

FSRH Ep 6 - Benjamin Foss & Bennett Konesni

Chrissy Fowler: [00:00:00] Hi there. This is Chrissy Fowler, welcoming you to the Flying Shoes Radio Hour podcast, which is produced by Belfast Flying Shoes and the Country Dance and Song Society, in cooperation with WBFY Belfast Maine's Community Radio Station, where the show airs weekly, mostly using music from the station's digital library.

This podcast version of the show features contra dance music and conversations with musicians whose talents catalyze joy and connection wherever they play, including here in Maine where this program was recorded. Enjoy this episode and thanks for listening.

Chrissy Fowler: Recording this show with Benjamin Foss and Bennett Konesni was a delight. Each of them makes their home here in Waldo County, Maine. Benjamin in Brooks and Bennett in Belfast, and sitting down with them as [00:01:00] my dear neighbors and friends was both relaxing and enlivening. As you'll learn, they're deeply committed to nourishing our local culture of participatory music and dance.

And for me, it was really special to have some time together to hear more about their reflections on all of that. Their paths intersect all over the place, including at Bagaduce Music, where Bennett is the executive director and Benjamin teaches, and also at Maine Fiddle Camp, at local jam sessions, at various Scandinavian music and dance programs, festivals, weekends, and a whole lot of Maine contra dance series, including the Brooks Contra, which Benjamin co-founded, and of course Belfast Flying Shoes.

These two talented multi-instrumentalist are definitely passionate about contra dance music, both new tunes and old chestnuts, and they obviously, to me, value the social connections of playing and dancing, including cultivating all the links among various cultures of music and dance, like those branches that we love exploring in this podcast.[00:02:00]

And both Bennett and Benjamin also dig the roots, literally sharing the history behind the tunes, some of which they have unearthed in archives and are bringing into the light, and some that they learned from their contra dance

musician mentors, and still others that they have introduced to the locally played repertoire after collecting them themselves on their own travels far and wide.

I think all of that comes across in the stories that they shared during our conversation. So sit back, enjoy the ride with Benjamin Foss on fiddle and Bennett Konesni on guitar. [00:03:00] [00:04:00]

< Mackilmoyle's / Lamplighter's Hornpipe >

Chrissy Fowler: Well, it's so great to be here in the Flying Shoes Radio Hour studio with a couple of local Waldo County folks, Benjamin Foss and Bennett Konesni. Glad you're here.

Benjamin Foss: Thanks for having us, Chrissy.

Bennett Konesni: [00:05:00] Glad to be here.

Chrissy Fowler: We are gonna chat today about some of your backgrounds, some of your connections with contra dance music, and, um, and you kicked off with a couple of tunes that I think are part of the core contra dance repertoire. Tell us about those tunes.

Benjamin Foss: Yeah, we just played Mackilmoyle's and the Lamplighter's Hornpipe. Both classic old New England tunes. Mackilmoyle's probably originated in Scotland, but there are lots of versions from various Canadian fiddle traditions and it's been around in New England for at least 150 years or so.

And the Lamplighter's Hornpipe is a great, composed New England tune probably from that same mid 19th century boom of, of tunes.

Bennett Konesni: Well, what I love about these tunes is that they are, they really are sort of essential. They feel like essential Downeast tunes for us. They've got a jovial jaunty quality to them.

They've got a little, they're, they're a little challenging, but they've got a fundamental groove that's really easy to [00:06:00] lay underneath the melody. It's the kind of the kind of tunes that really set the tone for a dance. They really say, okay, we're in Maine. We're playing a contra dance in Maine, and this is sort of the sound from here.

And also you will feel good. You know, that's what it says to the dancers and they feel good and it kind of gets things going in a really nice way.

Benjamin Foss: They have essential party quality.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah, right. A party vibe. And we, I think we even soundchecked with those tunes last night. And so

Benjamin Foss: I think we played Shingling the Roof, which we might get to later.

Bennett Konesni: Oh, did we? Okay.

Benjamin Foss: Yeah.

Bennett Konesni: But same idea, actually.

Benjamin Foss: Very similar actually.

Bennett Konesni: Like really good, to kind of set that party vibe for a contra dance, which is what we think is really important for contra dancing generally, is to have that energy.

Chrissy Fowler: Yeah. And I think your point about the uh, party fun vibe, the thing about those tunes for me is that there've been so many times that I've heard that tune,

Bennett Konesni: Right..

Chrissy Fowler: And felt really happy.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah.

Chrissy Fowler: And so you're [00:07:00] hearing like the in-the-moment excitement about the tune, but then you're like, under it is all this sort of residual. Uh, delight from years of hearing that tune dancing to it. Hmm. Yeah. Delicious.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. I mean, isn't that part of the greatness of traditional music and that it's layers of experience, lived experience?

The best parts of the tunes have survived, so they've got an essential quality to them. Whereas like, maybe newly written tunes could be great, or they could have a lot of fluff that was inserted by the songwriter, that's not really, wouldn't, wouldn't last. If you played it for a hundred years, it would get worn away by time and the experience of players playing for dancing

Benjamin Foss: tunes are pre-filtered.

Chrissy Fowler: Pre-filtered. Hmm. Let's just take a step back now. Tell us a little bit about your individual journeys. You've been playing a lot together lately. I know. And working together and doing things together here in Maine. But maybe just get back to the beginning parts about how you first [00:08:00] entered the contra dance music scene, how you started being musicians who played for dances.

Bennett Konesni: Well, I grew up in the coastal Maine area, and dancing was just a part of family life. I remember, I think my earliest contra dance experience was with a family friend who was calling. Some small, oh my, it might have been my, I think it was my uncle calling dances for our family and friends who were just hanging out on a porch and I was five.

So it was the kind of thing where there was contra dance consciousness. Um, we weren't hardcore contra dancers, I would say, like you have these days. I notice people at dances, they're at every dance wherever you go in, you know, within two hours drive from here, certainly. And that wasn't us growing up. It was more like we would show up for dances now and again. And I had an uncle who was a [00:09:00] caller. That allowed the sort of, that was fertile ground for once I turned into a late teenager and there were girls that I wanted to take on dates. And so we, I remember running out of gas after a Bowdoinham dance, in between Bowdoinham and Augusta, and literally coasting into the Irving station on Western Ave in Augusta and using, uh, old Moxie cans to get enough money to get gas to come all the way home.

And she wasn't impressed. But yeah, it, that, but that was enough that, that, that was enough to get us home and enough to get me hooked on contra dancing. And with a little detour through bluegrass and some other music, I finally, in around the mid 2000s, kind of fully engaged in playing for dances.

And I think my first official dance ever was the Belfast dance with Jeff Lewis and Owen Marshall in [00:10:00] 2007.

Chrissy Fowler: Wow.

Bennett Konesni: So, and since then, it's been a pretty regular thing in my life. You know, maybe half dozen dances a year in different places. And then recently, with Ed and Drivetrain, all over the country.

Chrissy Fowler: Yeah.

Bennett Konesni: And even played for some dancing in Europe too, which has been fun.

That's what I've been up to. And I met Benjamin at Maine Fiddle Camp, late 2000s?

Benjamin Foss: 2012.

Bennett Konesni: 2012. Early, early 2010s. And, uh, I, I just remember Benjamin had these, I think they were Converse sneakers and a case, um, maybe with a bouzouki or a mandola in it. And, Owen Marshall said, see that kid, we're gonna take care of that kid. We're gonna make sure that he's got all the support he needs. Owen set the tone and of course now we're all lucky to have Benjamin around helping us all sound better and have more fun. So.

Chrissy Fowler: All year long.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah, all year [00:11:00] round. Right up the road.

Chrissy Fowler: Well, that's a good segue. Benjamin, you want to tell us a little bit about how you, what, what happened before that?

Benjamin Foss: Yeah, that

Chrissy Fowler: That grateful, for us, moment at Maine Fiddle Camp,

Benjamin Foss: Maine Fiddle Camp in 2012 was really a turning point. But prior to that, I took a couple violin lessons at a local music store growing up and discovered my first fiddle tunes in books. Really loved them. I remember playing Angeline the Baker and Old Joe Clark out of a book, just trying to find as many books as I could that had fiddle tunes in them when I was seven or eight.

And had a family friend growing up, Bob Elliot, who played some mandolin and fiddle for dancing and had been involved in organizing the Rehoboth contra dance in Rehoboth, Massachusetts, where I spent my childhood.

He was involved for 30 years or so before that, and was a very influential, unifying force in the traditional music scene around there. He was just sort of a background character in my whole life, long before I had any interest in music or aware of, awareness of his involvement in that. But [00:12:00] I heard him play mandolin at parties and he introduced me to some people who taught me my first tunes by ear.

I took a couple fiddle lessons with Michelle Kaminsky in Providence, Rhode Island around that time. She's a Cajun fiddler and also plays for some dances, contra dances. And I just by chance grew up less than a mile from Golf Hall in Rehoboth, where the Rehoboth contra dance took place. It's an amazing, amazing hall. Definitely one of the best halls architecturally in terms of the floor in New England. And from the time that I was 10 or 11, I could just walk to the dance and the Sunday afternoon open band thing that Bob hosted there, the Sunday Night Jammers, which was how I got started playing instruments beyond the fiddle.

I would go and just borrow any instrument that I could find and play all the same tunes week after week and use that as a chance to get my hands on lots of different things. And that group hosted a dance once a month. [00:13:00] So my first dance playing experience was there playing in that open band for a community dance, once a month.

And I tried to wedge my way into involvement with the Rehoboth contra dance for a long time. Shawn Kendrick, the organizer, I think didn't quite know what to make of me for a while. And Michelle, my teacher at the time, would ask me to sit in with her band when she would play once a year. And Shawn didn't much like that, but, she, she came around to it eventually and when I was 15 or so, invited me to join the board of the Rehoboth dance and I got involved with organizing that that same year. Amy Larkin and Linda Leslie put together a little contra dance exposé thing for a local access cable TV station. And originally Amy was just going to play for a crowd of maybe 12 dancers in the studio, just fiddle alone.

And Linda asked me to come and dance so that they'd have a sort of good representation of people of all ages at this [00:14:00] thing. And I said, sure, I'll come, but can I play guitar? And Amy said, yes. I was, this was the night before. I think I was helping out, doing sound for them at the Rehoboth dance.

But they brought me along the next night, and I played guitar with Amy for the first time and that was a total blast. Um, it's kind of fun that that was so well documented. I think there might even still be video of that floating around online the very first time we sat down and played tunes together. But yeah, the rest of my teenage years in that part of New England, I played all the little Cape Cod dances dozens of times with Amy and Linda and spent a lot of time at the Monday night dances at the Scout House with Jack O'Connor and lots of other Boston area influences and mentors.

And that whole time was going up to Maine Fiddle Camp, also in the summers. Ken Fortier, who also lived locally just a quarter mile down the road from Bob, in Dighton, Massachusetts, used [00:15:00] to come to that Sunday Night Jammers open band thing. And he had brought his kids up to fiddle camp. Kara and Alex. Alex is now on staff at fiddle camp, teaching piano. And he said, if you like this, you've really gotta come to Maine Fiddle Camp. And I did. And now I am, now I live right down the road and I'm pretty involved there.

Chrissy Fowler: Yeah, you're on staff.

Benjamin Foss: Yeah.

Chrissy Fowler: Ooh, I liked that little dive into just sort of the roots. That's what the show's about. We're gonna talk about the roots of the music, right?

Bennett Konesni: Yep. I mentioned Bowdoinham and running outta gas on the way back, that just feels like an important thing to mention that I spent a lot of time playing, I've spent a lot of time playing with the Gawler Family Band and John and Ellen. And their role in the Maine Country Dance Orchestra and sort of keeping, getting dancing going again in Maine and really setting the tone for the revival of this art form in Maine, um, has just made a huge influence on me. And I think when Ben Benjamin and I play it's, there's like a [00:16:00] strong understanding or feeling of that kind of, well, we mentioned the party vibe, it's just sort of, the social aspect is strong and in the front, the fun, just like fun forward, and even if technically okay, we're always striving for technical greatness. And uh, also a big part of that technique is to foster a good time.

Chrissy Fowler: The joy.

Bennett Konesni: And, and to just have fun with it. And rather than, I think we see in other parts of the country and other dance scenes, some, the balance is a little different around like a technical perfection has to be the highest priority and then the fun will come from that. And I think that one of the things John

and Ellen have shown really effectively in the Maine Country Dance Orchestra, is that if you really focus on how to have fun and how to help people have fun, then the other technical stuff will come along. And [00:17:00] I found that in my playing for sure. That and, and to have that hook, the love of the fun, the, the other stuff comes along. And so that's, I think, a hallmark of our playing and a hallmark of our, our state and our scene.

Chrissy Fowler: Mm-hmm.

Benjamin Foss: Yeah.

Bennett Konesni: Which is really cool.

Chrissy Fowler: Like being together in the community.

Benjamin Foss: That, that feel and those influences is what kept me in Maine after I started coming up to Maine Fiddle Camp. I was mostly in it for the music when I was 12, 13. I was interested in dancing, and danced a lot as much as I could, but just as a way to be exposed to fiddle tunes as a broad concept. But coming up to Maine, I started to see how those events were, or at least how it felt to me, they were supposed to interface with a community. Like they were just the natural way that people would gather to socialize. And not a contra dance for contra dancers as a, as a subculture, which is how contra dancing exists now in most of the country. And the ability to engage with it as just a fun community [00:18:00] event that also happens to be a really high quality dance and very much a, an actively living tradition, was what, what drew me to this part of the country.

Chrissy Fowler: Mm-hmm. Yep. There are some things that I think are unique and special and happen in, and happen at other places too, but I think, I, I feel lucky to be part of this little dance shed as it were, like, a watershed for dancers.

So maybe getting back to the music. Tell us a little bit about the tunes that you're gonna play next.

Benjamin Foss: Yeah, we talked about Shingling the Roof, and that's a tune that Ellen and Greg [Boardman] and some other Maine Country Dance Orchestra folks learned from Alfred Omar, who's a New Brunswick fiddler who spent some time in Maine. I think they tracked him down and learned this tune in the 70s. So this was sort of very much part of that revival. And it's a favorite tune of ours, of ours now. It got revived somewhat at Maine Fiddle Camp in 2022, just recently. And had been in the rotation maybe 15 [00:19:00] or 20

years ago, and suddenly everyone was playing it three years ago, and now we play it all the time. Teach it to everyone we possibly can. It's an amazing tune. I think we'll play Shingling the Roof.

Chrissy Fowler: All right, great. Anything you want to add about it, Bennett, before you guys launch in?

Bennett Konesni: Well, uh, you know, the Gawlers, John's a roofer, and Ellen and Elsie and Molly have all helped roofing. And, I think part of the fun of playing it is thinking about being up on the roof with them and, just the, the perspective you get from up there and just the fun of it. And so, I don't know. It's a really great tune. It matches well with this tradition, this gang, somehow, of a roof, being up on the roof.

Benjamin Foss: And it's definitely a party. It's a four-part tune.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah.

Benjamin Foss: And all the parts on their own are kind of generic in their Acadian fiddle elements. But on the whole, it's a, has an amazing arc that not a lot of contra dance tunes in fewer parts can replicate.

Bennett Konesni: Last night while we were playing the dance, [00:20:00] Benjamin and I were reflecting on the change from, that we're seeing in contra dance music, from sets of three tunes that kind of go 1, 2, 3 over the course of a dance. Like maybe we're playing each tune five times through or something like that, which may have been more popular in the seventies and eighties, to, at least what we're trying to do, and I think we see some other bands doing this, which is, Ben just mentioned the arc. And I really love playing this tune because it allows me to, as a rhythm player, explore, create a whole arc over the course of playing the tune. And when I play it, I start with typically with this sort of, well, I might even start very simply. And then go through a series of accompaniment situations, whether it's "boom chuck", sort of a classic almost bluegrass style, which Simon St. Pierre's guitar player, the, [00:21:00] the, the sort of like, there's a whole thread of bluegrass guitar going through some of our musicians in Maine. And then I might do something that's vaguely Irish. No Irish musician or guitarist would claim it as theirs, but it sort of references almost like a, a floaty through thread or like pedal tone-y vibe.

Benjamin Foss: There's moments where you're playing all the 16th notes with not a lot of dynamic variation. Kind of just a strum smooth strumming bed.

Bennett Konesni: Like laying a bed with strumminess. And then the other thing you'll hear out of the accompaniment then is ultimately, uh, emerge into sort of party vibe, which I interpret as, well, it's partly sort of like, it kind of references sort of jazz, Django jazz backing, which is we do like chunk, chunk, chunk, chunk, chunk, chunk vibe, but then also somehow referencing some sort of Maine Caribbean connection through all the boats that were sailing back and [00:22:00] forth.

Chrissy Fowler: The ice, the schooners, the ice, and the, and the cocoa.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. I mean, apparently even in the winter ships were leaving Belfast every week. Yeah. And so thousands of boats a year filled with ice and hay and granite and wood and horses and so many Mainers would find themselves for a few days or a few weeks on a Caribbean island. And my theory about why we have an, like something a little different happening musically, around here, is because of that connection. Because you hear it in all the sea shanties. All the sea shanties are referencing the Caribbean and they're referencing places in the Caribbean. The song lyrics are Caribbean. They're Afro-Caribbean in origin. And when it comes to like the Maine piano accompaniment, I some something tells me they were, they heard

Benjamin Foss: There's, there's a lot of documented cross influence. Jack Douglass, who was the most popular fiddler in Winterport in the 1830s, grew up in Hispaniola. Um, and there were lots of other [00:23:00] musicians who went back and forth a lot. It was much more convenient to get between the Caribbean and Maine than it was between Maine and Vermont for much of the 19th century.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. Mary had, Mary knows all about it 'cause she had to drive here across those mountains, which imagine if you, you're in a horse and wagon, it's like way easier to get in a schooner, a coastal schooner and get to, you know, the Dominican, Dominican Republic or, or St Vincent, you know, so, so the way I like to end Shingling the Roof references that story and gives people that kind of, you know, it's, we're not exactly on the beach necessarily, but we might be like, well, we're a garlic farmer from Maine who wishes he was on the beach,

Chrissy Fowler: So, so let's keep all of that in the back of our minds.

Benjamin Foss: Yeah. I'll say one more thing about it also, for you dance musicians and keen eared dancers out there. It's a four-part tune and we play at double length, um, 64 bars. And so once through the tune for twice through the

dance, which totally works in this case. The, [00:24:00] the B and D parts are rhythmically pretty similar and compatible with what would be the B part of the dance in both cases. And I like having that long, continuous arc. It just feels very different than the normal tune structure and, and works. I've, have yet to see a case where it doesn't work.

Chrissy Fowler: That is fun and I, having you say that, I'm thinking I remember that. I was thinking there was some interesting improvisation going on, but really it was just one tune. Well, we're gonna hear Shingling the Roof next.

[00:25:00] [00:26:00] [00:27:00]

< Shingling the Roof >

Chrissy Fowler: Oh yeah. Great tune. Shingling the Roof. Mm. First off, I just want to mention too that Mary Wesley, who is another great friend in the contra dance [00:28:00] community, caller from Vermont, and also is helping me out a little bit with recording this particular episode of The Flying Shoes Radio Hour is here in, in the in-home studio, uh, with us. So when Bennett was mentioning Mary, that's, that's the Mary we're talking about. Mary Wesley. Hi Mary.

Mary Wesley: Ahoy, Mainers.

Bennett Konesni: Ahoy, Mary.

Chrissy Fowler: She's giving an ahoy. We're glad it didn't take her as long as on a schooner to get here. Um, we were chatting a little bit though about, um, some of the kind of things that you guys are up to together and separately here in Maine. Tell us just a little bit more about the kinds of things that you've been thinking about and that you're working on. Well, Benjamin and I get to spend a lot of time together teaching at Bagaduce Music, which is my relatively new gig, um, as executive director there. It's one of the world's largest publicly accessible libraries of printed music, uh, with millions of sheets of music of all genres there, including lots of folk [00:29:00] music, um, both songs and tunes. And we started an education program. We're now up to 25 classes of all different types, um, throughout every week people come together. We've got over 500 students this year, um, or 500 enrollments, that's the way to say it. And we also have a concert series with, um, really interesting music from all over the world that references our, or is referenced in our library.

Um, it's a really fun project. Bagaduce music, it's in Blue Hill, but we do education and concerts really this year from Freeport to Steuben, so along the coast. And the mission now has become about enlivening the, the musical coast of Maine and ensuring that, uh, for generations to come, we've got these kinds of dances happening, concerts, people have musical literacy and can, can enjoy and have fun playing music in the way that [00:30:00] we've been talking about.

So we get to do that Wednesdays and Thursdays. Every week we sit with an ensemble. Maybe tell us a little bit about what we do together there, Benjamin.

Benjamin Foss: Yeah. On Wednesday evenings in Blue Hill, Bennett and I co-lead our Northern New England Ensemble, which is really, uh, focused on playing these old New England tunes for dancing and talking about specific elements of the New England fiddle style or different New England fiddle styles to multi instrumental ensemble.

So right now I think we've got six or so fiddlers, a couple guitars, mandolin, accordion, bass, and piano. So full, full New England dance orchestra style. I think it's up to 10, 10 students right now. We teach tunes, both classic New England tunes and new discoveries from the archives, and work up to playing them for dances and little pop-up concerts around the peninsula out there. Um, it's kind of a, a long time dream project of mine. I love looking at the New England fiddle style [00:31:00] as its own cohesive thing and having the opportunity to teach that is really fun. And look at it in a slightly more focused academic way than you might normally with a group of people who are very enthusiastic about it and coming to it from a whole bunch of musical backgrounds. Some of them have been fiddling for 30 years. Some of them sing a couple singer singer songwriter songs on the guitar, but otherwise are basically new to this whole thing, just in the context of our ensemble. And that's just one of many similar ensembles or instrument specific classes that are going on throughout the week.

Bennett Konesni: We've also got a intermediate Scandinavian ensemble called Spelmanslag, which we run on Thursdays in Belfast. And we, the format, basically, we had a, I don't, we had almost, I think maybe 10 people last week. We teach polska and schottisches and we've taught an angleska (sp?). And, uh, the idea is to dive into that idiom in its finest form.

We might explore the connections [00:32:00] between, um, Maine and New England and Scandinavia historically, and how it's played out the towns, in the Swedish towns in Northern Maine and the Finnish community and the, any

Norwegian music we can find. Actually, we've got a really cool Finnish band coming from Finland, uh, this weekend called Frigg.

So people love their fiddle music, and we're gonna take the spelmanslag to the Frigg concert and have a little dance after the show on Tuesday at the Rockport Opera House. So that's kind of another little project we've got going on. And the, the whole idea is to really get music, as much music happening as we can in the neighborhood, and encourage our, all generations to continue weaving the tapestry of community music along the coast. And it's been a lot of fun. We're having a good time. I would say.

Benjamin Foss: Definitely.

Chrissy Fowler: It's a great mission. Elevating, you know, the rising tide, lifting all boats, like just continuing [00:33:00] to elevate that as a, as an identity, as Benjamin was saying earlier, the. You know, this is just part of our larger, the fabric of our larger community.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah.

Chrissy Fowler: Making music and dancing together.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I was thinking last night, we had, we played a schottische at the Belfast dance after the break and it was cool. There were, I don't know, maybe 50 or 60 people dancing the schottische and, um.

Benjamin Foss: They just do it now. They know what to do.

Bennett Konesni: It's just so great.

Benjamin Foss: Expose them to enough schottisches that they figured out how to make it a party and get around the floor.

Bennett Konesni: Right. And, um, you know, when you look at old dance programs, the couples dances were an integral part of an evening of dancing in the communities around here. So it's interesting that that kind of faded out for some time. And I think when we talk about weaving the musical fabric of the community, I think having experience and knowhow.

I remember being a kid and people dancing hambos. There was like a vi, there was a [00:34:00] whole thing to dance hambos after the break and, uh, I really believe in reintegrating that kind of dancing and at least getting some crossover

so that if the, if there's gonna be a Scandinavian dance some evening, we get contra dancers to the Scandinavian dance and we get some of those.

If they're people who just like to do couples dancing, get them into a contra dance, I think it's only healthy. And the, the musical qualities are just mind boggling once you dive into, as a, as a fiddler or a guitar player to just dive in inside the harmonies and the rhythms of those tunes. So we're, we're excited to be, to be sort of reincorporating that into the tradition.

I was really pleased when I saw the first copy of Northern Junket Ralph Page's, Northern Junket has, right in volume one, um, episode one was a Danish tune, like right there, sort of [00:35:00] highlighting Scandinavian couples dancing. And so, to me it feels like, okay, well it's come and gone over the years, but it's absolutely, we're on the right track by doing this.

Chrissy Fowler: There's a through line.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah, totally.

Chrissy Fowler: Yeah, there's definitely a through line.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah.

Chrissy Fowler: And as you were saying, having people from different, different dance, social dance experiences coming and joining in the contra dance scene. And, um, Mary and I were talking earlier about, uh, country western line dancing and how that's very different from contra dancing.

Bennett Konesni: Right, right.

Chrissy Fowler: But that there can be the same sort of joy and connection and community and, um, party side I would say.. Well, you were mentioning the, uh, schottische or a combo after the break, but before the break. And it's true that on the show it applies as well. I really like before we have our midpoint break to have all waltz, so could you play a waltz next and you want to just tell us a little bit about it so that we don't have to go back in our minds after the break?

Benjamin Foss: Yeah, we'll play the Country Waltz. I don't know Bennett, if you have more to say about it, but I, I definitely learned this from Ellen. Ellen Gawler.

Bennett Konesni: Definitely Ellen. This [00:36:00] is a Maine Country Dance Orchestra, Ellen Gawler fiddling classic, and I just always think about the way she gets in and out of the notes. It's like so iconic. Ellen Gawler. A way to make it through a waltz. And it's just fun, you know, she's obviously really enjoying it and John is too, when, when we play the Country Waltz and, uh, the dancers feel that. They notice it. I can tell. People are looking at the stage, they're responding, they're having more fun dancing.

And part of that is of course the, the personalities and the mindset that they have going into playing for a waltz or a dance generally. But part of it is also in the DNA of the tune itself. I think the way this, this tune has so many delightful little turns. There's these big swoops with the bow and then there's this, there's these little triplets.

Benjamin Foss: It has elements of bluegrass, and Western swing, and also these really square, like [00:37:00] Northern European accordion tunes. All in the same

Bennett Konesni: Right.

Benjamin Foss: All in the same place.

Bennett Konesni: Right. It's got a five of five, it's got a two chord in it for you guitar players out there. I mean, it's really a very complete waltz. It'll, it'll whatever you want, it'll give you that, except maybe,

Benjamin Foss: Sadness.

Bennett Konesni: Sadness. Give you.

Chrissy Fowler: If you need to have a good cry, maybe this is not the tune for you.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. This, this isn't the waltz for you. But.

Chrissy Fowler: All right, well folks, um, if you are in, if you're not in your car, then tie on your dancing shoes and, uh, and we'll hear the Country Waltz.

Bennett Konesni: 1, 2, 3, 1, 2.[00:38:00] [00:39:00] [00:40:00] [00:41:00]

< The Country Waltz >

Chrissy Fowler: Belfast Flying Shoes is a participatory arts nonprofit with a mission to build community and cultivate well-being through the joy of traditional music and dance for people of all backgrounds and identities in Midcoast, Maine. In addition to this radio program and podcast, we have concerts, workshops, a monthly community and contra dance series, other dances, school residencies, and programs for incarcerated men and for older adults. Learn more at belfastflyingshoes.org. We are also a proud affiliate member of CDSS, the Country Dance and Song Society. They connect and support people in building and sustaining vibrant communities through participatory dance, music, and song. To find out more about their camps, affiliate services, other programs and resources for music and dance throughout North America, visit cdss.org.[00:42:00]

Let's get back to the show.

[00:43:00] [00:44:00]

< Schottis fran Delsbo >

Chrissy Fowler: That tune, is that, is that the one that you played last evening [00:45:00] at the dance?

Bennett Konesni: Yeah.

Chrissy Fowler: Oh yeah. I, that was a great one to dance around with. I danced with someone that I've known since they were a baby and whose parents are just, are extraordinary dancers to watch. And so dancing with Sophie was just amazing. I can't always shottische as well with people these days. And, it was delightful and there's a little quirky part of it. It was different than the very prescriptive, what I'm, usually used to is sort of clearly where does the phrasing happen? Yeah. Yeah. Tell us about that tune a little bit.

Bennett Konesni: Well, um, I learned it in Delsbo. Edith Gawler and I were there for a summer festival in 2015 and, uh, it, it was in July, early July, and the sun never set. So the festival really didn't, didn't really get going big time until like 8:00 PM or something. It felt like it started, the energy started building and it just kept going and going. And by three in the morning people were still playing and dancing in barns on this old historic farm.[00:46:00]

And, there were three women who had a trio and were standing in the middle of this relatively small barn, and people were dancing around them and the tune

was so good. Um, we whipped out the recorder and just recorded it and we've been playing it ever since. And Benjamin picked it up somewhere.

Benjamin Foss: Definitely in, at, at fiddle camp.

Bennett Konesni: At fiddle camp

Benjamin Foss: In that 2016, 17 era, after that.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. It just was an instant like, yes, we're gonna play that tune kind of tune. So, um, and it's, uh, it's satisfying in a lot of ways. Both the quirkiness you described, it's a three-part tune, um, and it's got some amazing harmonic moments and, uh,

Benjamin Foss: It interacts with the schottische beat in about as many ways as it can.

Bennett Konesni: Yep, yep. And, uh, yeah, I think that one's. Got that one's got some staying power because of the, again, it's both fundamentally sound and also quirky and fun and in some key ways. It gives everybody a little something to chew on. [00:47:00]

Benjamin Foss: And it feels like a party. That's the, yeah. Underlying thread here. Apparently that's the theme. Even if you've never heard a schottische before and don't know how to dance to it, it tells you something about yeah, about what you're supposed to do. Yeah. That's really good.

Chrissy Fowler: Oh, yay. I mean, one thing that I'm always curious about and interested in is, you know, why do people choose to play for dances as opposed to in a bar, for example, or, or playing as part of a rock band. Why dance music? What is it that feeds you about playing not just the dance music, I guess, but for dancers?

Benjamin Foss: Well, I'll fully admit that I'm a little bit of a control freak, and I like having that role in the community experience sometimes, especially as an accompanist. That's really why I love playing guitar for dances. In this context, I'm playing fiddle, but I love sculpting that emotional arc from a rhythm instrument. And I love the challenge of looking at a caller's card and trying to pick the perfect tune. I spent a lot of time watching Amy Larkin do that, [00:48:00] and

Chrissy Fowler: Uhhuh.

Benjamin Foss: She is one of the undisputed masters of that particular niche art. Um, it's also just fun. It's the way that these tunes are meant to be used and to understand them in context and extract all the possible fun from them, you gotta, gotta do that. In my own personal life i'm sort of undergoing a change in that ratio right now. For years I was, most of my playing and performance work was dances, like maybe 80%. And right now I'm playing guitar with the Pine Tree Flyers and in a couple other combinations that are much more concert focused. And the Pine Tree Flyers we're playing these old New England tunes, but arranging them in a more, for a listening audience, mostly for a, a festival context, which is a fun thing that hasn't been done very often with these particular New England tunes, very much. There have been some examples, but our little local tradition hasn't seen the same revival as Irish music or Quebecois music, or even southern old time, in the sense that there aren't big touring bands that have taken this repertoire and made a, an experience that's tailored to sort of a, a [00:49:00] folk music interested audience outside of the dance context.

Chrissy Fowler: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Benjamin Foss: So it's really fun to be involved with that. It's a dream concept of mine that I've been thinking about for years and trying to approach in some form. But looking, yeah, looking forward into my calendar, I'm playing fewer dances than ever. But I, I'll never say no to our amazing dances in our local scene.

And so I'm playing them as often as I can, but in some ways I'm hoping to travel to fewer dance weekends and do more intentional traveling, and just some good local dances instead.

Chrissy Fowler: Letting you dive into the repertoire in a way that you can't, I mean, you know, dancers are listening, but they're not listening with that same, they're also listening while they're doing something. And, um, it's a different quality maybe. Right? And, uh, yeah, than somebody who's sitting in their seat really just focused on you.

Benjamin Foss: There's that element of it. And also just the, the element of exposing the tradition to a whole community of people that wouldn't interact with it in a dance context and would never have the opportunity to, or even know that that exists.

Chrissy Fowler: Yeah.

Benjamin Foss: Um, that's the big one for me.

Chrissy Fowler: Mm-hmm. [00:50:00]

Benjamin Foss: Yes, you can do different things with a focused audience. But it's really mostly just about cultural outreach and having a

Chrissy Fowler: Ambassador kind of,

Benjamin Foss: Yeah.

Chrissy Fowler: Mm-hmm.

Benjamin Foss: Putting this thing that we do in a context that makes it immediately palatable to a different demographic of people than we interact with in the dance scene.

Chrissy Fowler: And it might, you know, and I feel like, I can imagine that planting those sort of seeds might be like, oh, they're talking about how this is a dance, like, didn't even know it existed, and maybe I'm gonna go to the dance and whoa, whoa. That sort of thing.

Benjamin Foss: There's definitely some of that. Yeah. People, people's minds being blown by the idea of this being dance music and

Chrissy Fowler: Yeah. Yeah.

Benjamin Foss: Some of those connections.

Chrissy Fowler: Pretty cool.

Bennett Konesni: One of my favorite things to do is do a concert. Basically, when you're negotiating an a, an event with an organizer, they'll often say things like, well, should it be, what do you want to do? We want some songs and we'd love a concert. And, uh, maybe a workshop. They don't really know a lot of the times. And one of my favorite things to do is to suggest [00:51:00] a shorter set for a concert, followed by a short dance. And we, you sort of like clear the seats away and that speaks directly to exposing people who might ordinarily just listen to dance music and actually get them to move and try it, try to feel it in an embodied, a deeper embodied way.

Benjamin Foss: Yeah, we've done that a whole bunch recently with the Northern New England ensemble. Also play a concert and then even just get

everyone dancing the Galopede, or one simple dance and a waltz, just as a little trial, little taste of how it's supposed to work right at the end, which is accessible to anybody.

Bennett Konesni: I think it's so important to the future of dance and the future of music generally. Uh, both because it's fun, you know, like that's maybe the biggest thing. If it's fun, it's gonna keep happening.

Chrissy Fowler: We do have a theme for this, for this particular episode.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah, and because I, we were talking about couples dancing during, uh, community dances, you know, sort of [00:52:00] before the contra dance revival. Um, um, I'm, I'm really skeptical of all of these divisions that people put up. Like, oh, well this is a contra dance and we don't really do couples dancing except for two waltzes in a night. Um, or, uh, the idea like performance, performer audience. It's, it's really cool to sit and listen to music. And I want people to do that. And, uh, let's also get them dancing. Because I, I can tell that people reach a state of euphoria. Somehow when they're spinning, and they get there sometimes just by sitting, but uh, when people are spinning and seeing each other, looking each other in the face and passing by the right hand. And do-si-do-ing.

Chrissy Fowler: Active engagement.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. So their blood is pumping and their mind is in a different place.

Chrissy Fowler: Oh yeah.

Bennett Konesni: And they're just like, for me, when you asked, why do you play for dancing? And I could just do [00:53:00] concerts, but I do think that the euphoria, there's something about that just pure unbridled joy that a lot of people maybe are struggling to find in their everyday life. And to help them get there. Yeah. At least once a week or once a month, or once a year.

Chrissy Fowler: Or ever.

Bennett Konesni: Or ever. Yeah. That feels like a really, um, important thing for me to do with my life. You know? How, how are you going to spend a life? Well, helping people feel that, it feels like a pretty good thing. And, and I just, I get there too. You know? So. Yeah. Yeah.

Benjamin Foss: For the same reason that we dance and that we play socially in someone's kitchen, it's all, it's all fun from all angles.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah.

Benjamin Foss: It's fun to create the fun and

Bennett Konesni: Yeah, that's right.

Benjamin Foss: Help other people have fun.

Bennett Konesni: Somebody, I, I had a job in New York for a while. And so, I was talking with somebody last year. They're like, well, aren't you coming back to New York? It's like, what the, what are you doing up there? Why are you, why, why did you leave here? Like, why would you [00:54:00] leave New York? And, I, my best answer was, uh, look, I get to experience euphoria regularly. It's not, it's not like, it's like it's planned. It's something that you put on your calendar. You're like, well, I'm gonna go have a really good time, and for me it's the next five days in a row. And then. And, you know, I, I reckon we're, we're feeling really good, in spite of all of the junk that's happening in the world, we're able to find, feel really good several times a week throughout the year.

Chrissy Fowler: And it's integrated, as you guys were saying earlier. It's not just like one tiny little corner.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah.

Chrissy Fowler: It's actually integrated in the, in the larger, broader geographical community.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. It's part of the plan.

Benjamin Foss: I mean, if we're, we host a session on Tuesday evenings in Belfast, and if we're teaching Wednesday and Thursday and playing a dance Friday and Saturday, and maybe there's a party on Sunday that's, it's like every evening we're leaving the house with the express intention of [00:55:00] having fun and, uh

Chrissy Fowler: In a non hedonistic way, I would say, too. It's not, it seems like it's fun, but not in a, to me it feels like it's a different quality of fun than just like, I'm gonna go have fun and drink a lot of alcohol, and

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. It's not, we're not dropping below consciousness.

Benjamin Foss: Yeah. It's just a, a giddy, kind of giddy, silly, ridiculous thing that we get to do that happens to be extremely fun. And we, music is involved, like, I don't know, everyone loves music. It's hard to describe what that means and how it feels to interface with music in that way, of it just sort of being the vessel for all of this. But it's great. It's fun to, it's fun to play music. It's fun to interact with it in a professional performance context, in a teaching context, in the context of playing for dances, in the context of just playing at a party. Like I play music in so many different contexts, bouncing back and forth all the time. And it doesn't really get old in any of them. It's just they're all, they're all different. We get to connect with this amazing historical tradition, but it's also very much just a thing that we do. And that's alive [00:56:00] locally.

Chrissy Fowler: Totally.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. Dance, in particular, gets people to a place of presence. My theory is that their mind, their, like enga-, some people over-engage in the thinking process and there are times when you can just like dial it back a little bit. You still gotta, or maybe your, your brain is just focused on what's the next move. And how do I move through this dance enough that the fears and the anger and the dissatisfaction with life, like can take a backseat for three hours, four hours. And uh, that's great practice. It's great practice for anyone who walks in the room, it's great practice, for us, to be a part of that, because then we can take it into, you know, the more you're doing something, the better you're gonna be at doing it in other contexts. So that's my answer to your question.

Chrissy Fowler: Yeah.

Bennett Konesni: And, and to be able to practice that all the time. It really helps when you're like behind somebody who's driving slow or, or, uh, you [00:57:00] know, watching the news or, you know, listening to someone complain about their life. And, um, so. Hopefully everybody gets a little piece of that. And I just feel really lucky that we get to, and, and actually sometimes, like last night, we got paid to do it. So, thanks.

Chrissy Fowler: So as a dance musician that's pretty delightful.

Bennett Konesni: As a dance musician, it's pretty great. And thanks to those dance organizers who are out there kind of bashing their heads on the keyboard to get the dance musicians to respond and, you know, paying, putting, putting money, you know, like trying to figure out who's gonna sweep the floor, and

how to use social media to get people to turn up for dances, or whatever the frustration is of the organization process. We're really grateful for that.

Chrissy Fowler: Yeah. I think there's a social, there's a social benefit to it, the dance part. When I was hearing you talk about it, I was reminded of something that a dear friend talked about, a story I heard about another dear friend is that the [00:58:00] quality for us as contra dancers in that particular dance form with interacting with everybody in the room, in those set dances, is that you really are experiencing what a mental health professional called uninterrupted positive regard. Like it, that's the thing that's really effective about psychotherapy, is that you are with a person supporting you and they're giving you their uninterrupted positive regard.

Bennett Konesni: Wow.

Chrissy Fowler: But when you're contra dancing, it's like over and over and over again.

Bennett Konesni: Right.

Chrissy Fowler: People are smiling because they're feeling so giddy with the music and, and you get, might, may get a little eye contact or a little physical contact. And so you're basically given three hours, or more, depending on how long the dance is, of that all-ages uninterrupted positive regard, of people that you might not even like.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah.

Chrissy Fowler: It, and um, and, you know, that, I think there's something beautiful about that. Well, and there's also, I'm just gonna bring us back a little bit to the music. There's something great about the music too. So would you be willing to play [00:59:00] another set or another tune?

Bennett Konesni: Yeah.

Benjamin Foss: Absolutely.

Chrissy Fowler: You want to tell us a little bit about it before you launch in?

Benjamin Foss: Yeah, let's play some jigs. We haven't done that yet.

Chrissy Fowler: True enough.

Benjamin Foss: Um, some tunes that have been in the rotation recently for us are these tunes that Simon St. Pier. Played, um,

Bennett Konesni: Smyrna Mills!

Benjamin Foss: Um, they're Maine Country Dance Orchestra repertoire as well. That seems to be a running thread as well as the key of D. Pretty much everything we've played has been in D, but hopefully we're talking enough in between that you've forgotten about that. Um, yeah. We'll play these tunes that a lot of our mentors in Maine just call Simon's in D and Simon's in G, but the D tune is a Quebec tune called the Journeyman's Jig. And the G tune, in any other context, is called Jimmy's Favorite, which is another New England classic. But Simon's.

Chrissy Fowler: Those tunes, those jigs were tunes of the month for the Belfast Flying Shoes All Comers Band recently. And, um, yeah, great ones. So we'll hear, uh, the [01:00:00] Journeyman's Jig and then, then the one you said was, uh,

Benjamin Foss: Jimmy's Favorite.

Chrissy Fowler: Jimmy's Favorite. Here they come.

[01:01:00] [01:02:00]

< Journeyman's Jig / Jimmy's Favorite >

Chrissy Fowler: Oh, those jigs. Simon St. Pierre, Smyrna Mills. He was from Quebec, but he lived here in Maine for a long time. Yeah?

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. Yup, he was a logger. And there's a really cool picture of him some, I, I found it on the internet, and he's holding his fiddle and he's out in a clearing that he'd, where he'd been working. Yeah. Basically with piles of logs around.

Chrissy Fowler: Wow.

Benjamin Foss: Bennett made a great paper cut interpretation of that photo.

Chrissy Fowler: Oh yeah. Right on.

Benjamin Foss: Yeah, you can see it in the vestibule at Bagaduce Music Lending library.

Bennett Konesni: That's right.

Chrissy Fowler: That's great. You come to the, on site. He was also a National Heritage fellow.

Bennett Konesni: Right.

Chrissy Fowler: Um, and so if you look on the NEA National Heritage Fellowship site, where many other luminaries in the contra dance community, [01:03:00] are also honored. Yeah, there's a really lovely, they've got some nice pages, so if you're searching on the internet, like, uh, you did, you can see some photos and read about him and find a little bit more about his background. It's pretty cool. Hmm. Well, yeah, we have, our roots go deep, don't they?

But do you see things flourishing? What about the end? What about the growing edges? Where, where are we gonna be in a while? What's this, what do you see? What do you see as the future of contra dance music? How about that? That's like a, kind of a big question. Doesn't have to be that big, but just pontificate briefly because I think that it's important to think about: Well, here we are. We are in the middle of the stream. That we are, this is not ending with us. We did not start it. Mary and I were chatting about that last night. This is not something we invented, you know?

Bennett Konesni: Mm-hmm.

Chrissy Fowler: It's not us. We're not like, we're not us that's bringing this thing into the world. We're, we're drawing from a deep well. Hopefully we're, uh, leaving the pump primed.

Bennett Konesni: Right.

Benjamin Foss: I think Bennett said it in terms nearly this simple before, but if you make something fun and you keep it fun, people will keep doing it. And so, as long [01:04:00] as people have a desire for social connection and community events, which I think they always will, this type of social dancing, contra dancing, and our sort of shared local musical heritage will always be one of the many good ways we can interface with all of that. Um, and I think we're at an

important turning point in the scene, at least locally, over the last 30 years, with Maine Fiddle Camp and Belfast Flying Shoes and lots of good organizations that have done a lot of work to make sure that a huge proportion of our local next generation are aware of these things and exposed to them. And, um, for many of those young people, myself included, it's just sort of a fact of life. Like, yeah, you go to the contra dance on Friday in Belfast because it's what your friends are doing and it's what the community does. And I think just fostering that assumption, and the fact that it's, should be just obvious that it's a fun thing to do, is the best thing we can do to keep things ensured for the future. And I think we're, we're doing that. I mean, the dances are, [01:05:00] new dances keep popping up around here to fill in the schedule. You can dance almost every weekend night in the whole month in Maine, if you're willing to drive around to monthly dances. And many of them, especially within an hour of here, are packed to capacity every time. 170 or 200 dancers in Belfast, Brooks, the new Bangor dance, Surry, Hallowell. All those dances are thriving and have sort of reached that point, following Belfast's lead over the last 10, and all these new dances mostly in the last five years. I think people will keep showing up and they'll keep having fun. And as long as there's momentum to keep putting energy into organizing those events, they'll survive.

Chrissy Fowler: Mm-hmm.

Benjamin Foss: I've seen in some cases, national scale events and conversations with other organizers, a lot of pessimism, generally, about how people feel about contra dancing in the world, and interface with it, and attendance at [01:06:00] dances, and age demographics at dances. And I think the best thing we can do is make things as fun as possible and let them spread. Naturally, you can't really force people to have a good time, but you can give them all the ingredients and they will.

Chrissy Fowler: Yeah. You could put the feast in front of them.

Benjamin Foss: Yes.

Chrissy Fowler: Yesterday. I,

Benjamin Foss: That's a great way to say it.

Chrissy Fowler: At the, we were talking, Benjamin, before the community dance portion of our dance series, which since the pandemic has not had the same sort of intergenerational, there haven't been quite the same quantity of young people of, of children, of, school-aged kids. And last night there were a

ton. There were a number of them from some school residency work that I've done, and I was both shocked and delighted to watch these kids who I worked with in a classroom and had experienced some joy and delight in that brief way, but to see like, oh, here, here they're at the dance with the music and with all these other people. Yeah. And, and really just seeing what happens when you have, when they've, when they've sampled it a little [01:07:00] bit in another place and then they come and they come to the banquet, as it were. Yeah. And can really dive and dig in. Yeah. Making it available.

Bennett Konesni: Yes.

Chrissy Fowler: Is what I hear you saying. You can't force somebody to eat it and enjoy it.

Benjamin Foss: Yeah. It's been an interesting experience. I started the Brooks dance and was involved with that for its first couple of years and it's, it was really fun to talk to a lot of young people coming in the door, um, getting a sense of their relationship to the dance and the scene. And the vast majority of them, maybe they had been to a Belfast dance before and had the same experience, but plenty of new dancers coming in the door heard about it from friends. Just even, even not experienced dancers. It was just the obvious social outlet, and a thing that happened. And so they went. They don't know about the concept of a dance weekend at all. They don't care about contra dancing on the national level or have any understanding really of the tradition or history. It doesn't matter. It's just a fun community social event. And so there'll be those people who take deep interest in it, who will be involved in preserving it as some kind [01:08:00] of cultural product. And there'll be the people who are just ready to have fun and we need a large core of them to just sort of make it work as a community event. Yeah. And the fun has to come first. The people will come if it's fun. That has always been my experience. But you can't force them to come, and then expect them to have fun just because they're there.

Chrissy Fowler: Or that they'll make it fun because they show up.

Benjamin Foss: Yes. Yeah. Yeah. The fun has to be, all the ingredients have to be there for it to feel like a good time, and then people will stay.

Chrissy Fowler: And you don't have to do it every time either. I know we were chatting earlier too, about how some of the same people are at all the same dances as, you know, perhaps locally, even in that range of dances you were talking about. But there's also, I went to a, I've been to a couple dances lately and I thought, well, I've never seen those people ever in my life before. And,

um, and, and I may never see them again except at that dance. I think there's something about spreading it around and making it available in lots of different community places.

Well, Ben, Bennett, what do you, what, what's your take on the future of, we've heard great ideas [01:09:00] about, uh, where it might be going and ways that can help nurture that future that we want to imagine.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah.

Chrissy Fowler: That we want to manifest.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. Well, it's interesting to think about what dancing was like in Belfast a hundred, 150 years ago.

Chrissy Fowler: Yeah.

Bennett Konesni: How, there's this amazing map of Belfast with all the dance halls, and how there was a time when there was a dance almost every night in Belfast.

Chrissy Fowler: Oh yeah. Yes.

Bennett Konesni: Do you remember the number of dance halls? Was it like, 20?

Chrissy Fowler: I don't remember, but we can, it's, if you go to, actually to the Belfast Flying Shoes website, there is a link to a photograph of it.

Bennett Konesni: Okay.

Chrissy Fowler: Um, of that particular map.

Bennett Konesni: Right.

Chrissy Fowler: That is in the Belfast Free Library.

Bennett Konesni: Right. And I think there was something like 20 dance halls.

Chrissy Fowler: A lot.

Bennett Konesni: Uh, 150 years ago, tiny, tiny little town on the coast of Maine. Yeah.

Chrissy Fowler: And in a range of years, it wasn't even like over the last 150 years, it was like this little window of time.

Bennett Konesni: Right. Right. Where people were just dancing a lot, and playing the fiddle, and playing the tunes for the dance. And I don't know that maybe it's optimistic to think that we'd get back to that, [01:10:00] to be like, wow, there's just a dance happening every night in the same way that right now

Benjamin Foss: 60% community participation rate.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. Right now, if you want to go to a bar every night, you can.

Chrissy Fowler: Right.

Bennett Konesni: So why can't you go to a contra dance every night? Interesting question. Uhhuh. I, it would be cool. It, I would say that's a fun goal, that there's some, some setup. Somehow we get it set up where people could experience community dance and music making every night of the week if they wanted to. In the same way that Benjamin and I get to, and really, we really do. So, uh, I, that could be such a great thing for our world, our community, but for the reason we're talking about before, the, the fact that people get to be present and get this positive reinforcement. So where, it would be a very healthy thing I think for our society and our culture. I think by, it can happen. We've got some really strong, [01:11:00] creative, engaged, uh, community groups that are making music and dance happen. We're, we're part of 'em. And. I think that's going to be sort of a backbone or an architecture that could help us make that happen. The fun is gonna be the thing that keeps people coming back, because that's really what people want.

Chrissy Fowler: Mm-hmm.

Bennett Konesni: I also think the silver lining with all the screen time that everybody gets these days is that there's like physical limitations to that. And I, I know that with Facebook and Instagram, people are kind of like meh. They're sort of getting bored of it. It's just not real, in the same way that you get in the room, and you're dancing, and you're playing tunes, is just so real. And I think my hope is that, that actually the, like our bodies, we're just starting to

remember. Like, oh yeah, this is what, this is actually fulfilling. This is real, this is like junk food and real food. That same contrast. And I can [01:12:00] see, I can see, I think musicianship has improved over the last 40, 50 years. And I have a little fear, like one track we could go down is pure professionalization of musicians and the art form in itself. And we know and have friends who've been to Berkeley School of Music and are sort of like sort of academifying, universitizing, the musicianship. And you know, Benjamin and I both are really interested in technical goodness. You know, high quality of tech, technicianship. My fear is that we lose the other half of it. Where, which is the, the fun that we keep talking about and the sort of techniques and approaches to facilitating this community experience in favor of playing the notes right all the time. I think I articulated that earlier. And I think, at [01:13:00] least in Maine, we have, we have, the vision is small halls around the region that are taken care of, that are loved, beloved, homes for dancing. We have a population that understands and values how important this is to our culture and why, that understands the threads of where this stuff came from, but sees that as, not as like an identity that splits them apart from other people, but actually brings them together and finds some kind of common humanity, and ultimately presence, through the joyful experience of getting together. And it could easily be, in a hundred years that it's just, just as normal to walk into a place and find dancing happening and that, and this music being kept alive and actually improved as it is today, to go into a bar and just get wasted and sort of like, ignore all of the stuff and disappear from, [01:14:00] from your life for, for eight hours and wake up with a headache, but wake up sort of energized and excited because of how much fun you're having.

Chrissy Fowler: Yep.

Bennett Konesni: I think that's.

Chrissy Fowler: In, in a nourishing way, like you were saying.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. Like nourishing. Yeah. Like good food. Yeah. Good food. It's gonna ha, I think that's actually gonna happen. I think that's really the, uh, it's just like this organic movement, you know? Once you taste a great tomato, you're not going back.

Benjamin Foss: From our perspective, understanding both sides of it. It's the obvious path.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. But it's like, yeah, why wouldn't, why wouldn't that be the future? And so I, I suspect that, yeah, people, people, it's, we've got

hundreds of thousands of years of experience singing and playing and dancing together, and only a few years of recorded digital music and screens. And so I think we're sort of built to do this. And ultimately, we'll find the alternatives to be [01:15:00] lacking. And that's, so we're here to sort of be the bridge in that, uh, funny... people will look back and say, wow, that was weird. That was, what a trip we all went on there for a little, for like a hundred years of getting all hyped up on the screens and the, all this, I don't know.

Chrissy Fowler: Disconnecting from each other in tangible, physical ways.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. I don't think, because I don't, just don't think it's really sustainable, uh, any other way really. Probably. So, so that's, that gives me a lot of hope. I think it's a good vision to keep our sights on.

Chrissy Fowler: That is a good vision to keep in mind as we, as we close the show and, and move onward, like how can we continue to connect and manifest those two visions?

I think that's exciting. Well before I

Bennett Konesni: Yeah. It all starts with four potatoes.

Chrissy Fowler: Yeah, that's right. Four potatoes. Um, before we wind down the show, just let us know where you're gonna play.

Benjamin Foss: Yeah. Another, we've played a lot of Maine Country Dance Orchestra tunes, and a lot of commonly-played old traditional tunes. I also love pulling tunes out of the archives and old books, and looking for tunes that have, that were being played for dances a [01:16:00] hundred or 150 years ago that have fallen out of rotation for whatever reason. Um, and I think we'll play a tune called The Brazen Mask, which has become one of my favorite, exciting, big, A Major ender tunes that isn't in the top 10 rotation that everyone's been playing for the last 10 years. It's good to cycle those out on occasion. And this one, um, I learned from Ryan's Mammoth Collection, which is a great book of about 1100 tunes that was published in Boston in the 1880s. All tunes that were transcribed from fiddlers in that region around that time.

Chrissy Fowler: All right, well, uh, the Brazen Mask?

Benjamin Foss: The Brazen Mask.

Chrissy Fowler: Oh yeah.

Benjamin Foss: Great name too.

Chrissy Fowler: Great name. It's very evocative. I can't wait to hear the tune. Um, so we'll hear the Brazen Mask with Benjamin Foss and Bennett Konesni. It's been a pleasure to have this conversation with you and I'm personally excited that we live in the same area so that we can follow some of these threads. I've got a lot of threads to follow up on.

Bennett Konesni: Yeah.

Benjamin Foss: Yeah. This has been, yeah, exciting and inspiring and enlightening all at the same [01:17:00] time.

Chrissy Fowler: All at the same time. And I, and I'm grateful to, to Mary Wesley for giving some, a little bit of help here as we're navigating our Flying Shoes Radio Hour

Benjamin Foss: And calling the dance last night. That was a blast that we got to all work together in that context.

Chrissy Fowler: It was a joy. So before you play the tune though, I will let everybody know that you have been listening to the Belfast Flying Shoes Radio Hour and before the tune happens, I do want to remind listeners, as always, to please keep on supporting community music and community dance, and also in this context, especially community radio.

[01:18:00] [01:19:00]

< The Brazen Mask >

Chrissy Fowler: Well, here I am again. This is Chrissy just getting ready to sign off, but I sure am grinning after this time spent with Benjamin and Bennett. I'm really grateful to [01:20:00] them for sharing tunes, stories, and importantly for me, their reflections on contra dance music. I hope you're equally grateful.

I want to give a shout out of appreciation to Mary Wesley, the Vermont caller who worked with Benjamin and Bennett at the Flying Shoes Dance previous to our conversation and who also sat in on our recording session. Mary's podcast on callers, From the Mic, is produced by Country Dance and Song Society, and available at all your favorite podcast sites and mobile apps. Finally, a special thanks to Ness Smith-Savedoff, who skillfully edited the audio for this episode. Ness is a drummer, including for contra dances, a sound engineer, and an audio

editor who lives in Los Angeles, California, and, bonus, he has family roots here in Maine. You can find out more about Ness at nessopotamia.com. That's [01:21:00] N-E-S-S-O-P-O-T-A-M-I-A dot com.

Thank you for listening to the Flying Shoes Radio Hour podcast. Go to cdss.org/podcasts for show notes for today's episode, which will have info on the musicians and the tunes they played, a transcript of this show, and links to other CDSS podcast episodes. Thank you to Great Meadow Music for the use of tunes from the album Green Mountain by Mary Cay Brass and friends.

Please note that the views expressed in this podcast are of the individuals and don't necessarily reflect those of CDSS, Belfast Flying Shoes, or WBFY. This podcast is produced by Ben Williams and me, Chrissy Fowler. Until next time, please keep on supporting community music and [01:22:00] dance, community radio, and especially your local community arts organizations who, like the Country Dance and Song Society, and Belfast Flying Shoes, help sustain musical traditions like these.

< Bonus Track >

Benjamin Foss: Hey, Benjamin here. We were talking after and we decided we might, uh, we missed an opportunity to play an excellent tune that Bennett and I learned in Sweden last year from a Belgian fiddler who was there studying some Swedish tunes. Um, he heard some of our Maine tunes and pulled us aside and said, here's one that you have to know.

It's a maclotte, which is kind of like a quadrille, contra dance-esque, couples set [01:23:00] dance kind of thing from the Wallonia region in Belgium. This is called Maclotte de Houssa. It's a fantastic contra dance tune and you should all learn it and play it. It's perfect for a dance with down the hall figure in the B1, or anywhere, any marchy kind of thing.

Bennett Konesni: Here we go.

[01:24:00] [01:25:00]

< Maclotte de Houssa >