

Contra Pulse Episode 33 – Sam Bartlett

Julie Vallimont

This episode, Julie sits down with musician, composer, cartoonist, and stuntologist Sam Bartlett. As a musician Sam plays in the Irish and old-time American traditions on the tenor banjo, mandolin, and jaw harp and he has been a huge part of reshaping the face of modern contra dance music. He got his start as a dance musician playing with iconic bands such as Uncle Gizmo, Fresh Fish, Wild Asparagus, and the Clayfoot Strutters.

Julie Vallimont

After meeting his wife, Abby Ladin, Sam left his native Vermont and moved to Bloomington, Indiana where he joined and began a decade of touring with Abby's percussive dance company "Rhythm in Shoes." He also went on to play with other contra dance bands such as the Reckless Ramblers, the Sevens, Notorious, and his most recent project, the Stringrays.

Julie Vallimont

You might also know Sam as a cartoonist, and community artist. From group mural projects, to cranky shows, to his nationally renowned Stuntology books depicting simple parlor tricks and pranks to "amuse & annoy your friends" drawn in his signature cartoon style, Sam seems to have an endless font of creativity.

Julie Vallimont

In their interview Julie and Sam discuss his many musical influences, revisit memories of his very first contra dance, expound on the joys of the jaw harp and so much more. Julie also learns the secret behind Sam's favorite practice routine (note: do not try this at home!) Let's dive in.

Julie Vallimont

Well hello Sam Bartlett, welcome to Contra Pulse.

Sam Bartlett

Hi.

Julie Vallimont

It is so wonderful to see you. It has been a while for everybody.

Sam Bartlett

I know, I think about a couple years ago in San Luis Obispo we had a mega jaw harp jam.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, you and me and Pokey [Mark Hellenberg]!

Sam Bartlett

Where we got kind of out of control and you opened up a box and you had like 10 jaw harps.

Julie Vallimont

It's kind of like cracking a six pack, right? You crack a 12 pack of jaw harps and pass them around and it's a party.

Sam Bartlett

Exactly. It was very exciting for me as a longtime jaw harp enthusiast.

Julie Vallimont

Was that your first instrument?

Sam Bartlett

No. Well, that's interesting. I mean, the way I played it, I did get one at a very early age. There was a music store right near where I lived called Gleason's. I did get one, my mother bought me one when I was nine or something. Did I play it musically? No. I just owned it and brought it to school.

Julie Vallimont

That's awesome. What kind of things did you play on it in the beginning?

Sam Bartlett

I just messed around with it, mostly to be annoying, I think. Just go doioiong doioioing doioiong. I brought it to school and my friend Robbie Hall and I figured out how to use it, just how to make sound. I didn't think you could play melody on one. I didn't understand that idea other than just being a noisemaker until I saw a band come to my high school called the Arm and Hammer String Band. And they played and one of the guys in the band played Turkey in the Straw on it and I could hear the melody and I'm like, Oh my god, you can play melody on one of those things? That was a first for me.

Julie Vallimont

It's pretty cool. For people who aren't that familiar with them the jaw harp, also known as the jew's harp, or the guimbarde, or the trump, they're one of the earliest musical instruments. They're played in all different cultures around the world. The cool thing about them is that they sound like they play a note when you play one. Oh, man, I wish we had one handy. Mine are in boxes still because I just moved. I don't know where any of my stuff is.

Sam Bartlett

I might have one in my desk.

Julie Vallimont

Yes, everyone should have a jaw harp in their desk drawer. The fundamental note doesn't really change that much. But you change your mouth shape to change the harmonics and then when you play the melody, it's actually what the harmonics are a couple octaves higher. And so it's like, learning how to kind of focus the sounds.

Sam Bartlett

I never figured that out. What I do mostly when I play the the Jew's harp is I just, I "eef" [Sam makes mouth rhythm sounds]. I just get a cool rhythm going and literally, literally, my jaw harp playing ended there with eefing. But, I have a long history with these things and I realized this one right here is an F and it was given to me by Wayne Hanken, who's in the contra dance community. He played the jaw harp in Cirque du Soleil shows and it was his whole thing for years and years and years. I don't know, I have a whole ridiculous collection of these things and have thought about it for years at the same time as I'm not particularly great at playing them. At any rate, I've been thinking about the jaw harp for years and years and years at the same time as never really like becoming good at playing one particularly, but it's always sort of going on in my head. So that might say a lot about my personality.

Julie Vallimont

Have you played them for contra dance?

Sam Bartlett

Oh, yeah, early on when I realized, oh, it's just this crazy drone and it always sounds good if you play it in rhythm. It just, it sounds amazing. I think I probably brought one to the very first contra dance thing I ever did and probably pulled it out at some point on the microphone because I was such a bad musician I mean, I didn't know that many tunes and so I probably pulled one out at the very first gig.

Julie Vallimont

That's a fun introduction. When I didn't know many tunes I went with a penny whistle so I feel like you were kinder to everyone else than I was.

Sam Bartlett

You know, I tried to play the penny whistle and I still, this morning, I brought my daughter to cross country running practice and there was a penny whistle in the car, and I spied it with my eye over there in the little pocket next to the seat. I've been playing the penny whistle practically my whole life and I'm so bad to this day. It just never took, I just don't have it mentally to play one but it hasn't deterred me from trying.

Julie Vallimont

So let's talk about what are the instruments that you are undeterred by.

Sam Bartlett

Alright, so that's a good question. The first instrument that I had, that actually took, was probably the guitar, we had a crappy Silvertone guitar lying around in my house so I learned to play that from my sister's boyfriend, learned to play chords when I was probably 10. I was probably mostly playing like blues licks and stuff like that. I also grew up with a mandolin. My grandmother played mandolin in mandolin orchestras in the early 1920s and so we had her mandolin, and I would mess around on that. I never got anything, you know, I never went anywhere with it. I watch all the virtuosos of today, all the 10 year olds on YouTube, who are you know, better than you can even conceive? I wasn't that person. I just had an instrument and I liked the way it sounded and I messed around on it because I couldn't stop. But then I got drums, I got a drum set and I mean, my poor suffering parents. They were dying for

me to learn an instrument. I played drums, I had great rhythm, but very undisciplined. I'd jam along with Jimi Hendrix and Cream and Stevie Wonder, but then I got a banjo when I was 14 as my mother was just feeling like you're not really going anywhere on anything, and she said, I want you to get into something so you start to understand it, and so it becomes a thing. So I got a banjo and I started and that actually took. I started studying it. I was pretty much an autodidact. I took a couple of lessons with this guy at the same music store where I got my jaw harp. His name was Ed Seavey and he went to my high school, my sisters knew him. So I mean, I was a kid, I wasn't in high school yet, or no, I was in high school, but he had graduated. He taught me a couple of lessons. He smoked the entire lesson in this tiny room. He filled the room with smoke and he was really friendly, his hands shook the whole time. He gave me nice advice, but I after a couple of lessons, I just thought, I think I need to just do this myself. Then I started listening really intensely to traditional music and I listened really intensely to episodes of The Beverly Hillbillies, which always featured Earl Scruggs and watched episodes of Hee Haw, which featured other banjo players. So that, in combination with listening to Earl Scruggs and Pete Seeger recordings, I sort of deciphered how it was supposed to sound. So I was really obsessed with the banjo like I've never been so obsessed with something.

Julie Vallimont

The banjo appears now in your artwork, it's a very common image.

Sam Bartlett

Yeah, it became strangely iconic. I've been trying to I can't I don't know. You draw and you make art and crankies and so you know how sometimes you just fall into a weird rut of drawing the same thing over and over again, and so the banjo became a strange icon for me to just to a shape, a friendly shape that I would want to draw and have exist. It became a symbol of friendliness and anarchy and I don't know a whole bunch of things. So the banjo took over my life really when I was 14 and I didn't let up on the five string banjo for years and years I played it until I realized, I went to a contra dance a couple years later, I realized oh my god, the five string banjo was terrible for playing contra dance tunes on. I tried to figure out those tunes and was like, this is awful, this is...it's too complicated. So I went back to my grandmother's mandolin and I thought now this thing can play melody notes. I can figure out these tunes on this and I was terrible at that. I remember my girlfriend, I don't know, sometime in my teens or late teens told me, she said you know you're never gonna figure out the mandolin you should just stay with the banjo, you sound good at the banjo, the mandolin is just basically irritating and she wasn't wrong. But then I began a path of the mandolin and then I found that the meeting of the two worlds was the tenor banjo which you play like a mandolin but is loud like a banjo. I became obsessed with the tenor banjo, ditched the five string banjo. Really stopped playing it altogether and went all the way into the tenor banjo, which nobody seemed to play. I was a total outcast instrumentally. Then I found out there's this tradition in Ireland where people are really good at the tenor banjo. And then I realized I'd seen you know, Dixieland musicians, I saw the Preservation Hall Jazz band, they had a jazz banjo, I'm like, Oh, well, that's interesting, they totally wail on it with that kind of music and so I realized there were all these cool traditions that were really different than things that I knew about. So I started going after kind of both of those ways of thinking about the banjo. Then, when I met my wife, Abby [Ladin], who was the person I was going to get married to, she was really deep in old time culture, and grew up going to festivals and had clogged from day one and just been to old time music events and clogging events. I dusted off my five string banjo I thought, Oh, well, this this fits way better with this old time

stuff. I knew about old time music, but then I got together with the five string banjo again in a way to meld with the old time community. That's a little look at the instruments that I've been most obsessed with, the tenor banjo, the five string banjo, and the mandolin and the guitar.

Julie Vallimont

So when you started playing tenor banjo for contra dances was anyone around you doing it at the time?

Sam Bartlett

Yes. At first nobody. Then [Mick Moloney](#), this incredible virtuoso banjo player would come to town and I would watch him and be like, completely discouraged, because he was so ridiculously good. I just felt like, what I do and what he does, there's nothing in common. I make it sound like a racketty little machine. And he is just, beautiful, beautiful notes pouring out of his instrument. Then I went to a Ashokan in 1988, I went to Celtic week and at Celtic week, I met a guy who I had seen at contra dances in western Massachusetts when I was going down there to go and it was this guy named Danny Noveck, he lives in Boston now and Danny was a really good tenor banjo player, a true master. I started picking his brain at [Ashokan](#), just asking him, so what's what's the deal? He told me about how to make your strings the right gauge, what kind of pick to use and he sort of started filling me in and also at that week was a young guy, a teenager named [Seamus Egan](#) who was teaching with his friend, [Eileen Ivers](#). They were both teenagers and they were completely ne'er do well, getting drunk way too often, and totally in trouble. But Seamus, I took a little mini lesson with him, and he was so generous and gentle and he listened to my playing and of course he said lovely, meaning it was terrible. But he was really nice and he talked about doing ornamentation with my left hand and he gave me some pointers that I'm still working out after all these years, I still can't do them. That was a kind of a turning point when I met Danny and saw Seamus Egan play. But still, tenor banjo is just not an instrument that's very common at dances. I think the expression is it's hard to play fast. You really have to have great technique. I think if you're a good enough musician to play a tenor banjo, you could be doing something else. That's the way I kind of feel about it. I think it's quite a hard instrument. I got so into the tenor banjo, it was really my signature thing and with the tenor banjo I got a gig with [Wild Asparagus](#), because they heard the tenor banjo and thought that's a great sound and they were like the only people who thought that. Ann Percival just thought a tenor banjo was so obnoxious, I think it will fit with our whole thing. Because [David] Cantieni played the oboe and the tenor banjo and the oboe sounded really good together. They almost were like the same thing and so with the piano and the oboe and the concertina and tenor banjo, it was actually an incredible sound. There was no regular fiddler with the band at that point. We really clicked rhythmically, we had this really cool groove and the instruments were so dry that the dryness of the tone sounded great together. We really grooved on the tenor banjo thing and then I played it for a bunch of years and when I started flying more to gigs I stopped working with Wild Asparagus so much I kind of abandoned the tenor banjo except for playing Irish music at home because flying with a tenor banjo and mandolin was really awful. Then it became impossible after you know 9/11. Tenor banjo became sort of my home instrument and mandolin to be my on the road instrument. It's funny with all the quarantine, all the online gigs that we've been doing the past couple of years I play tenor banjo a lot because I'm at home. I play my banjos but traveling with banjos is hard, they're heavy and big so I've had a renaissance of playing the tenor banjo.

Julie Vallimont

I feel like the mandolin is something you can just take out of the case and play in the airport while you're waiting for a flight and noodle outside. A tenor banjo in an airport might cause a ruckus.

Sam Bartlett

Exactly. Early tenor banjo story, I was playing at one of the first dance flurries, I thought it was the first one but [Paul Rosenberg](#) corrected me saying he thought it was the second one. I was playing with [Jay and Molly](#) and Sue Sternberg, a bunch of us were playing in a band, just sort of a pickup band for a dance and I was playing tenor banjo. Paul Rosenberg turned around after the first tune and he looked at me said, "Are you just gonna do that all night long? Are you just gonna keep playing the banjo? Like, you're not gonna stop?" I think he really disliked it. I reminded him of that at the dance flurry Zoom. I was able to say that to him and he thought that was hilarious. He didn't have any recollection.

Julie Vallimont

Has he changed his mind now or does he stand by his original impression?

Sam Bartlett

I don't know. I keep a penny whistle in my car, as I said, I think I'm just drawn to obnoxious music. I was playing a penny whistle at a red light in Bloomington with a window open on my car. I was playing one of my lame tunes and there was a guy sitting on his porch like 50 feet away. And he said, "Hey, shouldn't you be doing that at home?"

Julie Vallimont

Wow.

Sam Bartlett

So you have to have thick skin as a musician who likes obnoxious sounds.

Julie Vallimont

It's true, you can play jaw harp in the car too.

Sam Bartlett

Jaw harp is great in the car.

Julie Vallimont

You just got to watch your teeth. I always fantasize about getting one of those harmonica holders that folk musicians like Bob Dylan use.

Sam Bartlett

Oh hell yeah.

Julie Vallimont

I'd be great to put a jaw harp in a harmonica holder. But man, that metal right next to your teeth, that seems dangerous.

Sam Bartlett

I know. I love all the instruments you can carry in your pocket. I really wish that I studied them more carefully or had more aptitude. I love the jaw harp. I love the bones, I think they're amazing.

Julie Vallimont

[Sarcastically] It would make you very popular at jams.

Sam Bartlett

Yeah, the worst instrument you could ever bring to a jam session. The bones are really heavily in Irish music. When I first started listening to Irish music, the Chieftains would have a bones player. They were big and then and I always associated it with Irish music. I never knew the connection with minstrel music. A minstrel band would be like bones, tambourine, banjo. I didn't realize that the origin of it was this whole crazy American, the African American tradition, musical tradition. It definitely lodged in Ireland like crazy. There are a lot of virtuoso bones players in Quebec too. I remember [Sabin Jacques](#) the accordion player, he's a really good bones player. I've been at bones workshops that he's given he says that he says it's just like casting a fishing rod, he says think about it like a fishing rod flicking the fishing line into the water. I love that as a Quebecois guy who obviously goes fishing, it was such a funny image to me, flicking his wrist. [Benoit Bourque](#) is a really great bones player. Do you know him?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, and step dancer.

Sam Bartlett

Really awesome.

Julie Vallimont

It's funny, Quebec music has a lot of these interesting traditional instruments that are very at home in it, as well as jaw harps. I think one of the other ways that jaw harps make their way into contra dancing is through Quebec music. There are a lot of bands in Quebec that use the jaw harp as a drone and it's just such a great sound. I love it when they add it with "turlutte," with like, mouth singing and jaw harp. It's just the most amazing sound.

Sam Bartlett

It's really true, there are a bunch of people play it quite commonly up there. I totally dig the Quebecois thing. I grew up in Vermont and so that was the first music scene outside of Vermont that I ever saw was in Quebec. I would drive up to a jam session in Montreal, and it alternated weekly. One week, it would be Quebecois, the other week would be Irish and it was in this really cool bar. I remember there were people who were really amazing musicians and they had the odd instruments too like the the jaw harps and the bones and people were really good spoons players too. I think of the spoons as being like, the most obnoxious instrument, even worse than the bones but the thing is there people know how to play them there and they sound beautiful. You know, they figured it out and they've all got these cool little hand motions where they bring them through their fingers and go, racketeka teka teka, and it's very satisfying to hear. I dig the whole Quebecois thing is great and I just love the music up there.

Julie Vallimont

How did you get into playing tunes in traditional music? It sounds like you didn't necessarily grow up doing it?

Sam Bartlett

Well, I did. What happened was my father grew up on a farm and he had this weird, idealistic love of sort of agrarian culture. He was always trying to connect with that. He became a professor, was a professor at the University of Vermont but he was really into music from how people used to do it and so he collected field recordings, really obsessed with Alan Lomax things and anything that was just someone completely unaffectedly playing music. So we had tons of these kinds of recordings and I was kind of brainwashed to hearing traditional music at an early age and heard a lot of banjo, a lot of bagpipes, a lot of fiddlers, a lot of people just like walking song Scottish music, hymns, just untrained music was part of my upbringing. I heard so much of that, that it felt kind of normal. But then I listened to bluegrass, my uncle gave me a [Flatt and Scruggs](#) album. But it was really at a contra dance was the first place that I sort of saw live music as part of a community. I was 16, I just got my driver's license and I drove, it was one of the first things that I ever did with my driver's license, I went to a contra dance with a friend of mine. We went there and I said, you know, my family didn't dance, my mother was Baptist and nobody did any dancing. There was just no nothing like that ever happened. I was worried that I wouldn't be able to dance because I hadn't grown up doing it. It wasn't part of the vocabulary of our bodies. My friend, Patti, who I'm friends with on Facebook now, who I went to the contra dance with, she said, well, you know, it's not that hard, it's basically just walking. There's not a special step, you walk, she had contra danced as a little kid. She was kind of sarcastic and she said, you know how to walk, right? Like you're gonna be able to dance. But the funny thing was, we went to the contra dance and it, [Pete Sutherland](#) was the caller and he grew up in my same town in Shelburne, Vermont. His mother was my librarian, and I kind of knew the Sutherland family. Pete, we kind of knew each other, kind of didn't. It was a small community but I got to the dance and I totally was one of those people at a contra dance who goes in the wrong direction, and screws up the entire thing. And it was it was also one of those contra dances is in a church basement, where there were poles everywhere. One of the first things that happened was I went the wrong direction and rammed into a pole and fell on the ground and was like, owwww and I remember Pete coming up to me and he led me through the dance by my shoulders to get me going in the right direction. He was very nice, but it was sort of like being in a gym class. He just didn't want me to screw up everybody. He took pity on me, but at the same time, he said, I'm going to just help this guy out by leading him around and I really liked it. I thought it was fun. I love the community of dancers and all the hippies in Vermont back in 1976. It was a kind of an exciting time. So it was at the contra dance that the music happened but it was also from the contra dance scene I started going to festivals and hearing Quebecois, there were a lot of Quebecois musicians living in Burlington, Vermont. So the Beaudoin family was there, the [Louis Beaudoin](#) and he had all these cousins and brothers, and I started taking step dance lessons with his daughter, Lisa Beaudoin I was like, the oldest guy, most of the people who took step dance lessons with her were seven year old girls, but I was this 18 year old guy and I did that for, I don't know, for a couple of years, I was never very good at it, but I really, really liked it. After Quebecois culture I started getting really interested in the Irish stuff, because I had also grown up listening to traditional Irish music, because, again, my father. So Irish music was a natural place to go and he had every single Clancy

Brothers record growing up, I listened to the Clancy Brothers to such a degree that I thought my family was Irish and in fact, we weren't but I really related to all the Irish songs and to the whole scene, and so Irish music became a real obsession with me. Bluegrass, I tried to play bluegrass, but bluegrass it didn't fit with my community mindedness. It was too much about taking solos. I don't know if it's partially I wasn't good at taking solos, or I just wasn't into that way of playing music. I'm more into sort of everybody playing together, or I'm into texture and communication. I tried to play in a bluegrass band, but I was kind of a failure and I also didn't sing. I like to sing, but I don't have that natural thing that says, I can hear the harmony, harmony 1/3 above, harmony 1/3 below, I don't have that. I did join a bluegrass band when I was in my teens and they said, alright, you get the harmony on the chorus, and I said, oh, I don't think I can do that and they said, sure you can. I was a pretty good banjo player and they just assumed because I could do that I'd be able to do the harmony. I remember we were doing the song by Lefty Frizzell called "Gone Gone Gone" and all the words are just "gone, gone, gone." That was all you had to do and I had to do the harmony. Every time I came in, I was just totally off. They just stopped and said, I guess you can't do that, can you?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, so you found your home in other schools of music.

Sam Bartlett

Tunes! I love tunes. I'm crazy about tunes. I really am. They're little math problems and they register in my brain. I don't remember words to songs, I don't remember people's names. I remember tune names, I don't know why. I remember how tunes go it. It's really weird that that's how my memory goes. My youngest son Stefan remembers the names to all sports figures, and all people. He has this weird ability along those lines. I do not have that but tunes fit into my brain.

Julie Vallimont

That's really convenient. I wish I were good at remembering names. I'm terrible at it.

Sam Bartlett

You're not good at remembering proper names, like names of people?

Julie Vallimont

Names of anything, really. When I was a naturalist I used to lead birding trips and I'm a terrible birder because I can't remember what any of them are called. Even when I would know I would forget what I would know. Tune names are different, if I've memorized the tune then my brain associates them together. In fact, sometimes I forget I know a tune unless I remember its name and then that is like how I can remember that I know the tune. There's a lot of nameless tunes, especially from Quebec, where the name doesn't come along with the tune when you learn it. I forget that I know them and then someone starts it up at a session and I'm like, Oh, I love that one. But somehow without a name for it my brain doesn't remember that I know it and so I have to rely on other people to remind me.

Sam Bartlett

Oh, that's so interesting and you're such a brainy person. I'm so proud. That's interesting, I like hearing that. I like hearing about people who have weaknesses.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, yeah. Well, we could have a whole podcast about my weaknesses. Or it's a question of turning them into your strengths, like playing tenor banjo and jaw harp for a living.

Sam Bartlett

I think that is the whole thing, is your weaknesses are your strengths. And that is such a strange contradiction, seems impossible, but it's definitely true. Well Julie, I just think of you as being brainy. You're a problem solver and so it's just interesting to hear you.

Julie Vallimont

Well, my brain likes concepts. So, when I was a naturalist, I was interested in ecology and how the whole ecosystem is working together and how everything's working together. That's why I love things like in music, I love thinking about band dynamics and the creative process and how people create and interact with each other. I'm better at those kinds of things. That's what my brain likes to obsess about because it does obsess about things. My brain is like a border collie, it'll chew the furniture.

Sam Bartlett

Cool. When you're playing a tune, like you wrote this really beautiful waltz. It's like Greenwood.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, yeah. Greenwood, it's on the [Buddy System](#) record.

Sam Bartlett

It's such a beautiful tune. When you play that do you change the chords as you go along or are they set?

Julie Vallimont

It's whatever my brain feels in the moment. So often, my brain feels the same way every time I play it, but I will sometimes change things if I feel moved to do it. I don't intentionally try to change things like a lot of times when I write tunes, I write the chords along with it. Like they're just so connected to each other. That the chord and the tune to me are one on the same most of the time.

Sam Bartlett

Yes, well, I definitely feel like certain chords are often very important for the emotional impact of a tune and if someone doesn't play the chord, you're like, noooooo, I have to have that chord.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it goes there.

Sam Bartlett

On the other hand, a cool thing about good dance musicians is channeling the energy and moving it through the emotion of new chords, like when you expect one, and then you do another one and the whole emotion shifts. I always admire that ability to do that.

Julie Vallimont

I love getting inspired in the moment, especially if I'm playing with other people, and they do something or sometimes, for contra dance, you've been playing for a while and the tune's good, but you feel like it's time to shake something up so I'll just start trying chord subs just to poke everybody, even if they're terrible, just to see if I can force myself to come up with something new.

Sam Bartlett

Well, it's shifting the emotion, the emotional energy, is very exciting. That's something that I love about contra dance music. It's also one of the harder things to do. It's really easy to do, like really botch the shit out of it, pardon my French, but it's so awesome when people know how to do it, you know, beautiful.

Julie Vallimont

What's your approach when you're playing for dances?

Sam Bartlett

It depends on the genre. In old time music, we decide on what chords we're gonna do, and we don't change them ever. We figure out the emotional harmonics and go with it and set it pretty much. Abby and I, my wife, Abby Ladin, and I work together with an old time band called The Humdingers with this really great fiddler, Brad Leftwich, and his wife, Linda Higginbotham, and Abby and I figure out stuff on the fly, sometimes when we're jamming, but we'll set it and once we set it, that's what we're gonna do. She has an amazing ability to hear the chords for old time music, because it's a different way of placing chords for this traditional old time stuff, it's more conservative and sometimes it's just weird. Like often you play jarring chords, like the melody might have a flat VII in it, but you play a V chord, so they conflict but that's how you do it, that tension is what everybody loves. That's actually very hard for me to do, that conflicting sound. But it's totally normal in a lot of old time circles. If I'm playing guitar at contra dance, if I'm the guitar player, and I'm part of the backup machine, and I have more power, harmonic power, I'm going to change the chords. I'm gonna be working the chords because that's what's so fun is you want to channel the energy and I know that's what you do. I usually play mandolin because it's light and mandolin has become...I don't even really like the mandolin very much. I feel kind of awful saying that, I don't love the mandolin. I don't go to sleep at night thinking about the mandolin. If I go to sleep at night thinking about the mandolin, I'm mentally trying to tune it. But I play mandolin, probably my favorite thing to do on the mandolin is just to play rhythm. I treat it like a snare drum and then play solos. I have good rhythm in my solos, I'll say that but I don't really care about solos particularly, so if everybody's doing it, I'm like, I'll do it too, we're just partying, but as my way of going about it is to get into a groove with everybody and just ride the groove as hard as we can. I don't have a lot to say, one of the jokes I think when we're playing with [Rodney Miller](#) or something is I'll say I'm gonna do it, I have more to say, I have another solo and I'm totally joking because I don't have more to say. Whereas Rodney, he's got tons to say on his fiddle that's what he does is he says stuff with his fiddle.

Julie Vallimont

So it's interesting, thinking of that groove-based sound. You play a lot with Notorious and then also with [The Stringrays](#), both bands have solid rhythm sections like the rhythm lock groove and then very

inventive fiddlers, if you look at [Eden MacAdam-Somer](#) and Rodney Miller, both inventive in very different ways.

Sam Bartlett

Yes, it's interesting. I'm a second fiddler on my mandolin, that's what I like to do. I like to get right up next to the fiddle, the melody, and to imitate everything they're doing. That's kind of my thing that I do the most is just, it's like the game you play when someone's saying something and you sort of say it with them. I do that on the mandolin. I'm terrible at doing it with my voice, but I'm really good at doing it with a mandolin. I'll just imitate their rhythm and I'll get most of the notes and so I just nudge right underneath them so we sound like this big block of power and so with Eden, she's tricky to follow, but I will get under underneath her and and try to follow as closely as I can and Rodney the same thing. I had a very close relationship with Nat Hewitt who died a few years ago in the band The Reckless Ramblers and Nat and I had really tight fiddle and mandolin. It would just sound like we were one thing a lot.

Julie Vallimont

Were you playing unison melody or are you playing harmony under his melody?

Sam Bartlett

A little of both, I would alter it. I can play better harmony with my instrument than I can with my voice. I would do unison, octave, an octave below a lot, or a harmony, all three of those things.

Julie Vallimont

Those kind of relationships are special when you have someone that you just have that perfect lock with.

Sam Bartlett

Yes, I think now that we're talking, I'm having the small epiphany as that's why I always say I don't like the mandolin, which is so insulting to the mandolin. I realize the mandolin is really good for imitating people and it's really good for imitating a fiddle. It's really good for adding a grit to the sound of a fiddle to make it just more rhythmic and more powerful. I need to give the mandolin more respect. I need to practice it. I think part of the reason I don't like is because I never practice the mandolin, ever, it's just, I don't do it. I used to a long time ago, but I remember after my first child was born, Wade, 20 years ago, I hadn't played mandolin very much and I was at a gig. I was playing really dumb scale exercises like [sings a pattern of upward notes], I just played like [sings a scale], all these dumb scale exercises. Nat Hewitt I realized was watching me and he said, wow, you must be really out of shape to be doing those kinds of things. And I'm like, yeah, I'm trying to get the mandolin back in my fingers because I can't even play it anymore. I want to give the mandolin more respect because it deserves it especially as it's a tool that's very effective in a band, I think.

Julie Vallimont

It blends in a really interesting way with other instruments and also it probably depends on the kind of mandolin you play, is it like a really mellow old Gibson or is it like a really bright strident bluegrass kind of mandolin? That also affects its role.

Sam Bartlett

That's very true. It's funny, my mandolin's birthday is coming up. My mandolin is a Givens mandolin, made by this guy Givens in Idaho. It was made 32 years ago, and I've had it pretty much most of that time, it's not here, it's in a case and it's beautiful. It sounds so good. I've broken it in, I've carried it with me forever, I've had it forever. It has hundreds of thousands of miles on it. A bunch of years ago, I was at [Augusta Dance Week](#) and Dance Week happened at the same time as Bluegrass Week. There was a really well known bluegrass mandolin player at Augusta named Butch Baldassari and he was a really cool guy. He played on the Grand Ole Opry and he was a real amazing mandolin player. He said, "Hey, can I see your mandolin?" He took it and he said, "I knew Bob Givens. I knew the maker, he's a friend of mine." He said "I love his mandolins and he said you want to trade for the evening?" Trade mandolins. I'm like sure. I handed him my Givens mandolin, a humble looking mandolin but it's still a great mandolin and he handed me his, he had a Gibson Lloyd Loar mandolin, which is basically, Max [Newman] and I were in Nashville and we played a Lloyd Loar mandolin, it was on sale for \$175,000 So Butch handed me his Lloyd Loar mandolin. We traded for the evening, and I felt like oh god, I don't even want to play this thing, I'm gonna drool on it and, you know, it was fine. I mean, it was it was a nice mandolin but I kind of missed my own mandolin. He totally was jamming out on my mandolin and at the end of the evening, he handed my mandolin back to me and he said, "Don't ever sell it". He said, "You have a really good mandolin." He sort of blessed it as he handed it back to me and it was very beautiful. I've tried to treat it better since that day. It's coming on its 32nd birthday coming up.

Julie Vallimont

Wow. Well, do you want to get it? We can pause for a second.

Sam Bartlett

Oh, it's right here.

Julie Vallimont

We should have a birthday tune in honor of your mandolin's 32nd birthday. I didn't warn you in advance, so tuning is optional.

Sam Bartlett

I'm not gonna play any different. [Plays a lick on the mandolin.] Yeah, it sounds great.

Sam Bartlett

All right. Here's a tune I used to play with Nat Hewitt called Miss Thompson's, do you know that one? [Sam plays Miss Thompson's on mandolin].

Julie Vallimont

Beautiful, happy birthday, mandolin.

Sam Bartlett

I know, it's a nice little instrument, deserves more respect.

Julie Vallimont

You talked about hundreds of thousands of miles of that mandolin and that reminds me of an urban legend. I feel like you're one of those people who just creates magic everywhere you go.

Sam Bartlett

Oh, it's so nice to say that.

Julie Vallimont

There's all these amazing little urban legends about you. I don't want to out you but I think this one is true, where you have been known to play the mandolin, and write tunes in the car with the mandolin on your knees.

Sam Bartlett

It was a really bad habit that I had for years and years and years and years...[Sam's wife Abby chimes in from the next room]...and then I had children.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, that's a good life choice.

Sam Bartlett

Yeah, about 20 years ago, I stopped doing it. But there was about 20 years that I did do it. So I moved out to Indiana, I think it started, I went to a workshop when I was a teenager. It was with this guy, Andy Sacker. He is a bluegrass mandolin player. And he said, I didn't barely play the mandolin at this point, but he said that my favorite thing about the mandolin is you can keep it on the driver's seat in the car and so you get to a stop sign, you can pull out your mandolin and play a tune. I remember him saying that and I sort of had this thought like, wow, that's an idea, you can't do that with the banjo, you can do that with a mandolin. So I started carrying my mandolin in the car. And then as I drove longer and longer distances, the mandolin would creep into my lap and I would just practice doing something with my right hand as I drove with my left hand. And then I realized if I steer with my knee, I can play the whole thing. It's sort of like drug addiction, a little it creeps in really slowly and pretty soon you're doing really, really dumb things and you don't even know how you got there. I realized not only could I play the mandolin, I could practice the mandolin and not only that I could play tunes on the mandolin and write tunes on the mandolin. It became especially useful when I moved to Indiana and I was still going back to the east to do gigs, and I would have this 20 hour drive. I did this 20 hour drive so many times. There are big stretches where not a lot was happening. I learned, I survived. It would make me really careful when I when I did drive. I had it really figured out ergonomically and I don't advocate this, I don't do it anymore. But yes, I did do it all the time. I wrote probably every good tune I've ever written while driving. I would record it, once I'd write something, I'd record it on a little tape player or something, whatever I had with me. Now, technology has changed, how do I do that or I'd just write down the sequence of notes, I'd write down the names of the notes that I was playing to remember it. You know the thing when you write a tune, and then you find it later and you're listening to it and you have no recollection of having written it?

Julie Vallimont

Oh, yeah.

Sam Bartlett

So that happened to me all the time because I'd be so tired and 20 hours is a long time to be in a car driving down the road. I would listen and be like, wow, what is that tune, where was I thinking? Where did that come from?

Julie Vallimont

I think that's a really interesting creative state when it's like all kind of subconscious, because you're half asleep. It's like this real flow state, really interesting things come out of it.

Sam Bartlett

Yes, that was really good for tune writing, for me and for opening up my musical brain. I think more probably happened during that period of time for me, musically than any time in my life of just being so bored. It's like being in prison and just coming up with ideas. I didn't have anything to do, I didn't have a smartphone, I mean, I didn't have podcasts, I just had my mandolin. I mean, that was it. Sometimes, as I was driving I would just discover, like notes, relationships to other notes, and just the ergonomics of getting from one string to another. I've just really explored a lot without looking at my mandolin, just sort of where things were and how they related to each other. It was kind of an interesting time and for coming up with tunes. I'm really bad at writing music, I never really learned, I don't think I really learned till my kids, and I still can't, I can't read music, particularly. I can read it, but I can't write it accurately. When my kids took violin, they all all took violin at Indiana University through this string program, and I kind of started to learn with them. I said alright, I'm gonna learn to do this. I started to learn about music, how it's written down but I'm, I'm quite bad at it. I published a tune book a couple of years ago and it is so full of things that don't make sense. I'm so embarrassed by that tune book in a way and yet, if I could write an introduction to the tune book now, I would say this is a book of ideas. There's very few complete ideas in this book. Because I can't really write music, it's like the tunes, these are possibilities of how we might approach this. It's like a cookbook that says, try...you know, it's like a fake book. This is a way to get into the tune, but it isn't really the tune. If somebody knows how to read music, they wouldn't play it this way, because I don't know how to actually write it. So it's my book of suggestions, suggested notes, some of these notes are gonna work, some are not. I remember I had a few tunes in the Portland Collections and remember Sue Songer writing me saying, Do you want the notes to go this way or do you want me to make it make more sense,? And I thought, I don't really know, I don't know how this tune goes, I wrote it out this way but I don't know if I would actually play it this way. I'm not one of those people who writes out a tune and says, this is it, this is the way it's got to be. My tunes are often just suggestions, you know?

Julie Vallimont

Do you play them the same way every time?

Sam Bartlett

Some tunes, I do but a lot of the tunes in there I would actually not play that way at all. I would. I would. They're just a pathway into the tune but not the tune. itself. It's kind of embarrassing for me but it was

an important learning experience. I'm trying to put it past me. If you got that tune book, I would just say it's a suggestion, there are good ideas in here for sure.

Julie Vallimont

I think that is what's cool about this as a living tradition, is that I feel like some tunes are living things. It's like trying to take a photograph of a person, and it's just what angle you get it at it, at which time. Even some of my waltzes, which don't have a lot of notes, I play them differently every time I play them and so how do you pick one snapshot to make your yearbook photo for your tune?

Sam Bartlett

Oh, that is such a great analogy. The analogy of one photo of a person doesn't say what a person looks like, we know that a person, you have to have a lot of angles, and it's hard to capture something. I think with tunes, you play a tune and then you write it out how you just played it but then you realize that if you played it fast, you'd never play it that way or if you played it really slowly, you'd never play it that way. So there's sort of the way you play a tune at 120, the way you play a tune at 110, the way you play a tune at 103. My ideal tempo is 104, I just go to 104 like, boom, 104 automatically.

Julie Vallimont

Irish reels are great at 104, nice lilt to them and that old time groove at 104.

Sam Bartlett

I love 104. I can play faster, I know how to do it. Once we establish that rhythm, I can usually get it into my body pretty easily. But at home when I'm just sitting around, boy, do I go slowly. You know that thing where you get to a contra dance weekend, and it's time to start really playing and I immediately have people say, hey, whoa, gotta go faster, it's not gonna work.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, break you out of your spell.

Sam Bartlett

Yeah, the spell. It's always a cruel moment where you realize, I need to play a lot faster than I've been playing.

Julie Vallimont

I always feel that in the fall, because I would just do camps for the summer and not play a lot of contra dances. So I've been at jam session tempos all summer and then of course, being the piano player, I have to do the potatoes. I was like, okay, guys, we need to recalibrate. It's gonna take me a couple minutes to recalibrate to dance tempo.

Sam Bartlett

It's so true. I love jamming tempo but sometimes, 115 seems like we're really rushing this man. Like, do we really want to do this but yeah, the dancers love that.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it's a good walking speed.

Sam Bartlett

I feel very thankful for that app, "the real beat", whatever that thing is.

Julie Vallimont

Is it BPM? [liveBPM]

Sam Bartlett

I love that. I practice with that, just to say, that's my reality check, just say, alright, do I slow down on the B part every single time like, yup, there I do, do I really slow down, or do I really speed up? Like, yes, you do.

Julie Vallimont

We can put a link for this in the show notes. It's basically an app that analyzes where your beat is, and then shows you a graph of your tempo over time. I've seen contra bands just have it out on an iPad on stage. I don't like to look at it during a dance because I feel like it just pulls my attention elsewhere. But it is a great honesty meter, right? Especially when you often get the situation where one person's like we're rushing, and then the other person's like, we're dragging and you can't really tell, something doesn't feel right. It's so great for revealing the truth.

Sam Bartlett

Oh, it's so true. I wish that I had had this app when I was in a dance company with Abby, we were in this dance company called "Rhythm in Shoes" is this really amazing percussive dance company. There was a battle between the musicians and the dancers because they have two different realities, the dancer reality and the musician reality and the lag of time between the two because we're across the stage. We just had different realities for the musicians, the dancers were always slightly off and for the dancers, the musicians were always slightly behind. It was so weird. We had to just reconcile the whole thing, we had to just come to grips with this weird reality. In dance bands you'll always have different perceptions of reality, of perceptions of rhythm on stage too. Eden always says, Sam, you know, you actually rush you rush. I'm like, no, I don't, I drag, she's like, no, you rush. I do both.

Julie Vallimont

I remember a band of mine. I always thought it was Person A who was rushing and Person B was dragging and I of course was the one who was right. That's what we always think, right? After the eight millionth joking, half serious, half funny conversation about this, we're like, we have to get to the bottom of this and do some forensic analysis. I got the Amazing Slow Downer, that app. We recorded ourselves playing in rehearsal, put it in the amazing slow downer and listened to it at 50% speed and it was illuminating. Person A was not rushing, Person B was rushing and that's when I realized the person B, who I always thought was behind the beat actually just played with more swing than Person A.

Sam Bartlett

Yes. And swing can be perceived of as pulling on the rhythm. Right?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it feels like it's pulling it back if one person is playing with more swing, and the other person is playing straighter, because everyone has their own inherent groove, especially depending on what kind of genre of fiddle tunes they play because old time music has a lot more swing than maybe Irish or something.

Sam Bartlett

Yes, and, and the way people play old time music, in a lot of our scenes, it's actually not too much swing, it's very straight. When I come in swinging, it's really like, disastrous, people are able to say, no, we finally figure it out. It's the relationship between the boom and the chick. It's like, your boom is with my boom, but your chick is slightly late even though it's not slowing down, it's just within the beat, the chick is late. We want the boom chick, to be the relationship to be, the chick to happen a little sooner after the boom. The chick happened after the boom sooner. That has been like a major major revelation. It's funny you think like what could be simpler than old time guitar? Boom, chick, boom, chick, boom, but actually old time guitar, in my mind is one of the hardest things to do. Because you do one thing over and over again, there's nothing to it, but it's got to be right every single time. So in a way old time guitar, it's maddeningly hard.

Julie Vallimont

I think about that with bass a lot. Like if you're playing bass for old time or bluegrass or something where it's a lot of I, V over and over and over again. But then you watch them and they're very careful with when they stop each note and how they attack each note and it has to be clean and just rock solid.

Sam Bartlett

My wife Abby's bass playing is amazing. The place she puts the beat, I think it's because she's a percussive dancer, where she puts the beat is like the most perfect place every single time. It is just like, ahhhhhh, it's excitingly perfect. Then I, of course, question it sometimes when it doesn't seem to be grooving. I'm like, wait a second, is she off? Then I realize, no, I'm off and it's such a bummer when you realize no, it's me, it's all me.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, that's the magic, is finding that sweet spot of the beat. Right?

Sam Bartlett

It is, and for me playing good dance music, it all comes down to that simple a thing sometimes. I think you can have great dance music and not have this kind of minutiae thinking, but I do feel like if you really know where the beat is, and really feel it, man it's going to translate over to the dancers too. They're going to just feel that so intensely.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, and that's that magic pocket that you're talking about.

Sam Bartlett

Exactly, it's so nice when you can get there, and it's so awful when you can't.

Julie Vallimont

I feel like once you're in the magic pocket, you can do anything.

Sam Bartlett

That's it, that is the magic space. Everybody's moving as a unit, you're like a herd of bison, a school of fish.

Julie Vallimont

The dancers feel that and respond to it and that's when the whole hall gets together and it's just amazing.

Sam Bartlett

They do, I know, I miss that, I love that. I love that sensation. I think it sometimes happens on Sunday of the dance weekend, more than any other time. If you're lucky it happens on Saturday night, and very, very unusually, it happens on Friday when we actually sounded good tonight.

Julie Vallimont

I feel like the Sunday of a dance weekend is like playing tunes in a session or writing tunes at 4am where your your brain has been chilled out into submission and you can get to that like flow state.

Sam Bartlett

Yes. Oh, that's so true.

Julie Vallimont

I love Sundays at dance weekends. The dancers are tired enough that they're not trying so hard anymore. That makes their timing better because they're not all worrying about flourishing in the same way necessarily and they've gelled together as people and spent time. That's the magic of a dance weekend versus a dance is that you really get to know each other and create this group energy. I love Sunday afternoons at a dance weekend, it is one of my favorite things so we don't have to play all our show offy-ist tunes. The show offy tunes are for Saturday night, right? Sunday afternoon, you just play the best tunes.

Sam Bartlett

Right, we're being real, we've established our relationship with each other. We don't have to prove anything and then all of a sudden, all the emotion opens up and you start to feel all these things. That is perhaps the greatest thing about a good dance weekend is all of a sudden, your love for humanity comes in and love for people, you feel love, seeing things and I miss that and I love that. I love that moment so much.

Julie Vallimont

It's like one of my favorite tunes to play on Sunday afternoons, just the happy kind of emotional ones like Door County Number #2. A [Larry Unger](#) tune for our listeners, tunes like that, just so good.

Sam Bartlett

I know and that's an exceptional tune. I mean, Larry genius, there's like three notes in the tune and some well placed chords but it's like you wish you'd written that tune. Like, ahhhhh, what a great idea. After I hear a good tune, I usually write some version of it myself. Door County's played all over the place. It's been played on the Grand Ole Opry. It's been it's played in old time music, and at festivals. I hear old time musicians playing it who don't know anything about contra dance music. That's kind of cool.

Julie Vallimont

Some of the secret is that Larry writes a lot of tunes and you don't have to put pressure on them all to be magical. But if you crank out 1000 tunes, the odds are likelier that you're going to get these gems that come out at the right time and the right place. If you make tune writing, like a habit as part of your life that you just do, wherever you are all the time.

Sam Bartlett

Yes, that is the whole secret. You got to write a lot of bad tunes and I've been writing a lot of bad tunes, so I've been definitely holding upholding that part.

Julie Vallimont

Thank you for your service.

Sam Bartlett

But sometimes you write a bad tune and it's just like, oh, man, this is such a great bad tune. I really don't love this tune. Years ago, it's funny, I lived in Montague Massachusetts, underneath [David Kaynor's](#), in his house, in a rental there, and it was in the early 90s. Danny Noveck, who became a really good friend of mine, the tenor banjo guy, and Dirk Powell, a really great old time musician, we're all together hanging out for some reason or another. We're in Montague and we decided to write a tune together. We wrote a bunch of tunes together, but we decided to write the worst tune we could write. We wanted to write the most New England, like the dorkiest tune ever written but that was still playable. And so we wrote a tune, we call it the Montague Frolic. But the problem was, it's kind of a good tune. We tried to write a bad tune, and we collectively wrote a nice tune. I can't think of how it goes, I need to learn this tune. Because it was sort of a beautiful moment of life that we wrote the Montague Frolic. I remember at first we thought it was really funny and really bad. We kept playing it and laughing and then one by one we realized, actually, this tune's kind of awesome.

Julie Vallimont

That's brilliant. Yeah, please bring back that tune.

Sam Bartlett

I want to bring back the Montague Frolic. It's in my tune book. I put two of the better tunes in the book I didn't write. I put in a tune that Danny Noveck wrote with me when we were traveling. He wrote while driving. I put it in the Montague Frolic as well, those are two nice tunes. Danny was a good tune writer while driving as well. Not to out him or anything, but I'm totally outing him.

Julie Vallimont

That's amazing, on tenor banjo? I hope not.

Sam Bartlett

Yeah, the tenor banjo, the 17 fret tenor banjo to get really technical about tenor banjo is a short neck tenor banjo. The typical tenor banjo that people play for Irish music is 19 frets. Danny would play a 17 fret, I don't even think Danny owns a tenor banjo anymore, he mostly plays fiddle.

Julie Vallimont

Some folks in the contra world who are listening to this might know of Danny. He doesn't play a lot of contra dances around here these days, but he wrote Sligo Creek. He wrote a few tunes that have made their way into contra pantheon.

Sam Bartlett

I love that tune, Sligo Creek, such a good tune, that might be actually my favorite tune of all time.

Julie Vallimont

Really?

Sam Bartlett

I just love that tune. It plays itself, it's so easy to play.

Julie Vallimont

You've written a few tunes that are part of our pantheon.

Sam Bartlett

I hear ideas that other people have and I tend to channel those ideas into my own tunes. That's my thing. I'm not the most original tune writer, I think but here's an interesting story about Sligo Creek. So I when I became friends with Danny, he'd written that tune and Sue Sternberg, who is the fiddler with Wild Asparagus back then said, "Danny wrote a great tune." He played it and it didn't have a name. It wasn't called Sligo Creek. I said, "What's it called?" He said, "I don't know it doesn't really have a name." And I'm like, Oh, that's interesting and we were all driving to Maine, we were going to Maine to go visit some people. Danny, he played the tune and I wrote it out. I didn't really know how to write music but I wrote out the tune, it had never been written out. It just existed on his instrument. I was the first person to write that tune out. On that trip, along with us, was also a guy named Rob Hayes, who wrote the tune in G minor called, Paddy on the Landfill. Do you know that tune? Rob had written Paddy on the Landfill and that had never been written out either. I wrote that out too on that same trip. Again, I mean, I couldn't really write music, but I labored away trying to write it and wrote out the dots and Paddy on the Landfill was called Paddy on the Landfill, which is a great tune in G minor, and Danny's

tune didn't have a name, but he called it Fred and Wilma after the Flintstones. He realized that was a terrible name. He understood that tunes have to have good names if people are gonna play them. So he said, I'm not going to call it that, like after I'd written it down, it's not called Fred and Wilma. His banjo had been stolen out of his car in New York City and he had an Orpheum number two banjo. He said, I'm calling the tune the old Orpheum number two. I'm like, okay. Then he called me again later on and he said, well, the tune's being recorded by [John Whelan](#), this great Irish accordion player so I feel like it has to have a better name. So he said, I'm calling it Sligo Creek, which is a place in DC, and he wanted it sound kind of Irish, but he wanted it to relate to DC where he was living too so so that's the origin of that name Sligo Creek.

Julie Vallimont

I remember being on tour and we drove by and I'm like, that's Sligo Creek! I'd never even been there, but you see the sign and it looks picturesque.

Sam Bartlett

I know. I love that tune. I think it's so easy to play it and it's a durable tune, like you could play not the world's greatest version, and it would still work. You'd still recognize it as like Sligo Creek.

Julie Vallimont

It's fun for chord players.

Sam Bartlett

Great chords, emotional release.

Julie Vallimont

All the things that make a good tune for contra dancing.

Sam Bartlett

Exactly. So true. Danny Noveck, I hold him very highly up in the music, the tenor banjo and the tune writing and just all around goofball, I don't know, pantheon.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, what did you and Danny used to do together?

Sam Bartlett

Well, interestingly, in 1989, some friends of mine went to the Peace Corps in the Lesotho. They went to go work there, and they're really good friends and another friend of mine, and I said, Oh, man, I'd really love to go visit them. I really didn't have enough money to buy a ticket. A friend of mine who had more money than I did said, "You mean, you'd go to Lesotho if you had a ticket? That's the only thing holding you back?" I said, "Yeah, probably". She called me the next day and said, I bought you a plane ticket, you're gonna go to Johannesburg, I have a ticket for you, you can go and visit Sherry and Phil. Meanwhile, Danny heard that I was going there and he said, I just inherited a little bit of money from one of my relatives, and I have enough money to go with you, can I come to? And I'm like, Yeah, let's go. So we both went to South Africa, I had no money. I went there with like, \$100 in my pocket. We

went to Lesotho, we took a miners bus filled with miners, people who work in mines out of Soweto. We went down to Lesotho, and Mandela was still in prison. We began an odyssey of hitchhiking around Botswana and Zimbabwe. So that's one of the early experiences with Danny after I met him at a Ashokan. We hitchhiked around Zimbabwe on very little amounts of money. That cemented our relationship.

Julie Vallimont

That'll build a friendship, or end one, I guess if it doesn't go well.

Sam Bartlett

It could have done both on that trip. But we ended up still being pals and lived together in Boston after that.

Julie Vallimont

Did you play for dances when you lived in Boston?

Sam Bartlett

Oh, yeah, big time. I was so lucky that when I went to a Ashokan, I went to Western and Swing Week, and [Mary Lea](#) was there who's such a generous human being. When I arrived in Boston, Mary said, you can come and sit in with Yankee Ingenuity. She was so generous, as was [Kate Barnes](#). They're both so generous and friendly. They were given a monthly CDSS gig and they said, hey, why don't you come and do it with us and we'll be that will be called The Panel of Experts. So Mary, Kate, and I had a band called The Panel of Experts, and I did not deserve to be in that band. I was such a rookie, playing tenor banjo but they gave me gigs. It was really, really generous on their part to include me, two total experts of English country dance music, contra dance music, and they said, Yeah, we'll play with you, you who knows not that much.

Julie Vallimont

I bet you learned a lot playing with them.

Sam Bartlett

It was so good. Oh, man, it was wonderful. I learned a lot just about how to be in a group, and how to be loose, because often they would play tunes I didn't know. So just how to not get too worried about that, get ready to improvise. I think that that might have developed my second fiddle chops, realizing I just have to support Mary because I don't know this melody, and I'm just hanging on by my fingernails, and also realizing to play along with Kate, to be part of the rhythm section always and to imitate what the piano was doing and so that lasted a couple of years. We did a bunch of gigs, we flew, we went to California, we we did gigs all around, all around the US, actually. But The Panel of Experts, we didn't make a recording, other than we were at Augusta, and we did there was a recording, they used to have live recordings at Augusta from the concerts and we did that. I wish I still had that, it was a really good concert, it was beautiful. After playing with them. I fell in with Wild Asparagus and started playing with them and play with Kerry Elkin in Fresh Fish.

Julie Vallimont

Right, we haven't talked about Fresh Fish yet.

Sam Bartlett

And then started hooking back to my old Vermont pals and who had formed the [Clayfoot Strutters](#). I started going back and playing with Pete Sutherland who was the caller of that first contra dance. When I lived in Vermont, I formed a band called the Celtic Menace with Jeremiah McLane. Jeremiah and [Jamie Gans](#), Jamie Gans is a really awesome fiddler from who lived in Quebec for a long time. He actually now lives in Bloomington, Indiana. Jamie and Jeremiah and I had a band and we played with Lee Blackwell, who was the drummer of the Clayfoot Strutters and so the Celtic Menace, we gigged around for a couple of years, playing in Vermont, never really leaving Vermont and then I left. I moved to Boston and then when Pete Sutherland moved back from Indiana they formed the Clayfoot Strutters which still kind of exists, barely, probably. We made a recording, I made a recording with the Clayfoot Strutters that is going to be reissued, it's going to come out again. It was called "Honk if you Honk."

Julie Vallimont

Whose idea was that? Where did that come from?

Sam Bartlett

We started using the expression, "that really honked" as an affirmation of something, like "man that honked" and we used it all the time, it became a strange thing that people just repeated. Pete inimitably just sort of thought like, that would be a cool title, you know, sort of meta, like honk if you honk if you honk if you honk. He's good at that kind of thing. They made a recording recently Pete's band, Pete's Posse called, you never really, you know, you never know, or something like that. I just love that. "Honk if you Honk," I'm sure it was Pete's idea. Maybe it was Lee Blackwell. He's sort of clever in that way, too.

Julie Vallimont

Did you and Jeremiah ever talk about South African music together and explore that?

Sam Bartlett

Well, that's interesting you say that, because in the Clayfoot Strutters, we spent a lot of time listening to South African music and Zimbabwe music and I had been to Zimbabwe. So it sort of gave me this credential that I didn't deserve. But Lee Blackwell, I remember him taking me aside and saying, if you use the other side of the guitar pick, you're going to get in on the rhythm I want you to play to get this offbeat thing. He really analyzed how to get the rhythm in some of the music we were listening to. It was really instructive to hang with those guys, they're all kind of brainy musicians and I'm not. They really analyzed music in a cool way. We would deconstruct Appalachian fiddle tunes, and then sort of overlay ideas that we heard in Zimbabwe music from Zimbabwe, and South Africa.

Julie Vallimont

I am not an expert on Zimbabwean music. I know very little about it, except maybe the most basic things, but the three over two concept and how that fits in with jig rhythm.

Sam Bartlett

Yes, exactly. I remember messing with that heavily. I think I was always in over my head but they always said don't think too much about it. Don't think, don't think, just get get in start doing it.

Julie Vallimont

Just feel it. I feel like those rhythms to me, you know those like optical illusions where you look at it one way and it's a vase, and then you look at another way and it's two heads, it's like a negative and positive space. That's how I feel about this music.

Sam Bartlett

That is the best analogy. That's so good. It's so true yet and again, thinking is not going to help you sometimes. I mean, sometimes you have to analyze it. But again, you know, When we would jam was we would understand everything through jamming, it's like, oh, now I'm doing it. Oh, now I'm not doing it. Now I'm doing it, you know?

Julie Vallimont

Just like those 3-D eye puzzles, you can't force your brain to see it. You mostly have to trance out and let your brain like lock in with different wavelengths.

Sam Bartlett

Oh, the magic eye, totally true. That's totally true. I could never see the magic eye forever and ever and ever. I looked at it, I tried to figure it out. It didn't work, didn't work. I was at a party in Philadelphia at Rafe Stefanini's house, an old time music party. I was kind of drunk. I was in the bathroom, I was peeing and I picked up a magic eye book and as I was peeing, I looked at it and was like oooooooh, I see it!

Julie Vallimont

I feel like that would be a great comic strip for Stuntology of ways to unlock the subconscious brain. This is great. Sam is actually writing this down.

Sam Bartlett

Well, yeah, otherwise I'll forget. That is so true, unlocking the subconscious brain. I think a lot of great music happens when you're not thinking too much. There was a guy named [Dave Grant](#), who's a really great bass player. He died in a tragic work accident, but he was the bass player for the Clayfoot Strutter's and he is from Charlottesville, Virginia, and Dave made a recording called "[Bubbalon by Bass](#)" which is sort of take off on Babylon by Bus, which is a reggae recording. So it's bubba, like bubbalon, Bubba nickname for Southern dude, Bubbalon by Bass, Dave being a bass player. What he did was, every time anybody would visit him down in Charlottesville, he would bring them into the recording studio. He made this collaborative recording, he put down a great rhythm section with a drummer down there and he put down his bass parts and then he would add people whenever they came through town. So we were down there with Wild Asparagus and he brought some of us into the

studio to do some stuff. He had great people on the recordings, like [Matt Glaser](#) was on the recordings, Dave Matthews, Roger and Linda Williams, really amazing. I'm on a recording with Dave Matthews. I'm playing banjo uke and I also played my tenor banjo through a thing called an envelope filter. So it turned it like so you can't even hear the melodic notes. It just sounds like a weird percussion instrument. But Dave's whole thing was he wouldn't let you hear the thing ahead of time. He would tell you what key it was in and he would tell you the feel and maybe he would play like three seconds of it to give you the idea of the groove. Then he would alter your brain and he would purposely alter your brain and then he would say Alright, go into the studio, he put on the headphones, he'd turn it up and he'd say, Alright, I want you to respond to the music. I played on one piece and he said this is sort of got an African like South African thing. Why do you think jig, it might not be in jig time but think jig. I started playing this jig, I started just jumping in on this jig on my tenor banjo, I was totally on the wrong beat, everything was wrong, but I kept going. I was in the groove but I was in the wrong place and I was bouncing along and Dave was cracking up and and I think I was in the right key but it was like just what he wanted, this backwards jig as a rhythm section and he kept it and it's part of the recording. I have the recording somewhere and it is amazing. It's such great music, I over-listened to it for years and years. He was going for just this spontaneous movement to the music, you respond and he had great faith in you responding well and then he would edit it. I took that model when I made recordings and I'm going to give you some recordings for this but when I made the recording of [Evil Diane](#) and [Dance-a-Rama](#), well even more so with Evil Diane. Whenever anybody would come to town I would have them come and sit down and put down a track, so that's how I got people to play on Evil Diane. Jeremiah McLane was in town and the studio had a Hammond B3 organ but it was in the wrong key. At any rate, I would get people to come in and play and they wouldn't really know the music very well but I would just have them play along with it and [Chris Layer](#) this really great bagpipe player came in and he put down stuff. [David Greeley](#), this awesome Cajun fiddler from Louisiana is on it. [Sam Amidon](#) is on it. Sam was in college at the time and had the use of a free studio. I wish I had all the things he sent me because a lot of them were complete and utter nonsense, he would just play like not even in the right key and you know screaming, but I didn't want to use screaming on it. I wanted it to sound just like regular music, you know? I wish I had Sam's response to that originally because I think it would probably be more interesting. So I have Sam and Eric Merrill this really awesome fiddler was living in Boston that time, he's on it. And so Evil Diane, I just plucked people who came through town. I put them on the recording, I let them know, I let them know a little bit more than Dave did. I followed that same model for a whole recording. That recording was a great recording I think because I spent like three years just adding people to it and just a little bit at a time, I was in no hurry.

Julie Vallimont

How are you patient with a three year process? Good for you, I can't do it. I have a solo album I've been working on since January and I'm already antsy that it's not out yet, and it's only been seven months. How do you could do it?

Sam Bartlett

I couldn't do that now I think, I'm more impatient. I wanted it to be right. And it's funny, it paid off because Evil Diane is a great recording.

Julie Vallimont

It's a great recording.

Sam Bartlett

I feel good about that record. I mean, some things feel dated, but mostly you feel the emotion, it makes you feel something. I feel like Dance-a Rama was not as good a recording, but it was the same idea. I sent stuff to people and said put down whatever you want, just put down something and I'll edit it. There's some good stuff there, but I know, for one thing, I tried to do things too fast. A lot of people I recorded didn't have a great recording setup, like Eden put down tracks for hers, and she was totally pregnant, ready to give birth. She recorded in her office, on the microphone on her computer with reverb everywhere. Dealing with reverb and a crappy microphone was awful. My engineer wanted to like kill me. He's like, why did you do that? Why do you have a great musician playing through the worst setup possible? I said, Well, that's just what we had, I mean, she's about to give birth, you know?

Julie Vallimont

I feel a little bit of that engineering at Contra Pulse. Everyone's audio is different.

Sam Bartlett

Oh, yeah. I hope this is okay.

Julie Vallimont

Whatever, we'll make it work. Evil Diane, there's so many unexpected things about it like the combination of people is kind of unexpected and all these little musical moments that are unexpected. It's just great.

Sam Bartlett

I know. And I had a other really good engineer. There's a guy named [Dave Webber](#) in town who's a really world class engineer. People come from all over the place to come record at his studio and a lot of people from Chicago. He was in a circus for years and years. He is a professional circus performer. He was a ringmaster in like Mexican circus. He's so out there. He will go along with you if you have an idea, he gets a sense of what you want to do. He's really good at assisting you in your in your vision. I sort of made him a producer, I didn't mean to. But he said, Well, Sam, you know, this is so wacko, why don't we put a whole section of this backwards? Why don't I flip it over? I'm like, yeah, and so the two of us, it was sort of a lethal combination. There's a bunch of moments in the recording where it's just like weird stuff is happening. You're not even sure what it is like, and that was really satisfying for me. On another cut like we did Mary Devlin's on that recording and the drum part wasn't working. I'd had this drummer from Ohio come over, not Pokey but another guy, my friend Kevin and the drum part was wrong. I'm like crap, how are we going to like deal with the drum part and Dave said, oh, I've got this, there's a really great drummer who's in town right now. His name's [Pete Wilhoit](#). He's Sting's son's drummer, he's total pro, he's from Bloomington, but he lives in LA, like studio guy. I'm like, would he do it and he said, Oh, yeah, he owes me and so he brought in like Pete Wilhoit to do the drums and it's incredible. Pete Wilhoit completely nailed this drum part, it's surreal beauty. He did it in one take, probably just wanted to get it done quickly.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, magic.

Sam Bartlett

So that was that was cool, that was cool. And then, other things like David Greeley, I've met David Greeley going to festivals. He played the [Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys](#) this great Cajun band and David is in this career, Cajun band and Cajun music is kind of cool for me because it's sort of like an analog to contra dance music up here is the Cajun scene in Louisiana. People go around doing these dances and they don't pay that well. But there's a whole circuit that people do. Even though a lot of them these guys are amazing musicians, the average Joe down there, or Josephine is an incredible musician, the level is high. David played fiddle, graciously he recorded a part. But when he listened to it when I sent him a proof he said, you know, I think it's not fully lined up. He said, I feel like it's a little...just a click not apart. I said, Yeah, but doesn't it kind of work? I feel like it's slightly off and David said, well if you're okay with it. He said I feel like it's not lined up. So you listen to it and there is something, there's a thing about the rhythm that kind of shimmers and it's that it's not perfectly, perfectly lined up. It's the imperfection of how it came together that makes it so good. So that was good, I was really proud of that. I'm also proud of that recording because I did one tune on it called Drop the Knife, kind of a weird tune and it was...you know, the band [Frigg](#) from Finland? So Antti Järvelä and I became friends at festivals and he came to Bloomington a bunch of times. He used that tune, he taught that tune to this huge [Finnish folk camp in Kaustinen](#), it's a big scene in Finland and so they used my tune there. I just felt very honored that he would use an American tune amid all this Finnish repertoire. He just said, yeah, it fits with our thing. Then I found out, I thought he was he was teaching it to older people, you know, teenagers but then I looked, there was a clip on YouTube of people playing it. They're like nine years old, they're all really young. The level of musicianship over in the Finnish dance community is so high. That kind of pissed me off.

Julie Vallimont

Do any of the Scandinavian traditions make it into your contra dance playing at all?

Sam Bartlett

I love that Scandinavian music. Oh, boy, I love it so much but no, not particularly. I play some of those tunes with my kids. I play some Swedish tunes with them and of course, you know, dance camp, walking tunes. I don't play anything authentically, I just try to play the notes.

Julie Vallimont

David Kaynor was known for his collection of walking tunes.

Sam Bartlett

Oh, God bless him. I mean, he's probably the only reason I know any of those tunes. My sister Ellen lives in Peacham, Vermont. She's a really good fiddler. She lived in Sweden and went to an institute where she learned Swedish fiddle for a year. Growing up, I would play music with my sister and she's kind of an awesome player.

Julie Vallimont

Peacham makes me think of the [Peacham \[Acoustic\] Music Festival](#), I think it was called. A bunch of us went there to hear the very last dance that Nightingale played together.

Sam Bartlett

I've heard that that was their last stand, right?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. We usually have a rule that you shouldn't spend more time driving than at the place, but we drove like two and a half hours or something to get there. We were there for 45 minutes and then we had to turn around and go home, it was just like a spur of the moment thing, but it was totally worth it.

Sam Bartlett

Oh, I'm so glad you were there. So Nightingale, my favorite dance band. I really love Nightingale so much I could scream that's such a good band. You know those recordings, you can go back to those recordings, and they get better as they go. I'm still deciphering what exactly they were doing. I mean, it's wild, how good they are. I think it kind of pisses off, Keith, you know how good those early recordings are. Keith's such a musical genius. All of his projects are great, everything he does is great. I think you know that now that the band doesn't exist, he doesn't want me to say like, man Nightingale is so good, they're great. I think that combination of musicians was just ridiculous. I remember when they were doing their first gigs and Ann Percival called me up, said Nightingale just performed in Greenfield and she said these guys, they're better than we are. She said they are taking it seriously. They are practicing. She said, we don't even know what to make of this. Like, this is crazy how good they are. She was admiring and felt very supportive. I remember her saying they're just, they're better than we are.

Julie Vallimont

Well, in context this is the beginning of the era of the mega dance bands like the famous dance bands.

Sam Bartlett

I think that's true. I think that's when people really started to take it seriously, and Wild Asparagus was always taken seriously. They really started something. I feel like they really invented, they reconfigured contra dance music. They thought about it totally differently. They weren't going to do stuff traditionally, they weren't going to just do what you're supposed to do what people had done, they were doing it their own way, which I really admired. I remember the first time I saw they had oboe, concertina and piano, I'm like, what are they doing? They're not playing, you know, [Don Messer](#) fiddle tunes. Do they know, you're not supposed to do this and they just did what they wanted to do. I really admire them so much and still admire just their raw power and really innovative and bringing Breton music into contra dance music was brilliant. And David, having that transition from the oboe to the bombard was so great and he's taught so many people how to play the bombard. I have a bombard.

Julie Vallimont

You do?

Sam Bartlett

Unfortunately.

Julie Vallimont

You should hang out a shingle as a collector of annoying instruments.

Sam Bartlett

God, I know. I have it, but I mean a gentleman is someone who knows how to play the banjo but leaves it in the case, they say.

Julie Vallimont

I guess when you look at these like big contra dance bands that play nationwide and have been like really seminal, I don't know, I just talking off the cuff but I feel like some of them are arrangement bands like Nightingale with their incredible concepts and arrangements and execution. It doesn't mean they never improvise. Some of them are improvising bands, like I think of Eden and her stratospheric inventions that are always changing and shifting. Then there's groove bands, like the Horseflies where it's just this rhythm section. chugging along. I feel like the Clayfoot Strutters is a band that has moments of all of those things at different times. And for you, as a musician, where do you fit in with all those?

Sam Bartlett

That is such a good question. And it's interesting, I feel like I'm most naturally a groove player. I really want people to...if the groove is not right, I'm out of there. So that is the first thing that is appealing to me. I did a gig with the Horseflies, I was their guitar player at a dance weekend once and it was so satisfying. I've played music with [Jeff \[Claus\] and Judy \[Hyman\]](#) at festivals and stuff, and I just I love, for me, the groove is all important. That's what makes me the most happy. On the other hand, I love the interaction of a contra dance, where people are going off in a lot of directions and just sort of, I like not taking it too seriously. Improvising is fun, I like not knowing what the outcome will be like, I'm inherently a risk taker. I don't mind stepping way the hell out on a branch with a tune I don't know. And someone says, Sam, take a solo and keep going. With Notorious that's the way we do it. It's like, go, go, you don't know how to do it, do it anyway, or Eden and will step up to the microphone and we'll be doing a swing tune, she say, let's trade fours with vocals, and I'm like, all right, and I don't sing, and she'll start scat singing and then I'll respond. And I don't care, I'm utterly shameless, with a good sense of rhythm. I totally dig risk taking. I think my weakest thing is arrangement, and being in a dance company for on off for 10 years, I realized that, dance companies, heavily arranged, everything's arranged. I love arrangements, but boy, am I bad at them. I'm slow to remember, slow to remember stuff. That doesn't come naturally to me to remember arrangements. I'd rather make it up on the fly. So, it's interesting, I love the [Latter Day] Lizards, and I love that they kind of have a rule that there are no rules. We have only one rule, there are no rules. I totally dig that aesthetic and I love that they trust each other enough, they're gonna play one tune, they're gonna drive it into the dirt. It's just an understanding that we're not gonna, like hinder each other, we're gonna play in rhythm and not step on each other's feet. On the other hand, if I'm listening to a recording for many years, I think I tend to like the more arranged recordings rather than the improvised recordings. I think that's why I come back to Nightingale's, I think those arrangements are brilliant I think they have a lot of lasting power and I think that's the lasting power of Evil Diane, too, is it actually was very arranged. So live, I like spontaneity but as a recording, I think it's better if it's planned out.

Julie Vallimont

They're very different media for very different purposes.

Sam Bartlett

I think it's cool when you can spontaneously create something. But the chances are, it's going to be better if you rehearse it and make it and plan it. It's going to last better. I mean, I hate to say that as someone who just wants to randomly create things, but I do...I come back to those Nightingale recordings, because I'm still trying to figure out those arrangements, like what were they doing? Why was that so good? What is that flavor?

Julie Vallimont

A lot of rehearsing, like the fact that they had rehearsed so much, it's like the musicianship plus the arrangements.

Sam Bartlett

That's true. My neighbor is [Grey Larsen](#), who is a really great flute player. He arranged the second Nightingale...he had produced and arranged or worked with them on that second recording. Grey is all about arranging, he's all about minutiae and little touches, and all the little things that make things sound amazing and great and getting really good sounds in the studio. He will get next to your instrument from all the different angles. He's a recording engineer, too. He'll just listen like from every angle and say, Yeah, we got to mic it over here, because I'm hearing this weird frequencies coming out of here. I don't think that way. I feel like put the microphone in front of me. Let's go.

Julie Vallimont

Well, that's it's a nice balance, right? I love people in the studio, who can keep that spontaneous brain and the people in the studio who are always listening and thinking and focusing, and it's a good balance.

Sam Bartlett

You need both. I really think you need both because you want the surprise, you want that spontaneity. I know when we did the [Stringrays](#) CD, we did two of them, actually, one of them's released, but they sent me back into the studio, said, hey, come on, do a real solo. What you're doing now, you're playing it safe, don't play it safe. That's the last thing we need. I know that and so we were playing some tune and without even thinking, again, the whole thing had been recorded so I couldn't make any mistakes. I just started up the neck, I didn't even look at where I was, and just started responding like a monkey, jumping around on vines. We kept it, it was like, this is cool. When I go and listen to that recording, I always want to hear that solo again, like what was I doing, that's nuts!

Julie Vallimont

Those are the moments.

Sam Bartlett

They are. Jay Ungar told me that on one of the Fiddle Fever recordings, there's a crazy banjo solo by Tony Trischka on Meltdown at Indian Point, there's a tune on there called that. Tony does this wild banjo thing and Jay said he was just shooting from the hip. Like, he didn't plan anything he was gonna do and just went for it and you hear it, it's cool, it's gristly. On the other hand, the recording is heavily arranged and so you got to have both elements, I think.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, you have to, but that's a special skill, I think, as a recording musician, to be able to both nail what you need to nail and to be free and creative and spontaneous in the studio. It's a special thing. And cultivating that whole atmosphere, having somebody in your band or your engineer who will like "yes, and" you, where you can feed off each other is so important.

Sam Bartlett

Oh, my god, that's true. It's so easy for musicians to get defeated. I think the "yes, and" concept is really great for musicians. I know that one of the big secrets about musicians, is every musician feels that they're not good enough on some level. I figured it out after years, everybody feels bad about themselves. Everybody's looking for their next gig and feels like, oh, yeah, I'm doing this now but what's my next gig? It doesn't matter who it is, even the greats, they're thinking, yeah, but what am I going to do next? Where are we going after this, really common, so feeling bad about your musicianship is pervasive.

Julie Vallimont

It's true, I suppose I feel like the better the musician, the worse they probably feel about themselves.

Sam Bartlett

Yes, it's so common. It's wild, during the pandemic, when I watched so many people on Instagram and sort of had intimate relationships with musical virtuosi that I follow, realize, wow, they have those same feelings, nobody has any gigs anymore. So everybody's feeling like what the heck. I've watched all these people that I admire just wondering what's going on in their heads. People like [Tristin Scroggins](#) he's a mandolin player from Nashville that I follow, who's like a mandolin genius, incomparable, and [Enda Scahill](#), my favorite tenor banjo player. Do you know him?

Julie Vallimont

I love his recordings.

Sam Bartlett

Oh, he's so good. He's so good. Bela Fleck, everybody knows Bela Fleck is the world's most amazing banjo player. I always think of Enda Scahill as being like the most amazing banjo player. When he plays I have to grip the table, I just can't believe how good he is. But he's tenor banjo, you know?

Julie Vallimont

Beautiful. His playing is so, I don't even have the right words. His ornaments are perfect.

Sam Bartlett

Oh, I know. I listened to him so closely.

Julie Vallimont

That's wonderful. I want to ask you about your favorite tunes to play if you're playing traditional tunes, do you play a lot of New England tunes?

Sam Bartlett

I love New England, they're a little bit like Wohlfahrt for a classical violin player. Wohlfahrt are all these exercises that a classical violin has to use and, and they're not like the most musical things in the world. But New England tunes, I don't feel like they're the best tunes in the world but I like playing them. It's like revisiting a crotchety old grandmother who you adore. Quindaro Hornpipe [sings a tune], no, that's Sailor's Hornpipe but it's like Quindaro is like awkward. It's just awkward to play, or Forester's, these finger twisters. I always come back to New England tunes, they're sort of what I study. I come back to them as exercises. Do I like the melodies? You know, it's not a like or dislike, they're just there, they're part of what you have to do.

Julie Vallimont

Part of what you have to do, that's a very Yankee mentality. That's what you have to do.

Sam Bartlett

I know and I'm not a Yankee. My parents are from the Midwest. I was born in Vermont, but I'm the only member of my family from Vermont. Nobody's from Vermont in my family. I totally dig the New England tunes but not for necessarily the obvious reasons. I just like them as a body of work. I think they're beautiful. I love that Dave Kaynor said, every New England musician should warm up with Money Musk or should play Money Musk every day and Dave is like a real Yankee, you know, mentality. You should work at Money Musk, and Money Musk, it's not easy to play a good, you know...and if you can't play it on the higher octave, play it on the lower octave and get good at it. That runs through me too. I'm always doing things that are not necessarily pretty, but I should be practicing, like, Lady Walpole's Reel in B flat. I always feel like you've got to know how to play Lady Walpole's, you got to know how to play Garfield's Hornpipe. You got to know all those tunes, the Mountain Ranger.

Julie Vallimont

I love that tune.

Sam Bartlett

You got to work those tunes and not cause they're beautiful, but because they're just what you do. When I meet New England musicians, or people who play contra dance music and they don't know those tunes. I'm like, oh, come on, man, you got to know those tunes? That's like, book one in Suzuki. Everybody knows how to play the three minuets on the end, you know?

Julie Vallimont

They do have a lot of arpeggios and scales and they're simple, sturdy, stoic tunes.

Sam Bartlett

Oh, that's so true. Simple, sturdy, stoic tunes. They're stoic. They're stoic. You have to dig to find the emotion. You might spend years finding emotion in those tunes.

Julie Vallimont

But they're so beautiful. They're beautiful in a different way. It's like hearing them with double fiddle and a full band is when to me, I find their true beauty. You play them by yourself and you're like, oh, this is an exercise but you hear a good rhythm section and two or three fiddles and a tenor banjo or something thrown in the mix and it's just incredible.

Sam Bartlett

Oh, I know, for me, hearing the Kaynor family hearing Van, David and and Cammy crank out New England tunes, I'd have goosebumps, just when they would launch into Ross's [Reel] or Batchelder's, I'd be like, Oh my god, or they would play Fisher's Hornpipe in four keys, so it'd be the classic Foregone Conclusions, "pound the dancers into the dirt" medley. I just thought that was the best thing I'd ever heard, triple fiddles, piano, tenor banjo, bass. Oh, my god, amazing, and not played too fast. Often I think they would not go over 110, they really understood the slow groove of the contra dance and to make everybody move like a big unit, like a big school of fish.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, for contra dancing, there's just no other tunes like that, that have that rhythmic machine, they have an engine in them and when the groove is right. I've been thinking in the last few years, it's like New England tunes in the contra dance world, they're kind of out of popularity in a lot of places.

Sam Bartlett

Totally, totally.

Julie Vallimont

It's partly that if you take beautiful fresh ingredients, and then you cook them all wrong and cover them with the wrong sauces, they don't taste right. I feel like if we just don't play them the way that they are in their natural environment, like, if you just play it by yourself without that lilt in the groove and the harmonies, it's not gonna sound great. Just the bands that we have today are different kinds of bands where the New England tunes don't sound as good or something, you know?

Sam Bartlett

Yeah, you're right. That's so true. In fact, before the pandemic we were practicing to go to Shetland Folk Festival, with Rodney and Stringrays, and we were practicing, we got together and we didn't know the pandemic is about to happen and make everything not happen. I remember I asked Rodney, I said, "How do you play Lady Walpole's?" As I was playing it, I was feeling like it wasn't...you know it was so pinky intensive and hard and Rodney had this real streamlined, groovy way of playing it and I'm like, oooh, it's easier that way. I realized he found all these ways to get through B flat to have it swing, and not emphasize the things that are hard, but to use all the things that are fun and sound good. I learned a lot in like, two seconds, I figured out how he made those B flat tunes sing, he didn't emphasize the impossibilities. He emphasized the emotion and the open strings that you get or the open D string I guess is all you get in B flat but I don't know he made them not like a challenge but he made them

beautiful and swing. At that moment, I realized oh, and then we made this beautiful medley with with all these B flat New England tunes, and then we never got to play it. But I've been thinking about it ever since. As we do.

Julie Vallimont

Thinking about the settings where I first fell in love with New England tunes, at Maine Fiddle Camp when everybody's jamming on stage. Or at Ashokan with David Kaynor, and playing New England tunes with him or the open bands at NEFFA or the giant festival orchestras or whatever. I've just had experiences like Maine Fiddle Camp and Ashokan are some of the few places where people will actually jam on New England tunes like they would have an old time tune or jam or an Irish jam or something with joy, like, oh, it's New England tune night. Let's all have a giant New England session. There's this magic, these tunes don't try too hard. They just don't. Sometimes when I play dances, I'm like, oh, what chord should I play? And how does this arrangement go? I have that part of my brain on the arranging part, the cool part, you know. It takes a while to turn that part off, once you do, you get in that flow and you're like, oh, the chords are just the chords, it's okay. Kind of like with old time, they don't need to change a lot. Why should they change? It's just like a feeling of pure joy when everybody is locked in, in that...and I love it.

Sam Bartlett

I love that Maine Fiddle Camp is keeping that alive. I know Ashokan does. I know people do. I went to NEFFA a bunch of years ago, and nobody was playing New England tunes, I was like, hey, wait a second. Maybe they do now? Who knows?

Julie Vallimont

At NEFFA you mostly hear them like at the festival orchestras and things like that, which is why those are so important.

Sam Bartlett

I love it.

Julie Vallimont

Well, this has been so great talking with you. I'm curious as to how you see contra music changing and if you have any sense of where it might go in the future?

Sam Bartlett

I know it's changing and I really admire what people are doing. I totally dig Buddy System that you do with Noah. Totally dig what people are coming up with, it kind of blows my mind hearing its evolution. I won't necessarily travel along with that evolution myself personally. I've seen myself almost going backwards and just trying to play those New England tunes. I'm more interested in traditional Irish music now. In Bloomington, we play really traditional old time music. I'm just trying to get inside that. I think I used to be into totally pushing the boundaries of music. I'm almost 60 years old, and I'm just sort of feeling like I'm sliding backwards and more fascinated by the minutiae of trad. I love what people are doing. But now, it totally makes me so happy when I realize, holy mackerel, listen to this boundary

being pushed. I totally dig when I feel something, I'm always looking to feel something. When I feel something when someone composes a new tune, you hear something like Greenwood played, a beautiful tune. I'm like, oh, you know that that's so beautiful. I love when I hear a new tune and love the new music that's being composed. Myself, I definitely feel like I'm going solidly backwards trying to learn how to play traditional music. I'm okay with that, I dig the traditional music, I can listen to Enda Scahill that's what I'm into, trying to figure out that rhythm, that real intense rhythm, and just learning tunes to play with people and writing tunes, still trying to write the perfect tune, you know?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. Well, that's the core of the tradition and it's an infinitely deep well.

Sam Bartlett

My main thing is, I want to connect with people. I want to connect with people, feel the groove, feel the love of the community. I love so many people who play the music. I think my goal is to just play with people and to learn their tunes and to get in the pocket with other musicians and to just hang with the community, you know?

Julie Vallimont

Well, you have given us so much joy over the years with your crazy solos and your rocking grooves, Stuntology, and crankies and your passion, enthusiasm for everything. You've been very inspiring to a lot of people, it's really great.

Sam Bartlett

Well, I feel inspired too, thank you so much. I appreciate you doing this, this is wonderful. I feel very honored.

Julie Vallimont

Very happy to have you here. Thank you so much, Sam.

Sam Bartlett

Thanks, Julie.

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