

# Contra Pulse Episode 43 – Mentors and Inspirations

## Julie Vallimont

Hello and welcome to Contra pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. This episode, instead of one of our usual interviews, we have a special feature. Last October, Contra Pulse hosted an online panel discussion as a part of the CDSS series common time.

In this special event, I spoke with four of the contra dance greats – Becky Tracy, Pete Sutherland, Rodney Miller, and Kate Barnes - about who their mentors and inspirations were, and how they're mentoring and inspiring the next generation of contra musicians. learn how these musicians fell in love with their craft, hear stories from the early days of touring contra bands, and explore what tradition is and how it is (or isn't) changing today.

There is video of the panel available on YouTube. We'll put the link in the show notes. Enjoy the episode.

## Ben Williams

Well, welcome everybody. It's so nice to see all of you. This is Common Time our monthly series from the [CDSS](#). This month we have a collaboration with Contra Pulse our music interview podcast with Julie Vallimont. So without further ado, let me first introduce Julie Vallimont, who I've had the pleasure of working with over the past nearly two years, it turns out, creating the [Contra Pulse podcast](#). Julie is a fantastic pianist and accordionist and she's played with bands like Nor'easter and Buddy System all over the country and beyond. She's passionate about the amazing diversity of contra dance music and playing piano and has been diving into what that is and how it intersects with the communities we build in her interviews over the past couple of years. So take it away, Julie.

## Julie Vallimont

Thanks, Ben. I just want to say thank you to CDSS for making this possible. You know, I approached them with this project idea about five years ago at least and it morphed into various forms and because of COVID, it turned into a podcast. And it's just been a wonderful opportunity to talk with a lot of folks and hear your stories and experience. So thank you, CDSS, for having us here as part of Common Time as well. Well, I don't want to talk because we have some cool things to hear from our illustrious panelists. So tonight, we have with us [Becky Tracy](#), [Kate Barnes](#), [Pete Sutherland](#) and [Rodney Miller](#). I think most of them do not need any introduction to most of you. But I'll tell you a little bit about them from their bio. I will also say that Kate, Rodney, and Pete have all been interviewed on past Contra Pulse episodes and Becky has an interview kind of in the works. So if you want to hear more about each of them, and have more chance for them to talk and hear more about their background and projects, you can check out those interviews on all your podcast software and the CDSS website. We thought of this project because as I was doing interviews with folks on Contra Pulse, some themes started to emerge. And that's partly the purpose of the podcast was just to kind of collect thoughts and perspectives and experiences and kind of take a snapshot like take the pulse of contra dance music as it is. And that ended up being kind of frozen in time in the sense because of COVID, which I hadn't planned when I started this project. I wanted to explore today the theme of mentoring and teaching and

learning because one of the things I love about this tradition is how welcoming it is to people and there's a lot of different ways to learn it and pass it on. I feel like these musicians are conduits, these tunes, some of them have been around for hundreds of years passing through person to person to person and they change as they go. And each of them is interpreted in a different way by the personality of whoever is playing them in the moment. So tonight, I'm hoping that we'll talk about things like how did each of our panelists learn and where did they get started and what inspired them and how they're teaching new musicians. I just have one fan girl moment that all of you, Becky, Kate, Pete, and Rodney were all huge inspirations for me and so if I play for contra dance is it's your fault. I spent a long time in dance halls dancing to you listening to you, sitting backstage, and you've all been so welcoming and gracious over the years, just being friendly, sharing tips, talking shop, you know, sharing tunes, and it's just been so wonderful. So let me tell you a little bit about Kate Barnes, who recently just won a nice award thanks to CDSS and she has been performing on piano, flute, guitar, and about a billion other things for contra dancing and English country dance and for decades, she plays with [Bare Necessities](#) and the [Latter Day Lizards](#). She's the author of beloved dance books for English country dance and couples dancing. Over 70 recordings Kate, that's a lot of time in the studio.

**Kate Barnes**

I know.

**Julie Vallimont**

And has played for thousands and thousands of dances in the order of tens of thousands of dances. Welcome, Kate.

**Kate Barnes**

Thank you, honored to be here.

**Julie Vallimont**

Would you be able to tell us a little bit about kind of how you got hooked into playing for dance music and what some of your seminal moments were that kind of got you started in this?

**Kate Barnes**

Oh, well, I think I always had a bent to this kind of music. Because when I was in high school, before I ever heard of contra dance music, I did some composing. I was basically composing polkas. Something about that rhythm and the simpler melodies just grabbed me. So I was kind of primed already in that direction of this kind of particular structure, 32 bar, repeated A's repeated B's music. Now, so in college, after the first year, I went to a contra dance to meet a friend of mine. He never showed up, but I stayed to dance anyway. I have a theory that if you can get someone to go to a dance twice, you'll have them hooked. So I went once, wasn't hooked but then my friend says sorry, I forgot, I'll come next week. I went the next week and then I got hooked on to it. At that time I also bought a flute just for the hell of it at a pawn shop in Cambridge. I started playing these tunes on the flute and I also looked at what the pianos were doing. I think it was Janet Paoletti and [Bob McQuillen](#) at that point, we were going to Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire and I thought, I think I can do that. And so I wrote anyone who could play any kind of melody instrument, we took out Cole's Fiddle tunes, and then I would back them up until they couldn't stand it anymore. That was basically my start, but the biggest nudge towards actually

playing was I was at the Fitzwilliam dance playing the flute on the side, and McQuillen, who was on stage with Roger Pinard, the fiddler and Janet Paoletti on piano looked at me and shouts as McQuillen only could across the hall said, "You, get up here". So I was petrified, clutching my flute, I came on stage and he slammed his hand on his accordion box next to his chair and said, "Sit here and play". It was it was great. It was fantastic and it's been downhill or maybe uphill ever since then.

**Julie Vallimont**

The rest is history, as they say.

**Kate Barnes**

I played some on the piano during the breaks because they had a pianist and Jim Kennedy who ran the Fitzwilliam dance, said, "Hey, I think we can work you into the hiring schedule". So that was kind of my first professional contra gig is the Fitzwilliam Dance during the summers.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's amazing. I love that story. Hey, sit down and play.

**Kate Barnes**

I know it's so Bob.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's so great. Well, more about that, but let's say hi to Becky Tracy here. Becky, you all know her distinctive, beautiful fiddle playing, which has been a defining presence in some of the most popular and innovative dance bands to come out of New England. You know, [Wild Asparagus](#), [Nightingale](#). Her playing draws on French Canadian and Irish and other New England styles and it's grounded in her upbringing in the dance scene of New England. Welcome, Becky. I'm so glad to have you here.

**Becky Tracy**

It's delightful to be here. Thank you.

**Julie Vallimont**

How did you end up getting roped into playing for dance music and making it a part of your life's work?

**Becky Tracy**

So without knowing it I kind of got brainwashed into this whole scene as a child because my dad was a caller for community dances. I would go off to Girl Scout dances and you know, just all kinds of little dances with my dad. He would call, sometimes my mom would help him and sometimes he had a band and Bill Welling and Bill Wallach were occasionally that band in Connecticut. But he also brought records like so many of those callers did. I actually listened to a lot of [Don Messer](#) and the [Ralph Page](#) orchestra and I had no idea who I was listening to. I just kind of grew up dancing to that music. I did contra dance, I went out to a few contra dances here and there through college, I went to a few up in like Etna New Hampshire. But it wasn't until I moved to Maine, and went out to a contra dance and Michael Connelly danced with me and he somehow asked me if I played an instrument. I made the mistake at the moment, at the time, I thought it was a mistake, because it was the end of my dancing

for the most part. He said, "Do you play?" and I said, "I play the violin" and he said "Well" and he started to drag me to all these sessions and I started having the best time. He brought me to a lot of Irish sessions and made me sit in with bands and helped me find people to play with. And then when I moved to Vermont, there were more people to play with there, great musicians, Walter Weber was a big influence in a band there that I joined called the "Bog Carrots" of all names. And it just kept going, as I moved people would, you know, kind of bring you in and teach you what they knew. And it was kind of, you know, as we know, it's a warm, welcoming community. So that's the gist of it.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's wonderful. Where in Maine were you living?

**Becky Tracy**

I was in Portland, Maine,

**Julie Vallimont**

Portland. Maine was the place where I went to my first contra dance, and I got hooked on it because they were so welcoming. It's just such a great community there.

**Becky Tracy**

Was your first contra dance Bowdoinham or was it a different one?

**Julie Vallimont**

It was the North Yarmouth dance at the Wescustogo Hall.

**Becky Tracy**

The one that burned?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And it was just magic. I don't think I would have gone back to contra dancing, if it hadn't been the energy of the people in the room and their friendliness that pulled me back in because I certainly wasn't good at the activity in the beginning. I found it very overwhelming. But I was like, wow, this is so great and you just feel that energy. So that's just really lovely. Well, we'll come back to that as well. We have Pete Sutherland with us tonight. Vermont musical legend, both an accomplished instrumentalist and a singer songwriter, or songsmith Pete plays fiddle piano, banjo, melodica, 800 things I don't know about, for contra dancing. And he's been doing this for decades, both as a founding member of the Clayfoot Strutters, and a veteran of many groups, including Metamora and now with his current contra band [Pete's Posse](#), which is just a musical adventure on wheels. Pete's also been an artistic director, producer and a mentor for several folks like [Young Tradition Vermont](#) and other groups. Pete, how did you end up playing for dances?

**Pete Sutherland**

Oh well, up here, I'm from Burlington, originally, there had been contra dancing in the previous generation. I didn't grow up with any of this my dad was not a caller. So I got all the way to college without actually hearing any of this music and this was like, right around the Kent State era and stuff

like that. And then all these kind of like, kids with backpacks and mandolins in tow, started kind of like roaming the halls of the university. And it was just like this sort of inkling that there was this whole thing going on that I hadn't necessarily heard about. All the time, I just listened to Led Zeppelin or whatever so at that point, I had gotten a banjo and then I got a fiddle and scratching away and fell in with enough people that that kind of like thought that they knew how to sort of like keep a beat to play for some really simple, not contra at that time, square dancing, actually. But just a few years later, and so we were trying to make something happen in the northern Vermont area. This was before you got up here, Becky, because I wasn't actually around here when you get here so we didn't cross paths there. But so we tried to invent things from the ground up as best we could from like reading about them or somebody said, Hey, I went to a Dudley dance, you know, like three years ago and then they try to like, everybody was like stone soup, everybody brought a piece of it and so we were trying to make that happen. Meanwhile then I got really out of college I got really interested in being a migrant hippie apple picker and was working down in Brattleboro for a while and several times after working 10 and 11 hour days piled in the car with a peanut butter sandwich and went off to a Dudley dance and it was the classic six person powerhouse version of the Canterbury Orchestra. So it was just an electrifying experience and you know, just swept, just like rolling off of everybody. And so that was really visceral and at that time, I was really much more interested in playing old time music, it's like the first language. It really bit me in the butt. So I took my apple picking adventures down south so I could visit all the fiddlers down there and stuff and there was certainly no contra dancing in Nashville or anywhere else at that time, we're talking like the mid 70s. It's pretty sleepy still. And I was working down there and I was like falling in with these really ne'er do well back to the lander types down there that were just living for playing old time music and not only playing it but like being reenactors of it...there's not really better word for it. And so like just for a nice yankee boy, I ended up in some incredibly, like crazy and stressful and probably downright dangerous situations pursuing this music and puking my guts out on the lawn of somebody I'd just bought some moonshine from and, you know, so far from like, the niceties of an English country dance. Yeah, I mean, but that to me was like I needed, I really needed like a complete jumpstart, you know, in having not heard this music and having tried my hand at other things. So it was it was really great. I mean, I'm not here to preserve cultural stereotypes, but some of the people I was hanging out with really kind of would make the Beverly Hillbillies look like the Kardashians. I mean, they were like, incredibly...yeah, you knew you were in North Carolina, in the mountains. So I came home with that kind of like experience and then contra dancing all of a sudden was happening. So then I kind of like broaden my musical palette, which I was interested in other stuff anyway and it just kind of step by step from there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sounds like an immersive experience to say the least, Pete.

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

I heard that in the early days you were also a caller.

**Pete Sutherland**

I tried my hand at that. I think everybody was kind of into the DIY thing because we had no living tradition. So we were just really trying to get something going and everyone was trying everything. And probably that's why I cultivated being a multi-instrumentalist as well, but I could still call at a wedding, you know, I could do that. What do you need to know? You don't need that much.

### **Julie Vallimont**

Oh, I have so many questions for all of you. But I want to get to Rodney and then we will delve into all these things in more depth. Our last panelist tonight is Rodney Miller, fiddler, violin maker, tunesmith. He's renowned for his New England style fiddling and his unique fiddle style and compositions, from the New England Chestnuts albums to [Airplang, Airdance](#) to the [Stringrays](#) and many more. Rodney 's playing showcases both tradition and innovation. He's been playing dances for more than 40 years on both coasts and everywhere in between and abroad, and has been recognized as a master fiddler. Thank you for joining us tonight, Rodney.

### **Rodney Miller**

Nice to be here, Julie.

### **Julie Vallimont**

So how did you get started playing in New England contra dances?

### **Rodney Miller**

Well, I started because my grandfather's violin was handed to me at age seven. My mother was a professional musician, piano and organ player. My dad was a minister so we moved quite a bit but I grew up mostly in upstate New York near Rochester. My mom was born in Glens Falls, and lived in Bluemont West Virginia for a while and both grandfathers played violin and I used to take my dad's father's violin and then go play for him, before my grandfather, before he died in the late 60s, I guess. So I came into it. There was a popular Irish tune book on the piano and I started playing tunes out of that book with my mom. I realized innately that there was an ancestral history of music, and my dad grew up near Syracuse and he told me about square dances that he used to go to as a boy. Anyway, there was some sort of collective folk mentality in the family. We would go to fiddler's picnics in Canandaigua, like on a Sunday afternoon and it really piqued my interest in playing more tunes. So I was getting training with some lessons how to play and back then it wasn't known that if you're left handed, you would play right hand, that was assumed that I didn't get left handed training because I am left handed. So I always see the world in kind of a reversal way, that's set up for righties. I managed to play enough fiddle music and work through my right hand awkwardness of bowing. Because my coordination is in my left hand, but it took probably a decade of playing for dances to smooth out my bowing arm. As I was doing that, then I was creating my own sort of bowing style, a lot of lifting off strings and stuff. Because of the fiddler's picnic situation, I was eager to learn some of the basic repertoire from the old time fiddlers associations. I looked up local fiddlers like in West Walworth, New York outside of Rochester, and went to visit Wayne Merrill who used to be a Adirondack lumberjack at the turn of the century in 1900. He played some tunes for me and I played along with him. And then I did a collecting trip to Vermont, to Barre Vermont, I met Clem Myers, head of the [Northeast Fiddlers Association](#), and he put me in touch with Neal Converse up in Plainfield [Vermont]. So I went to visit him and recorded him on a tape to tape recorder and learned Green Mountain Petronella and a bunch

of other stuff that I was beginning to play for contra dances. But when we get back, I was recruited to go to Oberlin College to be in a string band actually, that was the main reason I went and they needed a fiddler, the fiddler had left as I was coming in as a freshman and so I started playing with the string band at college. That led me to know Jane Wilk who was a sophomore, I was a freshman and she wanted to do square dancing and contra at college. And she needed a fiddler so she recruited me, I started playing for dances, then as a freshman. She had grown up with a family, the Wilks from New York City who had gone to Pinewoods camp in the 50s and 60s, and she had grown up with this stuff. She just begged me to go to Pinewoods. She said they're gonna love you, you're gonna love it. So I applied on scholarship and washed dishes, I think in '70-71 in the summer of and met [May Gadd](#). She played drums on the stage and a bunch of others, but I also met Dudley Laufman. He immediately hired me to come up on and play his summer schedule of contra dances in New Hampshire. I sort of morphed into moving to New Hampshire at that point. So I traveled around with Dudley for a summer and that led to more dance opportunities with my brother Randy playing piano. We started playing the Nelson dances regulars replacing [Newt Toleman](#) and Kay Gilbert. Anyway, it got me into playing for dances and that's been nonstop after since then.

### **Julie Vallimont**

Wow. What a story. You know, it's like when we look at all these different stories of how people end up playing contra music, some of us are born into it and some of us are not, and just kind of randomly encounter it in life. Some people are kind of pushed into it, like, hey, I was at a party and the piano player got up and left and someone said, "You play piano!" And I said, "Not this kind of music!" Sit down, go, boom, go chuck, here's some chords. We all have these different stories of how we get pulled into it. But there's often like this one person who's like a mentor, or a friend or a partner, or someone who brings us into it. And then there's all these places that are like incubators that we don't know about, like, when you're first a dancer, and you go to a dance at a hall, you don't realize that there's this whole deep rooted network of places where musicians can meet each other, like [Pinewoods](#), you know, and a lot of people get introduced to dance music at places like a [Ashokan](#), or [Maine Fiddle Camp](#). And so these camps are really important places for people to go and get immersed in things. I would just love to hear a little bit about or just talk about how these mentors influenced you. And if there's, for each of you, like a moment, or like a really important thing you learned from one of your mentors, or like a turning point, when you realized you were going to become a dance musician. I'm also curious, like, these names that pop up over and over again, like Dudley or Bob McQuillen, who were their mentors? Because we're all here, roughly the same time era. But who are they learning from? We do have an interview with Dudley Laufman, the very first episode of Contra Pulse, which you can go back and listen to. Because like you say, Pete, there's also the question of, some of us, you know, were just inventing things as we go. And the traditions have restarted all over the country and kind of make it up as we go as well. So I'm gonna stop talking now. If any of you want to jump in and share one of those formative mentoring experiences, I'd love to hear about it. I'm not used to interviewing four people at once. I don't know how to start, raise your hand? Pete, you're smiling, any thoughts about this?

### **Pete Sutherland**

Sure, dead air is a terrible thing. So I'm not sure that in contra dancing, I had any direct mentoring. But I've sort of said that as mentoring for me, in old age has become like, a super powerful and important



thing. I think any mentoring that I received, is going to necessarily feel really different and possibly be just like, not as visceral, sort of a thing. When I think about it as a factor in there, I think was more like immersion. That word got used already. I feel like I was just willing to just dive in and immerse myself in this entire other way of moving as a community through the work week and weekend and finding all these other people to whom this was just this passionate thing and everybody was smiling all the time because like, hey, we've got something cool going on here. So that, to me, is different, but I will say that I had, as far as learning tunes, I've had at different times, I've had mentors and one that I talk about a lot because I was just so amazingly fortunate to live about a half mile from him was [Louis Beaudoin](#), the Franco American fiddler from kind of like a second generation immigrant from a small town by the St. Lawrence. His whole clan ended up here via Lowell, MA the mill community there that Jack Kerouac was also...his family was there as well at the same time. There's a funny thought, Jack Kerouac and Louis Beaudoin. So the Beaudoins ended up in Burlington. I was just out of college and people are like, hey, there's this guy that plays some pretty cool, what we call French Canadian tunes. At that point, I go over there and that was amazing, because, as we can all testify from some experience, it's the fact that the mentor is unbelievably generous and welcoming that kind of really seals the deal, way more important than tunes, that's my piece.

**Kate Barnes**

Oh, dead air.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. I'm gonna call on you.

**Pete Sutherland**

Maybe we should call, next. How about how about you Kate?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you get to tag the next person when you're done talking. Yeah, Kate, what do you think about this?

**Kate Barnes**

Yeah, this kind of reminds me, I was doing this college interview and the interviewer said, So tell me about yourself, and that kind of broad, unfocused general question scares the hell out of me. Can you give me something more specific?

**Julie Vallimont**

Now I forgot what the question was.

**Becky Tracy**

It's about mentors and if there was a sort of defining moment that kind of propelled you into, it sounded like you actually kind of covered this Kate earlier.

**Kate Barnes**



I mean, I had people who influenced my style immensely. I started with McQuillen's very basic style. I have to say, I got hired by [Donna Hébert](#), Donna Hines at the time to play at the Fitzwilliam dance on the piano. And then we went on to play the Brimmer and May dance down in Boston, and [Tony Parkes](#), and I swapped the piano every other week on that gig. I learned so much about great piano playing from Tony Parkes. He is certainly very generous with his style. Is he a mentor? I don't know, but I learned a lot from him for sure.

### **Becky Tracy**

Yeah, I feel like each band that I went through, there was always somebody that I was learning from as time went on. There were the initial bands in Maine where I mean, I had the tunes in my head and I was able to learn by ear, but I didn't really know what I was doing, playing for dancing. And then there was the band in Burlington, the greater Burlington area, the Bog Carrots with Walter and Jim Search and a few other people. But Walter was this beautiful player. I absorbed, you know, just so much but at the time...part of your question, Julie was about propelling into this...when did I become a dance musician? I was playing for dances, and it was a blast. But I was also teaching math in the local public school, which a lot of people have done over the years, they've had these lives that have been, sort of two pieces like Louis Beaudoin. He didn't play the fiddle all the time. That wasn't the thing, he had a job and then he played the fiddle on the outside. For me, the propelling moment was just, I would go down to Augusta in the summer, I was learning from [Brendan Mulvihill](#), and [Eugene O'Donnell](#) down there. I was just playing more and more in the summer, and just doing that immersive thing that so many people are doing now with all the camps. I would get back to the school year and realize I couldn't do that thing that other people do in the way I wanted to. I was having such a great time playing the fiddle. Like to be a math teacher of young kids, it's all consuming and you can't really do both. So I decided to take a year off and see what happened. And in that year, I met the boys with Nightingale and Wild Asparagus decided to audition me and I managed to stay with all those people, those good people for a long time.

### **Julie Vallimont**

Sometimes all it takes is those chance meetings, you know, your life goes in a slightly different direction and then there you are. I'm glad you stopped teaching math.

### **Becky Tracy**

Well, at the time, I thought you know, I can do this again. If I'm going to do something new, this is the time and I loved teaching math. I still love teaching so it could happen again. I'm surprised that it hasn't happened yet in COVID but it hasn't.

### **Julie Vallimont**

Do you have anything you want to add to this Rodney? I'm putting you on the spot here.

### **Rodney Miller**

Sure. There have been several mentors. Early on I was traveling some down to like the Pipestem Fiddle Festival in West Virginia, and also to Union Grove just to be around more of the music. At Pipestem, I met Franklin George, a fiddler from West Virginia. He actually taught me the Salamonie Waltz that we recorded on Airplang album, great waltz. He pointed out to me that there were a number

of fiddle tunes that a lot of the Southern players play that actually sound like they're directly out of the Northern tradition of playing, like the Irish and the Scottish styles. So that sort of like tied it in for me that it was a broad area of music that translated to all different areas of the United States. Another mentor early on was Alan Block. I remember on a camping trip, my parents loved to go camping, to Lake Dunsmore, Vermont. And there happened to be a fiddle convention up in Thetford Center, and we went through that and I saw that [Alan Block](#) was playing, I listened to him. I had his album, the old time Stringband project on Electra I think, and I took the album, I had it with me. I don't know why on a camping trip, I just took fiddle music with me. And so I ran up to him in the parking lot and had him sign my album. But he was influential and great style of playing with his foot movement and his knees and his sandals. But then probably the most important mentor for my playing was through Ralph Page. I used to travel with McQuillen and Ralph Page to play for dances down in Concord Mass and around. We would travel together and I would first go to Ralph's house on Washington Street in Keene, New Hampshire. And then McQuillen would drive in with his Jeep, and drive all of us, the three of us down to the dance. And so I had time with Ralph in his parlor, when he wasn't smoking a cigar he would tell me stories about the camp that he ran. He had hired Johnny Kerry Young, to come down from Canada to play at his camp. He was just absolutely raving about how John Kerry Young would play Money Musk, like never the same way twice, like 8-10 times, it would be all different. So Ralph was presenting to me like, go for it you young fiddler, do something with it. And so when I recorded Money Musk for the New England Chestnuts album, I came up with a version that went from the key of G to key of A, now nobody that I know of plays Money Musk in the key of G, but I thought it would make a nice key switch. I worked out all kinds of variations and that was directly related to being influenced by Ralph and McQuillen, for writing tunes and all that stuff. So anyway.

### **Julie Vallimont**

I think it's easy for us who are learning to get kind of caught up in like how it used to be done as if there's like a crystallized tradition that is like the right way. When you hear stories about some of the folks that some of us never got to meet, a lot of them were pretty flexible and experimental, interested in trying new things. When I first met Bob McQuillen, I lurked around him for years just watching him because I was too afraid to talk to him and then I came up and asked him if I could have lessons. He's like, "I don't give lessons." But then I found out he was just joking and he gave me his card and invited me to chat. But he liked all the new things that were happening, I think. So one of my questions for all of you like as you learned and began playing, you all ended up innovating contra music that we have now, like it has flourished in the last decades, different styles, formats, bands, people traveling all over the country. What were you thinking about in terms of tradition, were you not worried about it? That's maybe not the right phrase, but what were your thoughts about tradition and what you were doing? And were you worried about whether it was quote traditional or not or were you just going off in whatever direction you were inspired to go in?

### **Kate Barnes**

I just have to bring up the Barnes rule of inverse geographical traditionalism. Which states that the further you are away from the source of a tradition, the more conservative you are in playing it.

### **Becky Tracy**

Yes, I believe that.

**Kate Barnes**

It's like Irish musicians and the great seminal bands like the Bothy Band, Stockton's Wing, Planxty, they're from islands, they felt free to play around and innovate and add new things that syncopated and synthesizers, you name it, and here in the states we're a little further away, and we kind of treat them with kid gloves. This was driven home for me when I played in Seattle once. I think I was with Rodney on this gig and there was a local band, they said, well, now we're going to play a New England tune. And it was so staid and limp, I think. I think that was that law in effect. I've never had much, well, I don't want to say I haven't had much respect for tradition. But I think it's a canard to think that there was any one time where things were only done one way. I'd like to think that musicians always innovate, 300 years ago, 500 years ago, now, I'm sure someone sitting in Haydn's symphony said, geez, I wish I could play it this way. So I think innovation is constantly happening and hopefully, I can remain open to that.

**Becky Tracy**

I'm sure you can.

**Kate Barnes**

You think?

**Becky Tracy**

I think.

**Kate Barnes**

In my dotage.

**Pete Sutherland**

You can't turn back now Kate.

**Becky Tracy**

One of the first people who brought me into really playing for contra dancing was [Ted Sannella](#). What he did is he hired me for this gig in Texas, I had never really played professionally, and he brought me to Texas alone, to play with all the musicians down there. At the time, I just thought he was gonna tell me sort of what I should do, you know, like, that I should be playing a certain tune for a certain dance. And it turned out that he was very open to having things tried out. He would feed me tunes that he thought were really interesting from other bands. And it sort of opened the door of okay, so this is this really well respected, deep in the tradition caller who is saying, go ahead and try, try out stuff. That was definitely a sense of freedom that he gave us, it was good.

**Pete Sutherland**

I think I was always, when I was starting out, I was gluing myself, and this is on the fiddle, which is what I was really working hard at for a while, and then getting on to some other things, but really gluing myself to people who were more innovative. So no matter whether it was on the old time side, or the Irish side, or the Quebecois side, people that seemed to really have that going on. It wasn't even like

afraid, not afraid, or any other, like emotional term, it was just like, that's the way they play. They do this thing where they don't always play the melody the same way. Whether it was scripted or not, it didn't really matter to me, because that just caught my ear so hard and so I modeled on that. And then when I went off to play with some of my aforementioned rough and tumble old time brethren, at some parking lot, they would be playing very beautifully, but without a great degree of personal innovation in there and they would look at me like, what are you doing? Bluegrass? What's going on there are you playing bluegrass? Because I was improvising. But it's it was true, when I started listening to Irish music, like who caught my ear was people that were innovating. So it's just been my model. It's like a group mentoring situation or something.

### **Julie Vallimont**

What were you thinking in the early days of your tunes Rodney when you were making, you know, albums like Airplang and stuff? I have a feeling some people maybe reacted to the sound of some of the things you were doing.

### **Rodney Miller**

A couple of the inspirations, one was from McQuillen writing his tune Dancing Bear, which just sort of reached out and grabbed me. Like, oh, man, that is such a cool tune. It is so like, direct and simple yet as so much to say and I just went wild with it. Another thing was Kate's tune Fair Jenny, which we included on Airplang as inspirational too had such a sort of a rock and roll to me, it was like Fairport Convention and I wanted to play it that way and it was an awesome addition. So some of my early tunes, I'm thinking of Bluemont Waltz, from 1986, on a dance tour to Bluemont Virginia, and the setting in the town hall and the rolling Virginia hills, inspired a tune the next day, having played in that location. So it has to do with emotion and feeling and response sort of internalizing what you've just been through, and then it comes out. Because, in our case, you know, fiddle or music is our language, we're not super English speakers. I mean, I've always had trouble speaking. Maybe because I have asthma, but I speak through my fiddle. So the fiddle has a lot to say, from inside me and the tunes just come up because I feel it. I was going to talk a little bit, if I can, about reaching out to the younger generation, kind of thing. An interesting event, maybe, is being worked on, this woman from England contacted me about a month ago. She teaches level three in Bristol, England out on the West Coast and she grew up as a Shetlander. And so she took originally fiddle lessons from Tom Anderson, when she was a kid. I was just remembering that about the same time period in the aftermath of Airplang coming out and Peter and Kate, sorry, Kate. But we were asked to go to Shetland as a duo, and we did in '85 or '86 or something in there and I think she was exposed to Airplang. Anyway, she had kept that in mind all these years. She stopped playing fiddle for a few years. And she's been a teacher, moved to England and married an Englishman. But she said the Airplang and my fiddling has been so important to her inner life that she wanted to bring it into her classroom. So we're going to do a Zoom, where I get up at 6:30am and Zoom to England for 30 7 year olds. And so that's a very cool reaching out and she keeps the music alive in her classroom. She said there are probably more English as second language kids there, because it's a working community. But anyway, she just plays music throughout the day at the morning gatherings and art activities and all this stuff. She has background music, and often plays the Airplang album and other fiddle music. So she wanted to bring that to the kids because it's alive for them. And that's one of the things that's so important is to make it alive in your world. You know, like when I was growing up, I had family support and promotion. Kids need peer groups of other kids

playing music, I think, to make it ring true, especially in this day and age, with so much media stuff permeating their ears, that it's important to expose them to a wide range of stuff, including fiddle music.

### **Pete Sutherland**

The peer group thing is so true. I mean, that's our whole thesis up here and all the organizations that we...and I think it's true down in Becky's corner and it's true in New Hampshire and there's so many places that I'm aware of now where they're pretty active year round mentoring situations and opportunities for kids who are otherwise considered to be kind of weirdos and odd. balls. I mean, we all are. But when you're a teenager it's terrifying to do that. If you happen to have an interest in some of this kind of music to meet anybody else, your age group, if you didn't have that many other lifestyle choices, dress code or anything in common, you'd be like, oh my God, my people. So that's enough fuel for a fire that's been burning, at least in my neighborhood up here for, like 20 years at this point.

### **Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, so it's like, how do we foster these kind of environments? You know, like, going back, I'm sort of monitoring what people are writing in the chat as well. It's an interesting question about traditionalism and how that can really intimidate new folks, because I think a lot of folks who are new to contra world often play other instruments, and they're used to maybe classical music where you have to, quote, do it, right, which I feel like programmed a lot of us. When I switched from classical music to traditional music, I was like, oh, I can do this however I want? It takes a long time to unlearn that. I think a lot of new musicians, they want the sheet music, and they want to know exactly how it goes. I think being flexible, and welcoming, like you say, and just giving off this vibe of anything goes. It is a living tradition, like Kate says, and the way you know, it's a living tradition is when you don't have to care about what you're doing and whether it's traditional or not, you could just do what you want. I was interviewing Ben Smith yesterday, and we were talking about electronic contra, which is not everybody's cup of tea, but he and I and others have had a lot of fun playing around with it. It's like a musical playground. I asked him if he worried about what is traditional? And he's like, well, no, we know what contra dance music sounds like and this is something different. And as long as there's something still that exists, that's fiddle tunes, and good rhythm, and it's danceable, why not play with the format, you know? Why not experiment with what it could be like? We're not trying to replace anything with anything else. It's just one more flavor that you can add to whatever you're doing. So, I'm curious, what are the most important things that you think to teach your students when you're teaching? And also someone is asking then what is dance music, contra dance music in this setting, if we can make it whatever we want? What are the most important essentials that make it still contra dance music? And what do you think is most important to teach to new people, I won't say young people, because anyone of all ages can be new at this and play for dances.

### **Becky Tracy**

I don't know what perhaps the essence of you know, in terms of what's the most important thing that I teach, but in terms of playing for dancing, I'm, of course, focused on people's rhythmic playing, and trying to help them develop that and that is a huge, it's a huge thing. So, it may not even be obvious, some of my students love Irish music, for example and don't necessarily play it in a rhythmic way. And so, you know, instilling rhythm into the music is something we work on all the time. I actually remember

Kate, something from a workshop years and years and years ago that I took with you, where you were saying, it doesn't matter if you have the right chord or not, but you have to play it in time.

**Kate Barnes**

In fact that's often a great way to discover new avenues of improvisation.

**Becky Tracy**

Right, right. And the other thing I learned from you, which is sort of about improvisation is if you make a mistake, try to do it again, so that people think it's right, that you're trying to do it.

**Pete Sutherland**

That's the definition of jazz, I think. So I've read.

**Becky Tracy**

I do that all the time. I try to repeat my mistakes, just make them think I was really trying to do that.

**Pete Sutherland**

It actually works. It actually works a lot of time.

**Rodney Miller**

I thought the key to mistakes is not to show any facial expression like surprise, like oh ooooh.

**Kate Barnes**

Yeah, right, right.

**Becky Tracy**

I actually teach my students to smile when they make mistakes. Yeah, I've had to teach myself that same thing.

**Pete Sutherland**

That is a winner too.

**Becky Tracy**

But that's not about the most important thing for dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

But it kind of is, right? That it's partly that spirit of like, have fun with it right? Welcome those opportunities when they come. I think smiling through a mistake is deeper than it sounds right? Because it means that you're like, open to it when it happens.

**Becky Tracy**

Yeah, and also, you're not beating yourself up, because it's really not that important.

**Kate Barnes**

The audience doesn't let us do that.

**Becky Tracy**

No.

**Kate Barnes**

Right. I often get piano students. Actually I have no students, and I haven't for a number of years now, but pianists who have been playing for a while, and they have a lot of technique. But so often, sadly, they just don't have the basic feel of the rhythm. So they can do all this fancy stuff with the right and left hands, but they don't have that basic rhythm. And it's not even just a matter of precise time, it's a way of propelling the rhythm along with your backup playing. I don't know what it is maybe a slight leading edge of the beat, as opposed to some of the other styles of music, I'm not sure. But that feel, that rhythmic feel is often what the students are lacking. It's often why a classical musician who not only has 100 times my technique will still not, often not be a very good dance musician. It's interesting.

**Becky Tracy**

Right. It's actually when I think of a piano player beginning, I think of Bob McQuillen as the beginning. Because like, that's the root, you know, and it's almost like if you take the tunes and kind of think of the tunes as the Bob McQuillen kind of tune, just kind of like, rough and ready tune that instills the beat, you know? And then you can get more complicated. But you're right, when a student comes at you, and they're really great and they can play the heck out of their instrument, sometimes it's really hard to strip them down into, like, really being rooted.

**Kate Barnes**

They don't usually appreciate it.

**Pete Sutherland**

Well, I'll say it's been a real blessing to be active in the contra scene all along, of course, but especially during the time that I, in the last 20 years or so where I have been engaged in some pretty active teaching and mentoring, which is a broad definition, that's kind of like, it's kind of a wide thing. But anyway, to be able to find the opportunities to bring some of the more motivated kids who really seemed like, they were aware of dancing, and they were aware of instinctively how much fun it was going to be to actually be up there on the stage, the way we all know, including a lot of you in Zoom hang here, slash audience. There's just nothing like it, it's the catbird seat and to be able to watch these kids get up there, and I mean, they're not ready to be soloists or anything like that, but to just play along with the band. We all had that opportunity, you know, like, Kate you know, "You, get up here", so it's sort of like, I'm eliminating the bark from the stage and it's just like, I bring them to the stage. I set them up. And of course, we're talking about pre COVID, but, it's just been so rewarding. The payoff is that kids see other kids doing it and they're like, oh, that's pretty cool. I want to do that, when's my turn?

**Julie Vallimont**

In Maine, Steve Muise has this amazing group of fiddlers. They do the coolest stuff, and they're so great.



**Pete Sutherland**

That guys is nuts, but in a good way.

**Rodney Miller**

So I want to tell a little story that happened quite a while ago. I was hired to play for a group of campers at Sargent camp in Hancock, New Hampshire. Years ago when Elvie [Miller], my daughter was a young teenager and I was just getting her hired into playing for some of these low key dance situations. and make some money, you know. She had been taking quite a bit of piano lessons and was attending Apple Hill chamber music sessions over in Nelson. Being part of that Apple Hill thing, she was, as a piano player, asked to play two or three really difficult pieces for other lead instruments, so piano backup for concertos and that kind of stuff. There was a considerable amount of pressure on her to perform at a high level in public on two or three pieces. And what she said directly after one of those performances, she said to me something like, you know, I just love playing for dancing, where people are moving to my music, it just feels so free, and spirited. She was comparing that to the pressure and the high classical events that were happening. I just think that sort of captures it for a lot of us, or at least for me, too, is that freedom of just getting out on stage, and people are dancing away, and you're sort of making it happen. The dancers aren't totally focused on the musicians, because I've been at events and gone into the bathroom at intermission, and somebody will say "Wow, you like the dancing?" and I was like "I'm on stage playing music". "Ooooh", so they don't really hear much and that means that the pressure is lowered for the musicians because it's a social scene, and they're interacting, getting dance partners lined up, and dancing and focusing on how to dance. So it's a great venue for just getting chops down and playing freely, you know and Elvie has continued to play for folk dancing. She now lives in Ireland.

**Julie Vallimont**

How many of us have gone to the restroom during the break and then been asked to dance while we're on our way back out to the stage? It's so great, because you're like, oh, this isn't really about me, great. I don't care if you notice me being onstage or not, you go have a fun time. I'm sorry, I can't dance with you. Once in a while you can like duck out for a while and leave your bandmates to it. I've known people to like dance up the line, book a partner for a tiny part of the dance, dance up the line and then just go up on stage and jumping in with your bandmates. That's also fun to do. Sorry Kate what were you going to say?

**Kate Barnes**

I was just gonna say the classic thing is you go out to move some refreshment table or something and then of course, people say, hey, you want to dance the next dance? And you say no I'm with the band. And then I always get "Really, what are you playing, what instrument are you playing?" You may find that liberating, I find it slightly demoralizing.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you know, it's like some of these things are so obvious when we're talking about what dance music is and how we learn it, that it seems silly to talk about them. But to kind of answer that question a little bit more. It's dance music when it feels like dance music, right? You just know it when you feel it. It's about the rhythm and the lift and the tempo and the energy. And then some of the sound also sounds

like dance music that has a little more variety to it, right? It doesn't all sound like New England tunes these days. You could hear a Breton tune or bombard or a subwoofer, and a drumbeat or looping or whatever. But also the fact that it responds to the dancers in real time, I think is also the really essential thing about dance music.

### **Becky Tracy**

That's exactly what I was thinking when I was hearing Rodney talk is just that the dancers are actually part of the band in a way, their feet movement you know. One of the things that has been hard about being in the pandemic is that you don't have that visceral feeling of rhythm that's coming from the floor that you do at a dance so it's like you're missing part of your band.

### **Kate Barnes**

Yeah, I heard this great tip from [Tod Whitemore](#) once. I said, Tod, how do you know when we're playing too fast? He says, I listen for balance, if the balance in the hall sounds like a like a gunshot just right on the money, you're doing fine and if it's scattered, there's probably something wrong with the rhythm.

### **Becky Tracy**

Yeah, that's that's a great advice.

### **Julie Vallimont**

So I think as we think about teaching new generations of folks, it's partly just giving them the freedom to play with it and learn and have fun with it. Right? But also, how can we as a community do a good job of creating spaces. When I was a new musician in Boston, I actually found it really hard to find a place to play. Because the dances at the Scout house were amazing but all the musicians were really great and bands from all over the country, but they didn't allow sit ins there. I used to drive out to Greenfield and go to David Kaynor's dance and sit on stage and noodle along badly on my pennywhistle. Oh, I'm just sorry, everybody. There was a dance at MIT that was welcoming to sit ins and so that's where I learned how to play and that's where I met my bandmates in Nor'easter and I bet all of you have had experiences like that. There's events like giant open bands like at NEFFA or other places, the festival orchestras where people get a taste of playing in an open band or something like that for the first time. What are some of your spaces, your favorite spaces like that? And how can we cultivate more of these opportunities for people?

### **Becky Tracy**

Well, I think you just answered your own question. I certainly made use of [David Kaynor's](#) sit-in contra dances myself, early on and that was huge. It was a huge thing to have a place to go. I feel like there's other places now that are being developed, like the fiddle orchestras, again, another David Kaynor thing, there's the fiddle orchestra in Western Mass and the one in Montpelier, where people of all ages can play. And then there's the young mentoring situations that like Pete is part of, or has been part of. So I think there's tiered things I think, just making sure that those things continue to happen is an important thing.

### **Kate Barnes**

Yeah, sadly, open bands used to be I think, more the norm, and now they're very much the exception.

**Becky Tracy**

Right.

**Pete Sutherland**

Which has got to be, at least partly an outgrowth of the proliferation of at least one of the professional bands, part time bands and stuff, which, you know, maybe COVID is just a reset button to the whole thing, and maybe we'll come out the other end back into dancing and open bands will suddenly be more of the norm again or accepted. Of course, we all have the power, if we believe that's a good thing to make that happen.

**Becky Tracy**

Right, to make spaces for people to join. There's also, as you say, that feeling of, well, then you then you get this, this spark, well, what can I create in a smaller setting with this group of people.

**Pete Sutherland**

That's where bands come from.

**Becky Tracy**

That's where bands come from, exactly.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I think it's important for us as a community to make sure that we have all sorts of different kinds of spaces. Because we are now in an era of contra dance music that's dominated by bands at a lot of events, especially dance weekends, you have to be a band, you have to have a lot of repertoire, you have to be practiced, you have to be good. The dancers partly drive, what contra musicians need to do to get booked. There are some excellent musicians and bands who don't get booked for dance weekends, because they don't necessarily...and callers because they don't necessarily fit the model of what contra dancers want or what organizers want. Organizers are also trying to sell their dances often to the same people who are flying to the same weekends. And so that's all great, I love our national dancing and traveling. But we also have to somehow preserve these spaces where people can learn and where we're welcoming to new people. I think sometimes the dancers don't want to hear open bands, or if you have someone sitting in and you're not playing your normal repertoire for the evening, and I know this is a little controversial, but I just hope that we can kind of keep these spaces and kind of encourage the dancers to be like we are all creating this experience for each other and let's all have fun with it. It's not an experience that we're curating for your entertainment, like you pay money to see a movie in the same way, it's like a living community.

**Becky Tracy**

I think that there's a lot of places where open bands happen where people are really proud of their open band and excited to be part of it. I think of the mega band out in Oregon. I think that there's definitely places where it's like an event, and people are happy to be part of that event and go to it. Maybe it's in our selling of it.

**Kate Barnes**

Well I wonder if I could float a theory which is, it seems to me when I started to dance was very much a community and social experiment. Awhile later, maybe 10 years later, the focus is really on the dancing itself and good dancing and people people really wanted to dance the other good dancers and bands started to refine their sound. But I know when I started dancing, it was often to all these open bands, and I just thought they were awesome and I loved that music and I loved the spirit of that massive sound. I wonder if it's just a change of taste, which, everything changes, and maybe someday we'll get back to that feeling of just enjoying this massive band playing the tune all at once. I still think that's kind of magical.

**Becky Tracy**

Well, hence your leading of the Festival Orchestra, keep it going.

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah, to me, it's like having been part of some bands that really kind of pushed various envelopes, and several others have been there. But it's like an antidote against a reset button. It's like, let's get back to basics and just feel the power, as Kate said, of the massive take on a great melody, arguably a great melody. It's been around a long time. It's kind of, it must be great if people are still playing it and it must really turn dancers on. It sure does. That's a well always worth going back to for another drink.

**Kate Barnes**

All right, I have a question for my compatriots. What makes a good gig? I'll start, for me a gig has to have any one of three things, has to be good, interesting musical experience, or has to pay really well. I'm not gonna hold up my middle finger. It has to be a great social experience, you know, like a lot of my friends, which is often why playing for a benefit is great even if I don't get paid, it's like, there's a looseness and my friends are there. And give them huge amounts of money, I am always open to that. But also sometimes gigs are like, well I've never played that this person or I'm learning this new style and this is a chance to try that out. So for me, any of those elements makes a great gig along with a room with a private door when you when come, you're not sleeping on the sofa.

**Julie Vallimont**

No cats in your bedroom either.

**Kate Barnes**

Oh, no, I like cats.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, okay.

**Kate Barnes**

All right, Pete you're next.

**Pete Sutherland**

Let's see, great gig. More than half my life has been not dance band, not the dance band for a dance. It's been concert kind of stuff, too. So two realities kind of in my brain that are probably a slightly different take on the question. But, for dancing, I think that people are just like, they're having fun, they're smiling a lot, some kind of engagement, referencing the conversation earlier about getting asked to dance when you go to the bathroom or whatever. Like they don't know, they don't know you from anybody. So it's some kind of connection so that you don't have to be like a rock star but like they actually recognize that you're one of the people up there on the stage creating this good time. So if there's a little bit of that I'm pretty happy and good reception to, you know, if you work hard on your sets and some of your arrangements and stuff like that, getting a really good reception to that and having people ask about it later. It's nothing but satisfying.

### **Becky Tracy**

Well, I'm thinking about everything that you're saying and I'm connecting to all of it, but it seems so long ago, and I'm thinking about my criteria for a good gig now and it's so different. It's outside and preferably, there's something beautiful nearby, I can see beauty. And yes, there still, there are friends, there's people that I'm connecting to and preferably some little interest, like, maybe there's children dancing, or maybe some of the people actually get up and move around a little bit or boogie off in the corners of the lawn or something. Anyway, I was just thinking how my whole criteria has changed, real people, please.

### **Rodney Miller**

Well, I think one of the beautiful things of having a band and traveling to a gig playing a weekend or a week somewhere, is that you have the camaraderie of your band members. Usually, that's the band put together because you all pretty much get along together and you're on the gig and you're playing the heck out of the music and people in the band are responding with amazing stuff. Like, I didn't know you could do that. And this is what keeps it alive, for me anyway, is the development of the music to a deeper level and when it really works with the dancing, and you're playing at top response between the band members, there's nothing better. It's like, I want to do this again. I want to do it again. Where's the next gig? And that's so important, because I think some people get put in circumstances, like if you're always going to play with a mega band for your career, then I mean, it's the beauty of the sound, but where's the personal development in there. Because it's like playing in an orchestra you contribute to the whole, but are you expressing yourself and if you're expressing yourself, then that drives you forward and makes you want to learn more music, more tunes, get more gigs, you know, take it for a ride.

### **Julie Vallimont**

A lot of new tunes are written when you're like in the car backstage or noodling around with your bandmates and it's all kind of part of that experience together. So the flip side, you know, bands have also been such a huge part of the flourishing of all these different sounds of contra dance music, like these amazing bands Latter Day Lizards and Nightingale and the Stringrays and the Posse and so many great bands. You get this amazing rhythm lock when you play with people for a long time. And in a way, it's like driving a racecar at that point, because you can really just focus on the dancers at that point, once you've all figured out what you're doing with each other, how to play off each other. The professionalization of contra dance music has changed a lot of it, but it's also allowed bands to get to

this level, this kind of dance like nirvana, which is what a lot of people who travel for dances are looking for is that incredible euphoric feeling of all being connected, which is what the whole point of the dance is, right, the moment when everything dissolves and everyone is just together, the caller and the dancers and musicians all moving as one. I've been grateful for the people who are crazy enough to fly me around and let me play dances all the time because one of the best ways to learn is just do something a whole bunch of times and mess up a lot. Right? Having that opportunity to mess up with really good company, especially who are often better than you which is another tip is to mess up with good people. You know, that's the best way to learn.

### **Pete Sutherland**

I saw the comment go by and Dave Marcus, wherever you are. He said, rather cynically, make sure you're the worst person in the band, that's how you're gonna learn. I was definitely that person in the Clayfoot Strutters in my own mind anyway, but I learned so much from some really incredible people and so there's a more benign version of that that could become conventional wisdom if you're a teacher, like always look for opportunities to play with somebody that's better than you, always, never pass it up.

### **Julie Vallimont**

So there's also been this flourishing of original tunes and compositions. And sadly, I don't think we have time to really delve into this a lot. But there's a question about what inspired you to compose tunes. I think for some of us, it just sort of happens, right? You're around tunes, you start thinking and they come out of your fingers. But do you have any fun stories you want to share about that before we wrap up? Too open ended the question.

### **Rodney Miller**

Well, every little tune was written by somebody,

### **Julie Vallimont**

Right, even like, quote, unquote, traditional ones, right? They're all original.

### **Kate Barnes**

I'm gonna get my charger. I'll be right back.

### **Becky Tracy**

Okay. I feel like I'm the least experienced writer here and I have been around some really amazing writers all my musical life. But it was actually Ann Percival's art work that pushed me into writing tunes, because she was doing this process art, where she would take her art and put it under the bed when she was done with it and it was all about the process and then it went under the bed. And she wasn't supposed to look at it when she was done. And so I thought I can do that and so I wrote tunes, I'd write tunes, I thought of tunes, and then I just turned the page and that tune was done. It was a while before there was a tune that I was happy with. But it was sort of that feeling that yeah, there's something there, it doesn't have to be a Keith Murphy, or a [Jeremiah McLane](#) tune right off the bat. Because if you're going to judge your tunes when you first form them, you have to be a beginner at everything. So anyway, put them under the bed for awhile, everybody has tunes in them.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and it's the question of like, process versus product, right? If you're making a studio album, it's about the product, but dance music, I feel like it's about the process. It's about the moment. A lot of bands make albums but we know that the magic isn't always in the contra dance albums, it's actually really hard to capture that energy in the studio, right? If you think about tunesmithing is that kind of process. Of course, we don't have to write new tunes. And you could argue as like Bill adding in the comments that Newt Tolman famously despised the idea of writing new tunes, we also already have lots of great tunes that already exist, right? They've stood the test of time, and they're amazing. And we had to keep that balance of like having a common repertoire as a community because the other magical thing about contra dance music is that any musician could sit down with any other musician, and find something to play and you don't even know each other's names, and you jam in the hallway at NEFFA for three hours, or whatever it is, or late night somewhere and you become best friends. You know, if we had all original compositions where every band has its own repertoire, then we'll lose that. So it's like keeping that commonality of these wonderful workhorse tunes and not losing those at the same time.

**Rodney Miller**

One of the things I've found very helpful in writing tunes, is when I was starting playing for dances, originally, I played it pretty much straightforward. So it was like two tunes 12 or 14 times through, instead of like the chestnuts which was one tune 14 times through, which can be a little tedious and hard to do, over and over and over. So I was like, challenging myself to take the tune and make it a little different each time or whatever, but that led to an improvisational freedom for me, of staying rooted with the tunes so you can tell what the tune is, but then explore it. Like, take a different path, but say the kind of the same statement that the tune was trying to say. And each time you do that, then the improv segment, actually could be a new tune because it's different. So that leads to writing tunes like you've played a lick during a dance, you said, wow, I don't remember any other tunes where that lick appeared. I'll write a tune based on the lick. So it's sort of like it's this motor driven thing

**Kate Barnes**

I see it as a continuum, from playing the tunes as it's written...over to the harmony, then improvisation, then suddenly a new tune...

**Pete Sutherland**

I probably learned the most recently, probably during the Posse years, with my longtime musical partner, Oliver Scanlon, who's similarly interested in the co-writing part. That's either something you can come to organically and fairly painlessly, or it's just terrifying, because it's all about trust, the process part is all about trust and you really need a longtime collaborator that you've kind of been through some fire with, in order to kind of settle that question and just get down to like, really having a brain meld and having that work. So in every single instance of code writing, whatever the actual route to the finish line is, in terms of who provided what I come away, feeling like I grew some as a writer myself, like, I could go back and, and approach the next thing, I want to try to codify in terms of a fresh idea in a slightly different way, as a result of that process. So I just kind of want to put in a pitch for that too.



**Becky Tracy**

It's the next terrifying frontier.

**Pete Sutherland**

Even if the tunes are no damn good at all, it's still worth something.

**Julie Vallimont**

I wish we could talk about this all night, we were joking that there should be an after party where we just keep geeking out about all this stuff. But I want to ask all of you, it's just been so wonderful to hear some of your thoughts. Are there any last thoughts about mentoring, or teaching or anything, dance music that you want to leave with us tonight? Anything you want to add? Besides everything that we haven't talked about yet? It's been really great sidebar in the chat, by the way, which I'm really enjoying, feel free to keep chatting over there, everybody. Sorry. Go ahead, Kate.

**Kate Barnes**

I'll end with a story. You know, I've been at this a really long time and unlike some of my fellow players, sometimes I like it, and sometimes I've really burnt out on it. And a while ago, I was wondering, why am I doing this, I'm poor, I have to get on an airplane, which I hate. But here's what happens is I get to a dance and this guy will come in who's been busting his ass at some job all week, is tired. And then as soon as we start playing, he stands up and he's moving around, he's jiving, and he's forgotten everything, he's happy. And I thought, damn, that is good work. If our band can do that for people, make them forget and just celebrate life and rhythm, just right in the moment. That is magic and that's why I do it.

**Pete Sutherland**

Hear, hear.

**Becky Tracy**

Yep. You said it.

**Kate Barnes**

I've been playing music for you know, decades and to me music is still magic. I don't understand how it reaches people the way it does in such a magical way.

**Julie Vallimont**

And keeping that newness and freshness and freedom is such an important part of it.