [Laughter]

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, first of all, there's a lot of things that fit differently on the clarinet. And then there's also you filtering it through your own personality and not caring as much, and being more free, and your playing, and all those things combined. And you get a Bill.

**Bill Tomczak**

More or less. Yeah, well, and the thing is... you identify a real problem. In all those years I was trying to be the fiddle, it's kind of like, yeah, it's a clarinet, dude, you don't have a bow, you can't do double stops, hello. And even just fingerings I mean, especially these tunes in A? A is a... there are certain tunes that are just a nightmare on the clarinet. And so you kind of have to change the melody a little bit, just so you can reach the note. You know, they're just certain notes, that will not work. So I'll veer off from it a little bit. And thus, heterophony.

**Julie Vallimont**

Thus heterophony. So I imagine this is a little bit different than like, what people would think of as a solo. Like in the jazz tradition, you've got like, the changes and the head and the tune, and then there's solos. But here, you might take a solo sometimes, but also it's like playing around while the tune is happening. So it's not like a solo in the same sense.

**Bill Tomczak**

Exactly. Yeah. No, it's not a solo at all. Yeah, David Kaynor once said as much. He said, you know, what I can bring to the music is some color. You know, that's one of the things that the clarinet can function as. It's just a coloration that, you know, it doesn't have to be exactly the melody. It doesn't need, you know... it could be just some kind of made up harmony or whatever. But it adds a different color. And actually, that's why BLT was kind of a foundational band for me because it really settled for me that fiddle, clarinet, piano, that's the ideal band for me, you know. Because you get...

**Julie Vallimont**

And this being Barnes, Lea, Tomczak, right?

**Bill Tomczak**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Kate Barnes, Mary Lea and yourself. Okay, sorry to interrupt.

**Bill Tomczak**

No, no, no, it's like, does anybody even remember that that band existed at this point?

**Julie Vallimont**

Um, so anyway, you were saying you started playing with BLT and I totally interrupted you.

**Bill Tomczak**

Oh, no this is... I should be interrupted, I talk too much [Laughter]. Well, BLT... part of the pivot point that BLT was... and I remember exactly when BLT started playing, it was 1982, the fall of 1982. And this was around when I was getting fed up with international folk dancing and folk dance music and arguing about how to play it. And I was thinking I should really get into playing you know, contra dances again. You know, I had been, like I say, sitting in with Yankee Ingenuity here and there. Or maybe sort of sitting in with Yankee Ingenuity after getting together with Mary and Kate. But, yeah, I was desperately looking to get into contra dance music. And I don't know if this is okay for publication, but I'm going to say it anyway. They were looking to get out of contra dance music and do something more interesting, because they were bored with contra dance music. So it was a match made in heaven. And again, it was Marianne Taylor, she put together what she was calling Town Hall dances. And what these were, were mostly couple dances of some sort or another. So we do some international couple dance type thing. And then we do contra dance or two. And then we do some more couple dances and everything. So Mary and Kate were the ringers for the contra dance stuff. And I was the ringer for the international stuff. And so it was like, you know, we were both kind of, you know, moving in opposite directions that way. Or, as Ruthie Dornfeld once said to me, why do you want to play contra dance music, you're already doing the interesting stuff. So, we started doing those dances, and it was in the fall of 1982 that I... Oh, and the way the band got its name was they put the flyer together and it was Barnes at the top, Lea on the second line, Tomczak on the third line. B, L, T, right? And we were like, hey, look, that's a bad name. [Laughter] And since as you probably know, naming a band is one of the hardest things to do. No one argued.

**Julie Vallimont**

No. No. Is it vaguely viable and not offensive? Great, it's a name!

**Bill Tomczak**

Exactly. [Laughter]

**Julie Vallimont**

Is it not already taken by everybody else? Do you not actively hate it? Then it's a name [Laughter].

**Bill Tomczak**

Every once in a while, we would be doing some kind of a one off or something. Or you know, just like some weird off gig here or there. And Kate liked to use the name ... I don't know if we have ever actually announced it that we used this as a name, but Kate always fell in love with the name the Wayne Balducci Five and it could be anything but a quintet. [Laughter]

**Julie Vallimont**

Uhhuh right of course, it has to be the wrong number of people. Well, you know, they have those like, neural nets that create their versions of what humans would write, like, you know, feed a bunch of mystery novels and it creates a mystery novel. What if we fed in all the names of all the actual contra bands over the last like, 100 years, and it could make up fake ones and

they'd be just as bad. I would bet you couldn't tell the difference between contra band names made up by a computer and made up by a human.

**Bill Tomczak**

You know, it's entirely possible. Especially ... it's just a name. I mean, I dread the idea of reading a novel written by a computer, but a band name? Sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

This is so off topic, but there was the [Harry Potter written by a computer](#) and it is some of the most hilarious stuff I've ever read.

**Bill Tomczak**

I'll have to look that up.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's very funny. So, you know, it's interesting because you play for a lot of different styles of dance and as we know, you've danced a lot of these styles of dance. You know, I love contra dance music. Obviously so do you, that's why we're here. You know, it doesn't always have maybe some of the nuance or variety of forms, like mostly time signatures and tempos. Like you know other kinds of dance, international dance, or English country dance especially have varieties in like, time signatures, key signatures, how fast you're going, the mood. But yet, contra dancing also has this amazing zestiness. And so how is your playing different when you're playing for contras like, what did that bring out in your playing when you started playing for contras versus international dance?

**Bill Tomczak**

That's a good question. What do I do differently? How do I play differently for contra dance than other things? I think the the first word that came to mind probably is the best description: wild abandon. You know, contra dance music for me provides a structure. I'm one of those people... early on, before I even knew about contra dancing I had figured out that I'm not a purely creative person, but give me a bit of structure and I can do all kinds of stuff inside that structure. So, in a way, the rigid structure of contra dance tunes is brilliant for me, you know. It's like, okay, we got chord changes. We got a melody that I can ignore. It's always 32 bars, or mostly it's 32 bars. So, you know, I got that clock in my head. And so within that, within those constraints, let's see what happens. And that's really kind of where the Lizards for me came from. My fantasy at that point in my career was the tradition of the New Orleans group improvisation, where, you know, it's like, there's these specific instruments. They have specific roles, you know. Clarinet, banjo, trumpet, trombone, probably bass or tuba. And everybody... you know, it's like, there was a chart, you know? Chords, melody, and each instrument sort of had a specific role to play within that context, you know. So the clarinet had sort of like a defined... and then it was all improvised, but the clarinet sort of like fell into this particular niche. And the trumpet generally had the melody or not, but would be like the lead. And the clarinet and the trumpet would just work off of each other. And so that was, that was my idea. And so along comes Dave and Kate. And I think Dave mentioned this in his interview about... you know, he started showing up at the



Greenfield dances. And there's this one particular moment that just blew my mind, blew both our minds, he was like, standing right next to me, we're playing some tune, I don't remember what it was. And Dave and I just improvised some kind of improvised line. It wasn't the melody, it wasn't anything else. It just some, I don't know, arpeggio or just a scale or something like that. And we did it in perfect harmony, absolutely together. And after we did that we looked at each other and I was like, what was that? I want to do more of that.

**Julie Vallimont**

It could just happen, just spontaneously happen.

**Bill Tomczak**

And you know, it's funny, because people, you know, now, will hear us playing. It's like, oh, well you guys have been playing so long together you don't need to have arrangements and you know exactly what he tells me he's going to do. It's like, no, that was right from the get go. You know, we weren't... we were a group improvising band, right from the get go. And we, I think we've gotten better at it, maybe. But now the ability to just... between three people, and you know, sometimes a bass, to sort of just fill the space with our own little niche. You know, I had my role as a clarinet, Dave had his role as the fiddle, and we'd swap back and forth as to what that role was. And we kind of... you know, it's like, nowadays the way I talk about it is like, there's a point where I just stopped playing. And because usually what's going on in my head is, I've been hearing too much of me, it's time to quit. And then let them kind of do something for a while. And then I'll come back in and they will be like, oh, I need a break. You know, and then we'll do trades or whatever. But it's all completely spontaneous. And it's like, it's a sense I think we all have. And this is another interesting thing that I wonder about sometimes. All three of us grew up musically for contra dance music in the same culture, in the same community. I remember these massive jam sessions at someone's house. It would be like, you know, people stuffing the room, you know, shoulder to shoulder playing all these tunes from from Randy's book mostly, or wherever else. But they were all tunes we all knew. Or we learned them at those jam sessions if we were new to it. And it's really astonishing to me to this day, every once in a while, David or I will say, hey, when was the last time you ever played ... you know, whatever, some tune that we used to play back in the 80s. You know, and it was like, oh, yeah, I remember that. And we sort of like, slowly remind ourselves when the caller is talking through the dances like okay, yeah, yeah, this is how it goes. And then we play it. I swear to god note for note, we play exactly the same tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah!

**Bill Tomczak**

Unbelievable. After all these years of not playing it for, you know, 10, 15 years, whatever, we play exactly, note for note, the same tune because we both learned it at those jam sessions.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right.

**Bill Tomczak**

You know. And so we have the same sensibilities about it, I think as a result.

**Julie Vallimont**

Maybe that's what tradition is.

**Bill Tomczak**

Well, it's one tradition. I mean, that's the tradition that we're coming out of.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, exactly, that's how it happens.

**Bill Tomczak**

But yeah, exactly. But you're coming out of that same tradition. You know, it's just things have changed a bit since you showed up. So you're kind of coming from a slightly different place. It's kind of like, you know, one of those Darwinian evolution trees, right? It's like, here's this root and you know, all this stuff coming up.

**Julie Vallimont**

Hey, you guys are like the coelacanth.

**Bill Tomczak**

Hopefully we're not the trilobites. I think coelacanths are still alive actually, someone caught one.

**Julie Vallimont**

They are! They are. I wasn't gonna call you a living fossil, but...

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah but you did. [Laughter]

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, we're not that far apart in age. We're farther apart in contra years than we are in actual years.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yes, exactly. But yeah, you know, the whole thing about it... because... you know, I think there are these stages we all go through. I don't know if you went through this, but I certainly did. Because of just the personality type I am, I had all these rules, you know. You play for a dance, this has to happen. This has to happen. This is the way this has to be played. This has to... you know, there's all this stuff about... and I was like, really rigid about. It's like, oh. And then I would keep seeing each of my cherished rules being violated with impunity by some other band. It was

like, oh, okay. Maybe I'm wrong about that. And at some point, I realized, there's really not a whole lot of rules here.

**Julie Vallimont**

And it's fine for contra bands to impose their own rules. That's one of the things that helps you like, create a sound. And like you say, sometimes a rigid framework actually leads to different creativity, because you have to be ingenious to keep thinking of ways to be creative within those frameworks that like, pushes you in a different way that I really enjoy.

**Bill Tomczak**

Right? Right. Exactly.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Yeah, so when you're playing on stage, and you're like, looking at the dancers, how do you interact with the dancers? In contra dancing as a clarinet player?

**Bill Tomczak**

Well, it's a little tough because I got this thing in my mouth, right?

**Julie Vallimont**

So you're not shouting at them.

**Bill Tomczak**

No, certainly not having a conversation. I have had people come up to me on stage trying to start a conversation while I'm playing. I'm like, wow, okay, you see what's happening here. But I have come very firmly to see the dancers as part of the band. Because they're moving and making noise with their feet, with their mouths, whatever, with their hands. And so, you know, there's this whole thing about like, well, you have to look at the dancers. And it's kind of like, yeah, I look at the dancers occasionally, just to make sure we're not totally off the wall, insanely... although I feel like that's the caller's job that if we're going too fast, then the caller has to say, hey, you're going too fast. I kind of feel like it's not my job, (and I have a story about that, too). But I hear them. I hear the noises that they're making, I hear their feet. And of course, there's always the proverbial balance, which is always like the focus that everybody likes to go at. But there's other things going on, too, you know, the way people's feet are shuffling. The way the sounds seem to be all synchronized, or not. You know? And I play off of that. You know, the really easy famous one you can always do is like, you know, there's Petronella type dances.

**Julie Vallimont**

They have the little claps.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah. Yeah, I remember when people started clapping during the dance, Petronella, we started doing those claps and we all hated it. Well, I shouldn't say we all hated it. Many of us hated it. And we always, you know, we were playing in some other communities like, has this dance

gotten the clap yet. [Laughter] But we've gotten used to it. But it becomes something to work with. Now, it's another way that the dancers join in with the band. And, so you know, there's the classic, where you just drop out for those bars while they do their little Petronella turns and claps and just leave them alone. Don't even play anything at all for like, whatever it is, three, four bars, you know, people are afraid of stopping. I'm not afraid of stopping.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, the the dancers just want to be part of it. You know, it's like clogging, you're doing footwork or clapping or whatever, more power to them, you know? Yeah.

**Bill Tomczak**

So I have to tell you this story is one of my favorite stories over the years. The the four... the Kaynor band?

**Julie Vallimont**

The Foregone Conclusions?

**Bill Tomczak**

Thank you. I was halfway there. So the Foregone Conclusions, there was a tradition for a long time that the Thursday dance that Tod ran was held at the Cambridge, I think it was a YMCA?

**Julie Vallimont**

The VFW?

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah, well his regular dance is the VFW but Thanksgiving, the Foregone Conclusions were in general, THE band. And they did this routine that was absolutely hilarious and had some really hilarious side effects. I think, I'm not sure, but I think the tune was the Blue Mountaineers. And they did this thing, where at the end of a round of the dance, they would start messing with the beats. So at the end of the dance, they would add one beat. And then, you know, of course, the dancers would, you know, haha, and then they would catch up and everything would be fine. And then the next time they would drop a beat, and then the dancers had to like, pull back and, you know, try to catch up again. And then I remember this one time, where they just, they just stopped playing. And my recollection of the tunes...this tune just like came to a dead halt, before you started up the next round of the tune. That's why they could do this. You know, they come in either a beat late or beat early or whatever. And then this one time, they just stopped playing. And the dancers kept dancing. And they started singing. And they, I swear, they did at least one round of that dance with no music whatsoever. They might have done a second round with no music whatsoever. And then the the Fourgonnes came in at the top of the next round. And it was just this like, big moment. So why not? Right?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. That's amazing. Yeah, like when you're talking about contra music, you know, you said the phrase wild abandon. And then you also talk about all these sounds and the grit. And I think

that's what I love about playing contra dance is this like grit, this sense of abandon this, like, it's a little rough and tumble. It doesn't have to be perfect. And you can kind of do whatever you want to as long as you decide what is the basic integrity of the dance. And even then you can mess with that, like the Foregone Conclusions and lots of other folks have been known to do, right.

**Bill Tomczak**

Oh we've done that. The Lizards have done that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, exactly.

**Bill Tomczak**

You know, the whole point is, you know, I go, I go back to that Dick Crum quote, people just want to dance to beautiful music. And as long as we're having fun, and the music is beautiful, and people are dancing and inspired by it, I'm good. There's things that I would rather not happen sometimes. But you know, those are choices that other people make, and, you know, more power to them. You know, I have my sensibilities and I'm sticking to them. That's, but there's, they seem to keep changing, too. So there you go.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, speaking of your sensibilities, who were some of your biggest influences in terms of the fiddlers that you were listening to or other clarinet influences, like you mentioned jazz or maybe classical music. And what are you listening to now?

**Bill Tomczak**

Listening to now? Oh, well, you know, obviously Mary Lea and I played together for many years and so she's undoubtedly a big influence on my playing. Rodney [Miller] influenced everybody. I don't care who you are. You know, he does amazing things. I did... I played with Ruthie Dornfeld quite a bit for a while. She was fun. And I learned a lot from her. I'm still like, sort of, I feel like I'm still learning things from my memory of playing with her and some of the stuff that she's done. She's just a phenomenal fiddler. I just, I cannot say enough good things about Ruthie's playing. She's just unbelievable. Alasdair Fraser, speaking of wild abandon, he and I, at Scottish week, we'd get really, really drunk and just play shit. I just have this memory at like two or three in the morning. It's Scottish week and Alasdair's hair is completely sopping wet and flying all over the place. And he's just sawing away and playing and doing whatever it is we're doing. And it was very cathartic. It was very good. I think I learned a lot from him. Gosh, who else...there's a bunch. You know, just basically all the people that, you know, were the fiddlers that were playing in New England at the time. And then, when I started, especially when I started playing saxophone... I started playing saxophone in the 90s. I came across my first tenor sax and fell in love. For one thing, the saxophone is a much more sane instrument than the clarinet. The clarinet is just stupid. But it's still who I am. I mean, it's like, you know, that's, that's my instrument. And I, that feels like, closer to my voice than anything else. I was just saying to

someone the other day, we were doing some gigs. Yeah, I kind of feel like a clarinet player holding a saxophone. But you know, I do alright.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. I feel like that's what happens to a lot of piano players who learn piano accordion.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, I used to play saxophone, like all through high school.

**Bill Tomczak**

Really? You poor thing. Why'd you stop?

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, speaking of poor thing, it was because I had dorm roommates and I didn't have anywhere to practice. I grew up in the middle of nowhere, and I could play and only drive my family crazy, but I don't want to go to the practice room. If I did want to practice, I wanted to practice piano. So I kind of just... it's not a roommate-friendly instrument.

**Bill Tomczak**

It's a lot more... or... I have to say a wife-friendly instrument because I was just learning to play saxophone when I was still married to Susan [Kevra]. I think it drove her a little crazy.

**Julie Vallimont**

But I don't think of the saxophone as a very hard instrument. Like it's, it's not like the trumpet or like, the French horn. Like anybody who plays French horn, it's just insane to me, like, how does that even work? But how is the clarinet harder than the saxophone? I'm curious... or like weirder:

**Bill Tomczak**

Um, before I before we leave this, I just have to say Matt Glaser said to me once he played around with the saxophone a little bit, he said, this is a toy instrument. Like, what's the big deal?

**Julie Vallimont**

Right? It's so satisfying. Like fiddle is also a weird instrument, like, millimeters of where your finger is on the fingerboard affect your entire pitch and everything. It all happens in, like three inches of space, how do they do it?

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah why do they put strings on the damn thing? I mean, come on. But, so it's hard... this may get a little bit technical for some people. Maybe you like this, but...

**Julie Vallimont**

The one clarinet player listening to the podcast, right? So clarinet player, this is for you.

**Bill Tomczak**

All wind instruments basically operate on the octave. So you play a scale with a certain set of fingerings. And then you press this little thumb key, and now you're playing the same notes an octave up. You know, that's, that's the way a sane, normal rational wind instrument works. The clarinet does not operate on octaves, it operates on octave and a fifth. So I play all these notes in the lower register, I hit a thumb key, I am now playing notes that are an octave and a fifth up from those notes. And so what this also creates is this little thing we call the break. So there's all these missing notes between those two registers, right. So we have all these funky little weird keys to help us bridge that gap between the two registers. And then what this ends up doing is you have, and again, this happens especially in the key of A, there are certain situations where there are certain notes, you have to figure out whether you're, you know...there's these pinky keys, you have to figure out if you're playing it on the left pinky or the right pinky, because there's a couple of notes...well one note in particular, that you can only play on the right pinky. So if you end up landing on one of those notes, that's on the right pinky, and you need to get to that one. The only thing you can do is play that same note on the left pinky to get to the note on the right pinky. And it's a pain in the ass. So, which reminds me of another story. When you're at NEFFA, Dan Beerbohm and I were talking and he's a clarinet player, and he was like he was oohing and ahing like, wow, you get this like really kind of bluesy, jazzy sound, you know, and especially in the key of A? And I pointed out to him that note... so in the key of A that note that I play on the right finger, is A, right? In that upper register, and that note that I'm trying to get to is C#. This what happens if you just lift your finger up to go press that key, you go A, C, C#. Add a little bit of a slur and you've got yourself a nice little bluesy slur to C#.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you got your flat third right there.

**Bill Tomczak**

Absolutely. And he was like, No, it can't be that simple. It's like, I'm cheating the whole time guy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, so it's just like leaning into some of those things.

**Bill Tomczak**

Well, it's the instrument right? This is what it's what I have to work with. Right. So...

**Julie Vallimont**

What are some of your favorite things to do on the clarinet for contra dances?

**Bill Tomczak**

Oh, wow, that's... now there's a question I would never have expected. Yes. What are my favorite things to do on the clarinet?

**Julie Vallimont**

Musical or otherwise.

**Bill Tomczak**

It's changed over time. Now... I think, really, it's not any specific technique thing or anything like that. It's funny, you know, what comes to mind is on our second CD, the Lizard CD, and I don't know if you played this cut with Dave or Kate, but it's the one that always comes to mind when I just think this is a perfect recording. This, this is a perfect track. It's, it's the first track on the CD Log Cabin. And it starts off, and this is it, you have to keep in mind again, we did not arrange any of that CD, we just like walked into the studio. And we said, Okay, you take it, you take it, we'll do something here. Let's go. And then we just go off into our little booths and record. And that Log Cabin track. I think it was just the one take, I don't think we did anything other than that one take. And so Kate did something she'd never done before in that take. She started with this vamp that was like, Oh, this is cool. And then I was supposed to come in on the first round. And I started off I was like, I'm going to play I'm going to play the melody, right? And then I got about maybe a bar or two into the melody, and then I just thought, no, I'm just gonna hold this note for a while and see what happens. And then I just improvised the rest of the way through. I like doing that kind of thing. We did, that reminds me of a time when we were playing at Greenfield and Naomi Morse and a couple of other young women who were getting into playing for contra dancing at that point, it's like her cohort. Rodney's daughter I think was there, Elvie [Miller] was there. And they're just sitting in the back of the stage at Greenfield. And we're just, and the Lizards are kind of playing away. And at some point, we probably... we might have switched. I think we did actually, you know, this is before we got too into the one tune thing... but at some point we started playing An Irishman's Heart to the Ladies, you know that tune, right?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. That's an A jig.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah it's an A jig. But, you know, it's like it's a great blues tune. Which is the way we're playing it at the time. But so we switched to Irishman's Heart to the Ladies. Nobody took the melody. And we were all just kind of like jamming the chord changes of Irishman's Heart to the Ladies. And afterwards, I think it was... Naomi came and was like, you didn't even play the melody until the second or third time through? It's like, yeah, that's what we do. I like doing that kind of stuff.

**Julie Vallimont**

Was there were there other contra bands? Like not playing the melody? Did that feel scandalous? Were the dancers, or the caller like, where's the tune? Or was that a pretty normal thing for you guys to do, then?

**Bill Tomczak**

Oh, well it became more and more normal. I don't, I can't believe nobody had done that before. That... I can't believe nobody did that before. Someone had to have been, must have been



doing that. But you know, I mean, the big band at that time in those days was, you know, like Wild Asparagus. And it's like, certainly at that point, my impression was, and I believe is true, like, everything was worked out ahead of time. Nobody did anything that wasn't part of... because they practice. The Lizards never practice. I don't even know what we would practice if we were gonna practice. But, you know, they, they worked out these arrangements and they worked out these things to play. And I can't imagine a band like Wild Asparagus. Definitely not a band like Nightingale. You know, that would probably... maybe not offensive, but just in bad taste.

**Julie Vallimont**

If they were to not play the melody...

**Bill Tomczak**

Well you know, I'm projecting onto them the idea that maybe what we were doing was in bad taste. Because they would never do that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I don't know. You know, I think like, both those bands have arrangements, we'd have to ask them. I think, of course, not every note is scripted, right? It's like you're improvising within your arrangement. I'm sure that like every time the arrangement comes out a little different. And then there's other things you probably played note for note every time, you know, but I that would be a great question to ask them. I don't think it was all scripted. But certainly, there wouldn't be a time when maybe nobody's playing the melody for some length of time. And I play with bands that aren't that rehearsed. And usually, if the melody is not happening, there are players who have this immediate instinct to think, oh, no, this is terrible. I must fill this space.

**Bill Tomczak**

The only time that has become a problem in the Lizards is when at the end of a round the tune, we all decided to stop playing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh and then it's over.

**Bill Tomczak**

Is it over? Immediately, one of us goes, Oh my God and starts playing the melody. But other than that, yeah, I mean, if if we stop playing, you know, if everybody starts playing at the top of a B, that's cool.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, today's contra dancers in for the most part are pretty used to that. They're not gonna freak out if the tune's not there, you know, as long as you give them something phrased enough they can dance to it.

**Bill Tomczak**

But it's not traditional!

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, it is.

**Bill Tomczak**

My point exactly. [Laughter] What was I thinking, oh, some thought just flitted through my distracted, chaotic brain.

**Julie Vallimont**

What are your biggest influences that you bring into your contra playing that come from outside the contra tradition, like...

**Bill Tomczak**

Well, you know, clearly, absolutely Bulgarian music, Eastern European music, Romanian music. Because that's the music that I most bonded with during that period when I was playing that music. And you can see, it's like, I tried to sneak in the hijaz scale, whenever there's an opportunity. In fact, we did, I think we did this on a recording, we have a thing that we do with Opera Reel, where we just changed the mode. It's basically exactly the same melody, but we change the mode to what some people call Jewish minor. Or you know that that Eastern European scale. And then there's like, there's a whole sequence we go through...speaking of arrangements, we do have this arrangement, where...but it's never quite the same every time, obviously. But we'll, you know, I'll give the nod to Kate. And then we'll switch into that, that Eastern European mode. It's actually kind of derived from the Turkish maqam system. And we'll play that for a few rounds. And then we switch to another mode. Still, again, more or less playing something like the melodies as much as you can in that mode. And then we'll do that for a couple of rounds. And then we'll switch back to the original mode and do that for a round or two. And then we come blasting in on a big, you know, D7, or A7 chord is it? It's a D right? So we come blasting in on a big D7 chord, and then go back to the straight major, original Opera Reel melody. So that's our arrangement. So yeah, it's a lot of... I think, a lot of the work that I did trying to learn fiddle embellishments and everything, I think they deteriorated over the years into basically, you know, Eastern European clarinet techniques. Because you know, it's a clarinet.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's a lot of cool ornaments you can do on a clarinet that you can't do on a fiddle, so...

**Bill Tomczak**

Oh, yeah. It's funny. Betsy Branch hired me to do the Portland Revels a few years ago. And I was one of the ringers, because it was a... it had a lot of Eastern European, Bulgarian type music in it. And so, and Betsy, you know, had never played that music before. So we actually worked with her a bunch, you know, just sort of like do a reasonable simulacrum of Eastern European fiddle playing. And I gotta say she did a brilliant job. She's an amazing fiddler. She got the feel of it down real quick. That's great. So yeah, you know, other than that, you know, I grew up listening to things like rock and roll and, and then once I picked up the sax, the real

irony of the sax is when I was in college as a music major, I hated this sax and I hated jazz. I think that's hilarious. But when I took up the sax, I started listening to a lot of jazz. You know, it's like, I was really taken with, you know, some of the the greats from, you know, the 50s and before. Stan Getz, Lester Young, Pee Wee Russell, I mentioned before was a clarinet player that I really liked. I discovered, oh...one of my cohorts in the international, you know, a guy who played a lot of Bulgarian clarinet lived in California. He sent me a tape, which I now was able to purchase. It's a jazz recording of Creole musicians in Louisiana. They, I can't remember the clarinet player's name. But he was sort of in the same area with, like Johnny Hodges, and...so all these clarinet players, obviously in Louisiana, and I listened to a lot of those guys. And I got a lot from them. Edmond Hall was just... totally fell in love with his playing for a while. Another one of these New Orleans, jazz clarinet players. So all of that stuff is in my ear. And, and then I don't worry about imitating it or trying to learn something from it. I just figure you know, I heard it, it's in my ear, I'll play with it. And I do... I end up playing with it. So, and you know, it's like it's a dance. Right? If it doesn't work? Well, I'll try it again and see if I can get it to work next time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. I mean, that's worth trying it a few times to see if it'll work. And then after a few times, you know then maybe you will or won't?

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah, maybe it's time to give that one up.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I was intrigued before when you were talking about the amount of swingy-ness in different kinds of music. I have been, the last few years as a rhythm player, just obsessed with groove and thinking about it and analyzing it. And I'm curious about your thoughts about it as a melody player. And I don't know, talk about groove. What do you want to say about groove?

**Bill Tomczak**

It's a hard thing to talk about, really. And you know, when you say groove, you know, my mind, of course, immediately goes to... well, you know, there's Bulgarian groove, and there's Irish groove, and there's Scottish groove. And New England is, you know, it's a big bush now. So who knows what groove actually means in there. If people are having a good time dancing, hey the groove is good. I know one thing that comes up for me ... I think it's one of those things that's possible to overthink. I think that's kind of probably what happens a lot. You just have to just play along with recordings, play with other people. And don't engage your head so much as your heart and your body. And when it feels right, it feels right.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Bill Tomczak**

You know? That's what it comes down to. Because when you start talking about it and thinking about it, there's a... in fact, we were just talking about this the other day, with something that's

been happening in the contra world, which I don't know if I want to get into or not. But in jazz, I took a bunch of jazz lessons from a guy named Billy Novick in the Boston area. And I was a terrible student of his. I mean, it's like, I took probably a dozen lessons with him over the years. And I feel like I'm still trying to figure out how to incorporate some of the stuff that he talked about. But really helpful, really. And a really good guy, just... I love Billy to death, and one of my big influences on playing. He famously said to Kate Barnes one day, it's like, yeah, you know, Bill starts coming along really well, and then he goes on one of these contra dance tours, and he comes back and he's all squared up again. [Laughter] Yeah, yeah. But, um, one of the things that Billy would talk about... so you know, when you talk about swing in jazz, you know, that's kind of, in a way, where the term probably came from, you think of the triplet eighth, right? It's not just dada, dada, dada [Bill sings straight eighth notes without swing], it's da-da, da, da-da [Bill sings eighth notes with swing]. And I'm sorry, that's not just swing.[Laughter] It's more than that. And it's not really a triplet, and it's not really a dotted eighth quarter kind of thing.

### **Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

### **Bill Tomczak**

And what he talked about was that swung note, that triplet, 16th, whatever it is, actually just has a little bit more weight than the other note, and maybe a little less time. But it's like, the way you weight that note, as opposed to, like, dada, dada, dada [Bill sings swung eighth notes without emphasis on one note more than the other]. You know, it's like... oh, I can't think of any tunes, you know, to do that. But it's like, if you follow that as a technique you will not be swinging, you know. Whatever note values you want to choose, you will not be swinging. It's a feel. So, I go back to: So play along with recordings, you know, get the feel of it, don't overthink it, but feel it. It's in your body, it's in your heart, that's where it's got to be. And I would apply that to any traditional music, you know. This sounds like a Bulgarian playing it versus some Polish American guy in Boston playing it. And not that there's anything wrong with that, because one of the things that I got criticism for during my international days was that my feeling was, we can't sit here trying to replicate what they do on these recordings, you know, what these Bulgarians are doing? Because you have to make it your own on some level. And, you know, that was, that was heretical, you know. And that's kind of what led to like, oh, well, contra dance. I live in New England, so if I play New England contra dance music, who can argue with me? Well, turns out a lot. But I had better standing. So in my way, I've made contra dance music, mine, you know. And I have some people who are willing to put up with what I've done to it. And people seem to like it, and they hire me. And life is good, right? [Laughter]

### **Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, for a lot of musicians, with some amount of technical skill, you can play music from a different genre and read it off of sheet music, but the feel isn't necessarily right. And it comes from that groove, that invisible nuance of its... it's not just, you know, the amount of swing in your eighth notes, or the beat placement, or the emphasis, or are you on the front of the beat or the back of the beat, or just all these a million little invisible variables.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yes, yes to all of that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, exactly. And when you immerse yourself in something long enough, you just... if you're a good listener and you spend time immersing yourself in it, you can just kind of through osmosis lock into that groove.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah, that's exactly it. You just have to do it a lot. And you have to be with people and play with people and lock into them. And yes, it happens in your ear. That's where it starts, you know? And then how does that make you feel? How does that make you move? What is it, you know, and you just keep adjusting. An analog to that... there was a particular Macedonian clarinet recording. It was a dance that I was always learning. And I would listen to it and I tried to play along with the recording, and I don't think I ever transcribed or even tried to transcribe it. But I think at that point, I was like, well, I'm gonna learn the melody, and then I'll just keep on honing in, playing along with this recording a million times. And, you know, slowly hone in on what he's doing. Now, you know, play with it, you know, practice with it for a few hours. Work, you know how that goes. And then okay, I got it, I got it. Then we go and play the dance. And I'd be playing it, and then go back and listen to the recording after I played it a few times out in the wild. And then come back and I was like, oh, he's doing way less than I think I need to do, you know. And so then I find myself toning it down. And it wasn't about notes. It wasn't about embellishments. He wasn't really doing a whole lot of that. But the feel...

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Bill Tomczak**

That was the thing that I... it just took me several rounds of that to sort of get to the point where, oh, I get it. There's a concept I have and it just drives me crazy. I hate it when I hear other people doing it. I hate it more when I find myself doing it. Because I know better. I talk about it: trying too hard.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh yeah, right. Oh, yeah. I feel like that's really easy to do in contra music when we're trying to make it exciting and we like overplay. And sometimes that gets less of a result from the dancers, than if we just let the music be what it is.

**Bill Tomczak**

Just enjoy what you're doing. Put some enthusiasm in it and you can just, you know ... this is another thing, talking about what's changed over the years. I have a really strong memory of dancing in the lower hall at NEFFA, probably still the early 80s. And it was Bob McQuillen, April Limber, and Pete Colby of the original New England Tradition, I think they called themselves. And you know, if you've listened to those recordings... if you've ever listened to April play, she

plays the melody, ornaments and all, exactly the same way every single time. Pete Colby is just, you know, wailing away on the banjo. And I'm not as familiar with the banjo but I have no doubt he's playing it exactly the same way or close to the same way. Every single time. Bob McQuillen, same thing. He plays Bob McQuillen, right? So here's this trio playing in the lower hall, and it was the best dance music I think I have ever danced to. I went through moments over those years, where I would listen to some... like Susan had a band with a couple of other women named Susan in the Pioneer Valley called... I think they call themselves The Susans. And you know, very straight ahead playing, you know. Just traditional in the New England tradition band sense of the term. And I would dance to them. And I would just come away feeling like, this is what people really want to be dancing to. They don't want to dance to this bullshit that I'm playing. But so that night at NEFFA in the lower hall, I am totally grooving on this band. They are fantastic. It's the best dance music I've ever danced to. And people are griping about how boring they are. Like, can you not hear? [Laughter] But, you know, that was a period when things started shifting and we had to be exciting. We had to do stuff.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Yeah. It's like, are you looking for ear candy and like constant stimulation? Like is it a concert? But then there's that groove. And I think... I feel like there was a time when that was a very traditional groove to hear in contra dancing, right? Like the Bob McQuillen sound, the boom chuck. Like the sound of boom chuck in general is not commonly heard a lot [today].

**Bill Tomczak**

That was New England contra dance music. That's what it was.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Yeah. And that kind of groove or like... if you listen to the New England chestnuts album... so the tunes are played with a certain kind of lilt and swing and the kind of boom chuck that's underneath them. And nowadays, you hear a lot of different kinds of music for contra dance. But along with that comes a lot of different kinds of grooves, right? Like you can hear The Horse Flies which is a way different groove, or the Clayfoot Strutters versus like a lot of bands that are... I think of other bands as being like really on the front of the beat, you know? I think of contra music as being like that. Whereas I feel like the older style was more centered in the middle of the beat. It had this kind of swing and lift in it. And today's music is more out to the front of the beat, like a band like Great Bear. I feel like I could say that playing with Noah a lot. Like he's, you know... they're out on the front of the beat. It's exciting. It's edgy. I feel like the Lizards definitely live on the front.

**Bill Tomczak**

That's all Kate. She's totally like, as far ahead of the beat.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh totally, exactly. Like, you know, they say like jazz players, they're so far behind the beat they're almost on the next one. It's like the opposite. Yeah. And so that's fine. Because then you

get to be like, the counterpart to that, right. To like, balance out the other side of the beat, if you want to. You can like play with that, I guess, if you want to be on the front or not.

**Bill Tomczak**

Well, you know, that gets to another point for me, that you play with the people you're playing with. In a band, to my mind, everything that happens in the band, every player, has to do whatever they can to make everyone else sound good.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah,

**Bill Tomczak**

You know? That's the goal in my mind, you know. We should all be basically supporting whatever it is that you're doing. And if that means playing off of you, or kind of like, having a tweak once in a while... as long as you don't go overboard and do something that just basically discombobulates your bandmates, you know, it's like, they got to be with you on that, you know. And that's one of the lovely things about playing with the Lizards is kind of like, yeah, pretty much anything goes. You know, it's like, yeah, we can all count on each other responding to whatever it is that comes up. It may not work, but you know, we're good to go.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's like how you would play with one person is totally different than how you play with another person.

**Bill Tomczak**

That's my approach. If I'm playing with someone who's a basic boom chuck piano player, and doesn't know much beyond like, maybe a V7 chord, you know, everything else is triads, I don't, I feel really uncomfortable doing anything more than playing the melody and maybe playing with the melody a little bit. But I'm not, I don't feel free to do all the things I might do with someone like Kate playing piano, you know. And I do play with people who are pretty basic players. And I love... as long as they swing, I love playing with anybody, you know. Problem, of course, is like, these days, time, and finding time to play with people. But well, you know, like, we're in the middle of mega band season right now The Portland Megaband. And we're having our final rehearsal, our dress rehearsal is Saturday. And we're going to do a concert two weeks later. And I've been working on all these arrangements for the band and stuff. But as a player... so we have, what is it, something like 40 or 50 people in the band this year. And you've got people who could be (and in some cases have been, or are) in the Oregon Symphony, or the Portland Symphony or something, really, really good, phenomenal players, to people who are having a hard time playing the simplest melodies. You know, and it's a wonderful group of people. It's a wonderful sound. And when I'm playing in that band, there's no improvising at all. I mean, the joy I get from that is, I'm going to play this melody exactly the way they've got it written. And there's a joy in that for me, you know, to just play exactly what's written perfectly every time it comes around. And the same thing with the arrangements. It's like, when I first started doing arrangements for the Megaband, you know, I would come up with all these... like, I have this

really wild idea of what I want to do. And then I realize, no, that's not going to work in the bigger band. Because to do these really crazy wild arrangements, the band has to be on board with it. The band has to work with that arrangement. The band has to be able to respond to that arrangement. And this is not a band that's going to be able to do that. So the arrangements in a lot of ways are pretty simplistic. But I've been getting a lot of really good feedback on what I've done this year with the arrangements. It's like, you know, again, comes back to swing. Playing the melody, just by itself, really well, with swing. You don't really need anything more than that, right? It's nice when you can go beyond it. But, you know, you can have a really great dance experience dancing to some really straightforward music, like, you know, New England Tradition.

**Julie Vallimont**

The Portland Megaband. Yeah, absolutely. And I miss hearing that kind of groove more in contra dancing these days.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's just harder and harder to hear it. It still happens but I love it. Like I love when you're at a festival and they have like... like the NEFFA Festival Orchestra or something. And it's like, that groove again. That's swingy-ness. The sound of a bunch of people. And it's just changes the whole vibe on the dance floor.

**Bill Tomczak**

Absolutely. Well, and Megaband normally does a dance once a year. This is supposed to... [crosstalk] And I just joined in 2020. So we ended up not doing our dance. And at the last minute just before they closed everything down, we ended up doing our whole set as a concert. But you know, it was like, for me to be able to play in a band like that, with no improvisation, nothing fancy, but to be part of a horn section... I think we had... did we have four horns that year. I think we had trombone... yeah, trombone, French horn, tenor sax, and I was playing... or maybe Norman was playing alto sax and I was playing soprano. And, you know, to be part of a horn section like that, it's just so fabulous. It's like no, it's not, you know, big band jazzy blah, blah, blah, fancy stuff. But good solid music played with heart and swing. It makes me happy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Me too. That's my happy place. I love doing fancy arrangements. But the thing that fills my heart the most is just that simple, good, straight up groove and a good tune played well. And it lets you relax and live inside the tune and just be in that space. And a good tune is designed for repetition, you know? They don't need a lot of fancy things, right?

**Bill Tomczak**



Ralph Page was the one who said to me one time, if a tune is good enough to play once it's good enough to play 1000 times. And his other one was, well, if you have to change tunes, you certainly don't change key.

**Julie Vallimont**

[Laughter] It's funny because now I think one of the rules that people think is like, oh, you have to change keys when you're changing tunes. And it's just like, we've made up these rules for ourselves.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah! Well you know, it's part of the traditional. When I showed... oh, and the funny thing is, so here's Ralph telling you this, right? And so when I started playing in the early 80s, with BLT and sitting in with Yankee Ingenuity, everything... and I think, did you interview Mary Lea?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, I did.

**Bill Tomczak**

I think she talked about how that was a tradition they came up with in Yankee Ingenuity. Three tune medleys, right? So BLT always did that. We always had to pick three tunes for a medley, sometimes four. And that was the tradition at that point. That's the way it was done, you know. And then, of course, you know, I had so much fun hanging out at southern jams, where, you know, they play one tune for like, four hours or something. And I just thought that was just so fabulous. Because, you know, talk about getting inside a tune, right. Getting inside of there, right? You just like, you just zone out. You totally get into this meditative state, you know. Some sort of Zen, you know, meditation state that you get into. And we didn't necessarily plan it this way. I think they spoke to this, but when the Lizards first started playing, we were all like, totally into the improvising thing. And we would pick, you know, the standard three tune medley, or, you know, sometimes maybe only two. But then, you know, we'd be having a great time playing, the caller would turn and say hey, two more times. It's like, wait, we haven't gotten to our second tune yet! We just gave up coming up with alternate tunes. And so now that's the Lizard tradition.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, exactly, that's your tradition.

**Bill Tomczak**

We made it up. It's ours. And not out of whole cloth, either. I mean, that's the thing. It's like, we're all taking bits and pieces of various traditions that have come our way that we've all had experience with, and kind of pasting them together through our own little Frankenstein monsters. And some of them are really good. People keep hiring the Lizards. God knows why.

**Julie Vallimont**

[Laughter] And like some of these things... like, we're allowed to experiment, and then these things don't have to be around forever. Like, that's how I always thought when I started doing techno contra, or whatever people call techno contra. I didn't call it that but doesn't matter. That's what everybody calls it so that's what it is.

**Bill Tomczak**

Exactly. That's the tradition. [Laughter] Actually, I have to tell this funny story. I hope I'm not telling tales. But there was some gig, oh, I think it was the Colorado gig, Starry Nights something... We were doing this gig in Colorado and there was a techno contra happening one night.

**Julie Vallimont**

It was at Stellar?

**Bill Tomczak**

Stellar, yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

Stellar Days and Nights.

**Bill Tomczak**

Stellar Days and Nights, that's it. And I remember Dave and Adina Gordon and Kate and I were just kind of hanging out in the cabin. And Kate, you know, got dressed up and said I'm gonna go to the techno contra. We were like, really? [Laughter] You? So Kate went off, went to the techno contra. Adina and Dave and I are kind of hanging out just talking. And Kate comes back and says, "Well, that was disappointing." And I'm like, "Why, what happened?" "Just, I was expecting something new and different. It's like they're basically just doing contra dances to different music." It was too conservative for her. [Laughter] "I was expecting them to do something new and different."

**Julie Vallimont**

[Laughter] That's brilliant. Yeah, so, you know, for listeners, you've alluded to it, but you have a website where you've collected a bunch of articles over the years and you put some of them back up on this website.

**Bill Tomczak**

They're pretty old, but they're there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you know, about all sorts of things like community and like, dance consumerism and like, you know, the music. And all sorts of things which are interesting. And we'll post a link to that in the podcast notes for people to check it out. But I want to just give you a moment if there's any of these things that you want to talk about, like the opinion corner. [Laughter]

**Bill Tomczak**

Oh do I have opinions. I don't know. I mean, it's like, you know, it's funny. I've heard other people reach this point. And they can't think of anything, and of course me listening, I was like, oh, I can think of things.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, always.

**Bill Tomczak**

And I'm sitting here thinking, man, we talked about a lot of stuff. I got a lot of stuff off my chest. That's good.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, where do you think contra music is headed? Knowing that tradition keeps getting redefined as we live our lives, what do you think might happen? What do you think of where it's going?

**Bill Tomczak**

It's gonna go where it goes. I mean, if you take that long view of tradition as not something that... you know, not one of the snapshots and say, okay, here's what contra dancing is. But you take it as a living tradition, as long, you know... it gets back to the decorum code. As long as people want to dance to beautiful music, something's going to happen. And it will be what... that generation will make it whatever it is they want it to be. And I have no idea what people are gonna want it to be. I mean, it's like, you see some of the touches of it now with the young people coming up now, and I think it's brilliant. I'm not particularly interested in it necessarily. But they're making it their own. And that's exactly as it should be. And the generation after them. Who even knows, right? But as long as people want to dance to something that sounds vaguely like contra dance music we'll figure it out. There's another thing too. I mean, it's like, we're seeing... we can see the moving pieces over the course of our life, right? I talked about this big change that happened in the 80s. Ralph Page is already getting pissed off about what was going on in the early 80s. Nevermind what happened after that, right. Because his concept of contra dance was something that was in the 30s and 40s, right? And then Dudley Laufman came along and you know, basically ruined things as far as that crowd was concerned. And then, even Dudley Laufman, who is one of the... has been credited with like, the incredible boom in contra dancing that started happening in the 60s and 70s, right? There, he went through a period, at least for a little while, of not being very proud of what he had done to contra dancing and seeing what it had turned into. Because the next generation come along and started making it their own, right? And now here we are talking about techno contras, and gender free contras and all that stuff. And you know, I feel a little out of it, because I'm part of that generation from the 70s, the 80s... the 80s cohort. But the 90s and aughts cohort, you know, is now creating their own thing. And the group that comes along in the 20s? In the 30s? We'll see what they come up with. And I wish I could live long enough to see what it turns into. But I wouldn't try to second guess what they're going to turn it into. It's like, you know, every generation... it was like, my generation grew up listening to The Beatles, you know. The current generation is like, who

Beatles what? But I have confidence that people will want to continue dancing to something like this music, you know? And doing these kinds of forms, in one way or another. But each generation has got to make it their own. Or it's like, why, you know? It's like, what, they're gonna try and imitate us? I didn't try to imitate Ralph's generation. Why should I, you know?

**Julie Vallimont**

You didn't try to imitate them, but yet you were informed by them, you know. Like, you talked about you and Dave going to those same sessions and learning the same things.

**Bill Tomczak**

Absolutely, but that's a different thing. I mean, that's like taking what is in front of you and saying, you know, okay, I'm going to learn this. I'm going to learn how it swings, right?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Right.

**Bill Tomczak**

And then oh, what if I try this. I kind of like doing this, you know? Something that April Limber never would have thought of. And here's the thing about April. She saw what was happening at the end of her life. And she loved it. She loved what people were doing with with New England music. She wasn't going to do it herself because it's just not the way she plays. It's not her. That's not her DNA, musically. But she really appreciated what was happening as the newcomers were coming along and doing their thing. That's the tradition. Like that old Hungarian guy who doesn't even like the way the kid is playing his music. He's playing all the right tunes, and swinging in the way that he thinks he swings. But this old guy kind of like, eh, you don't know how to play for me?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Yeah. Because it's not the same.

**Bill Tomczak**

No, and good. As far as I'm concerned it shouldn't stay the same. And I think that's part of the problem with the word tradition. It's like, I think there's this idea that when you say, what's the tradition, that okay, now I'm in this box. I have to like... everything is set in stone. And I have to do it this way. Or I have to break the tradition. It's like, no, there's something in between that. There's like, appreciating the tradition, and then making it your own.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, or just letting it be your own. Like, you don't even have to try too hard to make it your own. It will be your own, whether you want it to or not, like, that's what I love about tunes. They get filtered and passed through every person who plays them slightly differently as a function of who they are.

**Bill Tomczak**

Right. Well, and that gets to the other thing, too, you know, about the idea of tune mixings. It's like, never do an Irish tune with a Scottish tune. But I... half the time, I'm not even sure where these tunes come from. Sometimes I find out...

**Julie Vallimont**

They're not either. [Laughter]

**Bill Tomczak**

Right? But, I also... I've come to the point where I don't care. It's like, the tune itself speaks to me. And so I work with the tune. And maybe later I'll find out, oh, it's an Irish tune. It's like, oh that's probably why, like, started using some of my faux Irish embellishment shit that I do there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Those instincts kick in there.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah. Because to me, it's about the tune. I don't really worry about where it came from, or, you know, whether it should mix it with this other tune because it's not from the same country, or the same culture. It's like, well do the tunes work together? And I play them very differently. A real classic example for us, so our second CD was named after the tune Rainy Night in Montague, right?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Bill Tomczak**

So, George Reynolds wrote that tune. He's kind of like an old timey feel fiddler, you know, living in New England. But he has that sort of old timey feel to his playing. And he wrote this tune, which I don't know how it sounded when... oh, I actually kind of do. I actually, I have a recording of Rainy Night in Montague with George playing it, I just I just realized, yes. So George wrote this tune. People started playing it. It was getting some popularity. And one day, after we had started picking up... and we were having a great time playing a tune. We just loved playing that tune. And one day we were working with Lisa Greenleaf, and she was, you know, talking about the dance that she... you know, Dave and I, you know, we look at the card, figure out like, what kind of tune would work with this. We looked at the card and we're like, oh, this is perfect for Rainy Night in Montague. So we hand it back to Lisa and she heard us say Rainy Night in Montague, and she's like, no, no, I hate that tune. And we're like, trust us, Lisa, you're gonna love it when we get done with you. And so we insisted on playing the tune. It turned out it was absolutely perfect for that dance. And Lisa was like, okay, yeah, that's not the tune I was thinking at all. We had our way with it, you know.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, the groove is different, the feel is different, you know. Another one of these elements that we didn't talk about but like, the amount of backbeat that you play with affects the tune and like all these different things.

**Bill Tomczak**

See, this is the thing. There's so many people who feel like oh, 32 bars AA, BB, that's so limiting, how can you possibly survive that? It's like, do you know how much you can do within that form?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Yeah, was it the Kate Barnes quote, the piano 88 little mistakes waiting to happen. But there's also like, a contra dance tune, 30 bars of mayhem or something like, we need a quote about what you can do in 32 bars. [Laughter] Get on it.

**Bill Tomczak**

Okay, we'll think about that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, this has been so fun to talk to you.

**Bill Tomczak**

Oh, me too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is there anything else we should talk about? Anything else you want to leave us with? How about one of your favorite moments on stage? Do you have like a good dance story? One of those moments where you're just like, I love this.

**Bill Tomczak**

I've heard other people talk about this on your podcast, the thing that immediately came to mind... So it must be at least one, if not the, favorite moment of my experience. We're on stage... I don't remember where this was, we were on stage someplace playing some dance. And we were just noodling around. I mean, we weren't playing anything. We were just, you know, kind of dorking around in the key of D. And just kind of going, you know, [Bill hums some notes] whatever, you know. There's no recording of this. So it's useless. But we're just kind of playing along, of course, you know, we're contra dance musicians, you know, who've got that, sort of, 2 beat bar, 32 bar sensibility. And so we're kind of playing along. Whoever was calling, I forget who it was, but whoever was calling, decided that we were playing a tune, and she started the dance. And we're like, we haven't even picked a tune yet. And we've just been kind of like farting around in the key of D. And we suddenly realize, oh, my God, the dance is going on. So we just kept playing. And slowly, some themes emerged out of the music. We knew where the top of the tune was. So we could, you know, lock into that. And some kind of a mushy semi tune showed up out of all of that, and it actually had phrases and everything. We were totally making it up based on what we were watching on the floor. So, you know, it was

definitely, you know, being made up for that dance in that moment. And, we got... it was fabulous. And the one way you know that it was fabulous is after we got done someone ran up to us and said, what is that tune? Like, I have no idea.

**Julie Vallimont**

What is a tune, really? [Laughter]

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah. I mean, what do you mean, tune?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, do you mean that groovy mayhem in a key that just happened?

**Bill Tomczak**

[Laughter]. Which is... I think Dave alluded to this or said this as well, too. So, one of our favorite moments, you know, this used to happen to us a lot, we'd be playing some dance, you know, and just doing our one tune thing. And someone would come up, say what was the second tune in that set? It was like, uh, no.

**Julie Vallimont**

Ostensibly still the same tune. Or at least not a new tune. We can all agree that there was not a new tune?

**Bill Tomczak**

Well, this gets to one of the other things that you've talked about in your podcast is like matching tunes with dances. It's like, it's a lot fuzzier than I think a lot of people are willing to accept, because it really depends on the band. How you play that tune, you know. So you can craft a lot of tunes to just fit the mood you want it to be in the moment. Especially when you're like The Lizards where we just like, have absolutely no respect for anything. But yeah, it's like, granted, there are tunes that probably would be harder to make that work and really don't work with a particular dance. But you know, for the most part, you know, Ted Sanella was the one... he used to... whenever he did a gig, he would have his little dance cards, and the band would pick a tune. If he had never worked with a band before he'd just say, here's something like what I'm looking for, and the band would pick a tune. And if it worked really, really well, he wrote down the band's name and the tune that they played. And then when the next time he worked with them, if he calls that dance again, he looks at his list, oh, yeah, you played this tune last time, it worked really well. You know, another band might be a completely different tune, same dance, but a completely different tune, because that tune wouldn't work. Again, if he didn't know the band very well or didn't have any other suggestions, he's say, well, here's what here's what other bands have played for this. Then that new band would, you know, maybe pick one of those dances or play something that was like one of those tunes, right? And then if it worked, he'd write it down.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember even having that experience with... When I was learning I was really, for a while, into the tune Vladimir's Steamboat from Fiddle Fever.

**Bill Tomczak**

We play it all the time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Such a fun dance tune. And also I had just danced this contra dance with a really cool move in it where you like swing a neighbor and you go backwards and your partner's like waiting there to catch you. And it was like... so I was hanging out with my good caller friend Chris Weiler in Boston. And I was like, Chris, can we write a dance to go with this tune that also has that move in it. And I knew nothing. I wrote a dance that didn't progress. And I was like, Chris, I need your help. So Chris wrote a dance with my various parameters. And it went with Vladimir's Steamboat. It had like, Petronella balances on the first three parts of the B, and a magic swing and catch on the fourth. And I was so excited. Like, I think it was a Mary Lea band that played it for the first time at the Scout House and they debuted it. And it fit amazingly. I think Keith Murphy was also playing. And they played it with all this propulsion and energy. And then we tried a few other times, and a few other bands played it, and some of them played Vladimir's Steamboat with this like, laid back kind of old time groove. It totally changed the dance, and all of a sudden, the dance and the tune didn't fit well. Like, the first time we're like, this is the best thing ever. And then the second time, we're like, hmm, that was okay. But I don't get why this dance is so cool. It's, you know, it's like even if you take the same tune and the same dance, played by different people, you can have a very different results every single time.

**Bill Tomczak**

Right, and this is why, you know, again, it's like, you want to have all these rules. And you want to somehow, like, you know, capture the lightning in a bottle. It's like, this is not that easy, necessarily.

**Julie Vallimont**

No.

**Bill Tomczak**

It's like... again, there's a lot of freedom here that, you know, needs to be recognized. I love that tune, because that's another tune in my band with Betsy and her husband Mark. We do that tune because it's like, one of my favorite tunes. And Betsy is the one who instigated... in that band we also play Vladimir's using that European mode, that Eastern European mode. So we'll play it in D, and then we'll play it in that wacky Eastern European mode for a few rounds. And then we'll come back in straight melody in the key of A.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, fun.

**Bill Tomczak**



Yeah, it's really it's a great ... The Lizards do the D to A transition as well. It's a great change. I highly recommend it if you want to try it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is that the one ... I think there's some arrangement that Fiddle Fever did in like four keys was it Vladimir's?

**Bill Tomczak**

No, that was ... I know the one you're thinking of. It's a Big John McNeil.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, yeah, they do like, eight million keys.

**Bill Tomczak**

They just keep going through the keys, yeah. Now there's a tune that does not work on the clarinet at all, oh jeez.

**Julie Vallimont**

[Laughter] You know like, Vladimir's is already kind of a modal tune because it's already in mixolydian mode. So yeah, why not mess around with it?

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah, exactly. Well, it's just to get to that mode, it's really at that point, only one note change in the scale. And what's great about it is, you don't hit that note until a few bars in. So, nobody even necessarily knows that you've changed mode until all of a sudden you start hearing it kind of sneaking in. It's very cool.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's fun. Well, you know, that makes me think that's one of the things I love about chestnuts. Like Chorus Jig or Money Musk. Like when we talk about like, my made up combination of dance and tune don't always work, it's like, the fact that the tune to Chorus Jig goes with the dance is great, but it's also the style in which you play it fits the dance. And currently, we all kind of agree mostly on how we play Money Musk and Chorus Jig, you know, like, for now. I think when a lot of bands play Money Musk, usually it's a mega band thing at the end of a weekend or festival or something. You've got a bunch of people on stage so we revert back to like a more boom chuck rhythm section.

**Bill Tomczak**

Because you kind of have to, in a way.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you're not going to put some cool hip groove under Money Musk. Like, you could but why? You know like, it works a lot with like the balances and the you know, like, just everything.

And maybe that's one of the few times where we had this like predictable groove tune dance kind of thing happening together.

**Bill Tomczak**

So they're doing Money Musk at weekends.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Oh sure.

**Bill Tomczak**

Wow, cool.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, not every dance weekend. Depends on the weekend. But especially things like ... I know like, at Youth Dance Weekend they always do Money Musk and...

**Bill Tomczak**

Wow.

**Julie Vallimont**

And like, when Elixir had a dance weekend they did it there. And Ralph Page [Legacy Dance Weekend] of course, they do all those dances, you know?

**Bill Tomczak**

Were you at Kate's LCA [Lifetime Contributor Award] thing for CDSS?

**Julie Vallimont**

No, I couldn't make it sadly.

**Bill Tomczak**

Yeah, because Money Musk is another one of those tunes that, you know, doesn't sit well on the clarinet. On the occasions that has come up, you know. Dave does a really good job of Money Musk. So I just, I played him back on it, [laughter] speaking of grooves.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's fun. Chorus Jig is probably fun on the clarinet.

**Bill Tomczak**

Which, what?

**Julie Vallimont**

Chorus Jig.

**Bill Tomczak**

Oh, I love playing Chorus Jig on the clarinet, yeah. So that's a fun one. And it has all sorts of... especially when you're playing with, you know, a piano player or backup players who are, you know, more advanced than just simple triads. Man, harmonically there's just like, so much open space in that tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, yeah, totally, totally. And then I do love Opera Reel as a switch tune. I just love Opera Reel. I mean, here's the thing, like, we could talk about how you can't do it the same way, you need to improvise with it. But there's just also this great feeling of like, oh, this is how I like Chorus Jig.

**Bill Tomczak**

Right, right. Sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, like it's this amazing familiarity. And if we don't give the dancers enough consistency like, they need to be able to relate to it. And it's like eating your favorite foods. It's that same feeling of comfort. So it's like, we have to keep enough of those moments in our tradition where people are comfortable and happy. And yet not let it get static or stagnant or prescribed, you know.

**Bill Tomczak**

Well, again, people are there to dance to beautiful music. And if it's not exciting them or not interesting to them, then they're gonna move on. And you know, who can blame them. So, whatever you do, whether you change the tradition or not, whether you move it forward or not, whether you do amazing things, or just plain vanilla stuff. It's gotta just hit you in the heart. You know, it's just... this is where happens, you know, not here in the head.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, it's funny, that was such a great way to end this episode. But I have to butt in because I was just reminded today... I was reading this like, botany forum, because I'm a plant nerd. And they were like, we talk about things being vanilla, as if they're boring. And people are like, just remember that vanilla is like, one of the most expensive spices in the world. And for many, many years it was this extreme luxury. It's like this orchid, and it only flowers like once, and these... you know, like, vanilla is something we take for granted. And yet it's this amazing flavor. And I feel like our fiddle tunes are the same way, right? A good vanilla tune is such a thing of beauty.

**Bill Tomczak**

I can't resist telling you another story. And hopefully this will... I don't remember who this woman was, but she... we were done with some dance weekend. And she really wanted to drive me to the airport after the weekend. And so you know, again, it was very nice of her and all that. And the reason she wanted to drive me to the airport, there was like an hour or two drive was because she wanted to pump me for how to make her band more exciting. She wanted to know all the tricks. And I was just like, can you play the tune well? And with heart? You know, start

there. She was like, no but I want to know what the tricks are. It's like, hey, you know, we used to call it scream harvesting. You do these tricks, and then you just go, wow, And all I did was like play a really high loud note. And everybody was like, wow. You know, it's like, it's stupid. But you know, if I am moved to play that loud, high note, then I will do it. But not just to get the crowd to go nuts. It's like, I don't like tricks. I don't like gimmicks. And anything that the Lizards do, anything that I do, can become a gimmick. If I've basically given up and said, oh, here's this thing that I do. I'll do that. Like, does it make sense right now? Do I feel it right now? No. Then why am I doing it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Those are great words to leave our interview with, and to think about. I mean, we could sit here talking for months. But I think our one clarinetist has left the session. I don't blame them. Well, thank you so much for your thoughts. It's been so fun to chat with you.

**Bill Tomczak**

Oh same here. Great. Thank you so much.

**Julie Vallimont**

Take care, till next time.

**Bill Tomczak**

Okay, 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.***