

Contra Pulse Episode 36 – Anita Anderson

Julie Vallimont

This episode, Julie sits down with west coast dance pianist Anita Anderson. Anita has been playing piano for contras and English dances for.....a long time! Long enough to have accumulated a list of weekends and weeklong gigs, a number of bands and collaborations, and an immense set of music notebooks. She brings licks from gospel, blues, ragtime, doo-wop, Scandinavian, Cape Breton, and Quebecois music to her backup (and Baroque counterpoint to English playing) and almost never plays a tune the same way twice.

Julie Vallimont

In the contra world, you'll hear Anita with Bag o' Tricks, the End Effects, and Spin (with Rodney Miller); in the ECD world, the Tricky Brits and Roguery. She also writes tunes, the best known of which is the "Bus Stop Reel."

Julie Vallimont

In her interview with Julie, Anita revisits her early musical experiences learning the chord organ where she grew up in Long Beach, California, through her first exposure to contra and ECD in Los Angeles. They discuss the myriad musical collaborations she's involved in and with the help of some short excerpts from contra dance pianists selected by Anita, they explore the many influences and styles that have led to Anita's sound.

Julie Vallimont

Well, hello Anita Anderson and welcome to Contra Pulse.

Anita Anderson

Hey, Julie.

Julie Vallimont

It is so great to see you. Where are you located? Are you in Seattle at the moment?

Anita Anderson

I am in Seattle. I'm in Wallingford, which is a nice area of Seattle.

Julie Vallimont

Lovely Is this your home office that we're seeing the walls of? Lovely. We're all at home right now. I remember I think the first time I met you in person was at [\[Northwest\] Folklife](#), years and years and years ago. I think there was a jam session, and you were playing piano and I was just kind of hanging out watching you. At one point, someone asked me to get up and play and I was so terrified.

Anita Anderson

That's pretty silly.

Julie Vallimont

Right. But I was new and we can all be terrified at any level of playing, but it was just really cool to get to see a little tiny bit of your world, but we've never really gotten to spend much time together. Although I feel like fellow piano players always have a special bond, even if we've never gotten to spend time together. So I'm really looking forward to chatting today and get to hear more about your approach and your playing and how you got started and everything else like that. So why don't we start from the very beginning, how did you get started playing music? How did you end up playing for dances?

Anita Anderson

Well, once upon a time, I was growing up in Long Beach, which is a city south of Los Angeles and there were three kids in my family. I think my dad had the idea that everybody should try an instrument at some point. He usually relied on the schools to provide free music lessons and instruments and whatnot. But I was only about seven, hadn't gotten to that point. This was during a period when people were first starting to think about home organs. There never was such a thing before. There were chord organs and there were actually fancier models as well. A local furniture store was trying to promote home organs and sell them and they offered 10 weeks of free lessons, if you would actually come into the store and then maybe buy something. So I got 10 free lessons on a very simple organ. At the end, teacher took my dad aside and said, this kid needs more lessons, I really think you should do something. So we got some sort of cheap chord organ but the organ teacher rebelled and said, no, no, this is not going to work. And if people don't remember chord organs from the old days, it was just like a two octave keyboard and a bunch of buttons. So you really couldn't learn to play much of anything. Anyway, he finally sprang for an actual two manual organ [two keyboard, for those unfamiliar with organs] with an octave of pedals and that's what I took lessons on for the next five years. I just got bored with it. I didn't have anything to do, I didn't have any recitals or anything.

Anita Anderson

So when I was 12 I think, I said I wasn't interested in taking lessons anymore. So we quit the lessons and I continued to play just for fun. But then I got into vocal music in school, I was in a bunch of choirs. So that was my musical outlet for a long time. There was one exception to that, I was going to a church that had very simple music and my senior year in high school, the organist retired, and people knew I was going off to college, but they said, just for a year could you fill in, and we'd actually pay you a few dollars a week. I needed money for college so I was fine with that and I would have been there anyway. So this was an organ gig, not a piano gig. Anyway, the previous incumbent had been used to just opening the hymn book and playing stuff. She didn't learn anything special, but I was going to do a better job than that. So at the time, there was no internet and I didn't have a whole lot of music at home. So I went off to the central library in Long Beach and checked out every simple looking music book I could find and started learning simple Bach études and things like that, inventions, and got into a practice of checking out huge amounts of music and going through them very quickly finding something that I could learn quickly for each week. My rules were that I would never repeat any music for the whole year. I had a five minute prelude, a three minute offertory and a five minute postlude to prepare every week. I never repeated, and boy, did I learn how to sight read really, really fast.

Julie Vallimont

That's the way to do it.

Anita Anderson

I was also sort of absorbing basic baroque counterpoint, while doing all this just because there's so much music going by. My very last Sunday, I set myself a test that I would give myself a theme and I would improvise for five minutes in baroque style and I'm sure it was a mess but I got through it without any more music. So that was really important part of my musical education that year. I didn't do much with keyboards for a long time after that. Again, in college, I was doing a lot of vocal music. After college, I was doing a lot of early music, choral stuff. I came back to LA after grad school, I was doing international dance, oh, and I had been dancing in high school too but it was all international.

Anita Anderson

There was a token contra, token English dance every evening, but we were not focused on that. But there was a growing contra scene in LA when I got back so I was doing all that and doing some English, doing lots of Scandinavian. At some point, somebody asked me to fill in on piano for a local band. And all I knew, what they told me was, here's a lead sheet, you play these chords, you do boom chuck, that's the rules. That's what you're allowed to do. Okay, so I did that for a while, and I got really, really bored. So just as an example of what I was told to do, here's a clip from a piano player that we all know doing very straight, solid, New England, boom chuck. [We hear a clip of Father Charlie's/Frankie's Tune from the album [Hand it Down by Bob McQuillen](#), Laurie Andres, Cathie Whitesides]

Anita Anderson

So that's the quintessential New England blocky style. It's absolutely solid. Rhythm is consistent, tempo never changes. McQuillen was so good at keeping a very solid tempo. He could not be moved, you could always depend on him. Anyway, it worked really well for dancing, people loved it, but I was bored. I was actually thinking of quitting because there didn't seem to be any way around it. And then I heard a CD that came out in I think '86 from [Rodney Miller](#), called Airplang with [Kate Barnes](#) playing on that and this changed everything. So maybe we could hear a clip of the some of the music where Kate got to shine.

Julie Vallimont

Yes, let me pull that up. And while I'm pulling that up, that was the [Airplang album](#), I believe it was Rodney Miller, Molly Mason, Kate Barnes, Russ Barenberg and Tim Jackson and this is from a track called Soulmate. And you had specifically mentioned a place in the track that you'd like to hear that kind of showcases some of her inventiveness. I'm going to try to fast forward it to this part kind of midway through.

[Julie plays a section of Soulmate from Airplang.]

Anita Anderson

Yeah, so that convinced me. You know, if Rodney Miller, the absolutely perfect traditional New England fiddler could play that and Kate could play that then it was allowed.

Julie Vallimont

That kind of expanded your horizon.

Anita Anderson

It certainly did. So I started working on copying Kate Barnes in everything I could do.

Julie Vallimont

Like many of us.

Anita Anderson

So I started playing a little more. I was playing with [Mike Mendelson](#) from Santa Barbara. And then a bunch of us separately decided to move to Seattle right about 1990. And there were lots of opportunities when I got here, particularly playing with [Rex Blazer](#), one of the wild men of contra.

Julie Vallimont

He is one of a kind, Alaskan...

Anita Anderson

He was living in Alaska at the time, later moved to Florida. He was, kind of a still is, kind of a seat-of-the-pants player. He likes to take big risks, try things he's never tried before. He introduced me to a lot of very cool tunes that I wouldn't have heard about otherwise. He got me to go to [Ashokan](#), which had never occurred to me to go to a place like that.

Julie Vallimont

Was that Northern Week?

Anita Anderson

Yeah, Northern Week. He was up for any tour anywhere on short notice. He would fly across the country if somebody offered him two gigs in a row. So we traveled a lot as a duo, and to play a lot of cool places. Then he moved away and I started playing with Bag o' Tricks with [Dave Bartley](#) and Sande Gillette and we were doing both English and contra. Betsy Cooper was playing with us when we did English and we actually recorded in 2002. That's really the only arranged contra album that I've been on so far. Since that point, there's been lots of bands that come and go with the same pool of people who are about the same level and like the same kind of music. So Bag o' Tricks, Tricky Brits, End Effects and one of the biggest opportunities I've had to play is with a group called Roguery which started out as a bespoke band to record English tunes at dance length, so that groups that didn't have live music could have some tunes to play and we've done six CDs of those so far.

Julie Vallimont

So I also have to say that Bag of Tricks and Tricky Brits is one of my favorite band names of all time, such a great funny concept of having the same essentially band have different personas for English and contra music because we often feel that way. Who were your mentors when you were learning to play for dances? You heard Bob McQuillen's playing and that was probably like a good role model in a sense, like it kind of set the sound in your mind. But what were some of the other things you were hearing and people you were meeting and things like that?

Anita Anderson

The same New England crowd that we all listened to, Wild Asparagus, Nightingale, anything [Jeremiah McLane](#) did, anything, and anything Kate Barnes did, and of course, for English, [Bare Necessities](#). I realized very quickly that I was never going to be [Jacqueline Schwab](#) and that was fine, one of her is great, no one else can reach her.

Julie Vallimont

Were there any particular fiddlers that you played with as you were learning? I'm just curious about your process of how you learn to accompany tunes.

Anita Anderson

Well, I played with fiddlers who were very busy in the style of Rodney Miller, a lot of bow rhythms so that gave me a lot of room to play something else in straight rhythm. They really filled out the sound, and I can play around them and underneath them and if there were any spaces, fill it in. It's the basic counterpoint principle that when they move, I'm still, when they're still I move. So learning from people like that was what I did.

Julie Vallimont

So it sounds like there's times when you could kind of play it straight and just provide a solid rhythm for them to play over. But then also, they being strong fiddlers gave you the freedom to experiment. What are some of the kind of things you would do if you had space?

Anita Anderson

Well, the styles that I was listening to aside from straight ahead contra dance, were first of all, I had a gospel background from playing church music, and listening to blues, listening to Cape Breton stuff, listening to French Canadian stuff, rags, I did a lot of work with rags. So I had tricks from all of those that I could insert whenever there was a chance or whenever it was stylistically appropriate with the music. I wouldn't play rags when I was playing French Canadian, that sort of thing. But you get these things in your fingers and if there's a space to use them, just tuck 'em in and see if anybody squawks.

Julie Vallimont

I feel like that's something that all these bands that you mentioned were doing in different ways, like Nightingale bringing in both [Jeremiah \[McLane\]](#) and [Keith \[Murphy\]](#) as rhythm players, brought in all these different influences from all over the place. Jeremiah has done some Cape Breton piano and modern things and jazz and just everything and French music and mbira music, and then Keith, with all of his influences, and also some strong Cape Breton piano influences as well and then [Wild Asparagus](#)...Ann Percival's background on the piano and then Kate Barnes, of course, is someone who I associate with like, pulling out every trick in the book at any moment, anywhere. Do you consider yourself kind of in that school of piano players?

Anita Anderson

I'm not as bold as Kate, I don't know as many tricks.

Julie Vallimont

Few people are, I mean, no one does, we shouldn't compare ourselves to her. You also play for English country dances. How does your playing for English differ from your playing for contra?

Anita Anderson

Well, it's more lyrical, and heavy rhythm obviously is not as important. If you give people a basic idea where the beats fall, where to walk, you can leave spaces, you can do a lot of sustain and you can use your classical chops in a way that is inappropriate for contra. One thing I like to do in English, partly for the benefit of the dancers and partly for me is to play along with the walkthroughs, and I have strong feelings about how to do that and what it's good for. You play something very simple, often just a melody line, nothing else. You leave out all the pickups, you leave at all the ornaments, you give people just a sense of the framework of the dance, how long they have to get from A to B, how fast they should be walking. If it's in three, four, you give them a sense this is a waltz, you should be thinking about that as you move around. It gives the band a chance to preview the dance and figure out how they can support it, what are the tricky parts, when are people likely to run out of time and need a little assistance, that sort of thing.

Julie Vallimont

It also gives the caller a chance to adjust your tempo, which I feel like at least for me often happens. For our listeners who maybe aren't as familiar with English dancing, you know, in contra, we don't play during the walkthrough unless we do a rolling start, which is a trick that some bands will do where they start playing under the walk through and then the caller keeps calling and then just flows right into the dance and you never know when the dance begins and the walkthrough ends. In English country dances some musicians play kind of noodling under the walkthrough. But they'll do a little bit of the phrase and then when the caller starts talking and stops teaching, they'll stop playing, and then they'll do another more of the phrase. Some people like it, some people don't. Some callers like it, some callers don't. It's all about personality. The goal is to help the dancers get the music in their bodies, like you're saying, and help the musicians get the dance and the music synced up. I really enjoy it, it's a really cool feeling.

Anita Anderson

Yeah, and in English, there's so much variety of tempi and of choreography in that something like a simple figure eight, could take six beats, could take 16 beats, you just never know until you start the walkthrough and the dancers really know, are they going to make a huge arc or are they going to scurry as fast as they can around the person next to them? It's really important for them to know that ahead of time.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, absolutely. Especially because the tune and the dance go together. The phrasing in the music is really important for the dancers, like you say, to know how much space they should take up. And it's like, how far do you move your body? And how slowly do you move and all these different things that most of the time in contra, we don't worry about those nuances. A well written dance can fit to most well phrased tunes and the phrasing of the tune is enough. But in English, you have a lot more diversity of, like you say, of tune styles and time signatures and everything else. I've enjoyed, for me as a piano

player, I kind of have loved playing for both because they each kind of scratch a different itch for me. I love the variety and the subtlety of English. Now I also love subtlety in contra. It's not to say that contra can't be subtle, but it is just also fun to just kind of crank it out during contra dance. What are some of your favorite moments?

Anita Anderson

In contra?

Julie Vallimont

In anything.

Anita Anderson

Hitting a punctuation point in perfect synchrony when the dancers are with you on that, you get a lot of crowd response at that point, people feel that the whole room is moving as a unit, including the band. That's pretty exciting. And also, if you do things like introducing blues riffs, or little bits of Motown or something and people change their dancing, you have a feeling they're actually listening to you, and responding to what you're doing. That kind of connection between band and dancers is pretty exciting.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, so those are some of the moments, what kind of fills your heart as a musician in addition to those things?

Anita Anderson

Well, I play in support of the dance; I'm not there to concertize. If I can do stuff that makes the dance work, that shows off the people in the band, gives them space to do what they're good at and maybe come up with some new ideas, some new chord progressions that we haven't done before keeping us all on our toes. That's a good evening, when I can do all those things.

Julie Vallimont

It's really great to have that mindset of kind of being there to serve the dance and the dancers. You know, it doesn't mean you can't be creative, but it means that that foundation is there, the same foundation that Bob McQuillen would lay down.

Anita Anderson

One thing I've been pretty passionate about, especially in English, but also in contra, is watching the floor as much as possible. I work with people who are paper trained and will not take their eyes off the paper no matter what, even though they've played this tune 30 times, and they really know how it goes. They're just trained to look at the music all the time, and they never look up and they miss punctuation points, they miss pauses, they they play over things that you wouldn't if you had been watching the floor. And as a backup player since I'm not doing complicated melodies, I have the bandwidth to look up and see what's going on in the floor. It gives me all kinds of ideas for fun things to do and it gives me a constant check. Should I be adjusting the tempo? Are people having trouble getting to where they need to be? Are they bored because it's going too slowly and they're getting thing getting there too

early? Is there something fun about this dance that I can accentuate in some way? So watch the floor, watch the floor.

Julie Vallimont

Are there any telltale signs that you look for?

Anita Anderson

Well, again, if their feet are off, if their foot is off the floor, and they're waiting to put it down because they're waiting for the next beat, that's too slow, if they're scurrying, if they're late on the progression. Gosh, I can think of so many dances that have a hey for four at the end and they're trying to finish the hey and move on to the next couple and they're late, that's a tune that needs to slow down. It's just a consequence of the choreography.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, absolutely. I often watch the long lines and if they look really ragged, and then even, you know people aren't getting to them in time, things like that. Or some people are getting to them early. I often, I try to ask myself now, if they're off, is it because of phrasing or tempo? It's often tempo, but sometimes clear phrasing can help. Like if they have a hey, that they have to get through quickly to get to a balance after something. I try to make the phrasing really clear during the hey, that something else is about to happen. So we all have these various tricks in our arsenals for dealing with things like that. How do you communicate to your bandmates that you want to adjust the tempo? Do you just kind of push it a little bit or pull it back a little bit?

Anita Anderson

I've had minimal success forcing them to do things unless it's very, very subtle, very gradual. Usually, we're close enough together that I can actually say, pull it back, pull it back, or, we need to speed up. I have a little trouble talking while playing so I tend to talk in rhythm with the beats because otherwise I throw myself off. So sometimes it takes a while to get a sentence out and make sure that it's heard by whoever needs to pass it along.

Julie Vallimont

That's an age old thing for every band is like that kind of communication. But I agree, if you want the whole band to speed up to fit the dance or slow down, it's just good to just say it, then everyone can try to do it together.

Anita Anderson

And of course, a good caller. A good caller is telling you these things too. But often I look over and I see the caller is checking the cards for the next dance and isn't watching the floor. So, it's up to us.

Julie Vallimont

It's true. Like sometimes that's the callers, like we have our downtime, maybe during the walkthrough, but they have their downtime during the dance. So they're often multitasking just like we are. Do you have all the tunes memorized? Like do you know them by heart? Or are you kind of chording by ear? Or do you ever use written down chords like cheat sheets and things like that?

Anita Anderson

If we have established medleys, I probably know them backwards and forwards and I have ideas about transitions. Every once in a while somebody will spring a tune on me that I have not seen, something they wrote that afternoon. I'll be leaning on the lead sheet pretty heavily for a while. It doesn't take very long to get the format of a tune down though, and start looking for alternate chords because I'm easily bored and I like variety. One thing I did in college was take a full year of music theory. It's the...just about the most valuable thing I've ever done. I wasn't a music major but this was a fairly heavyweight course for music majors. It gave names to things that I had an intuition about, but I didn't know what they were called. It forced me to compose with multiple lines, it explained the relationships between chords, different kinds of codas, why the Western world has the biases it has towards certain kinds of connections between chords and melodies. So, incredibly valuable, I would recommend that people, if they have any opportunity, take some theory, you don't think you're gonna use it, but it really comes in handy. So again, with a tune that I've just learned, I'm already starting to think of ways to vary it that fits some of those rules.

Julie Vallimont

So you think about theory in terms of what chord substitutions you can use and things like that?

Anita Anderson

And basslines, I love to invent basslines.

Julie Vallimont

What a bassline sound like, Is it like an every downbeat? Or are you doing like eighth note, basslines or riff kind of basslines?

Anita Anderson

All of the above.

Julie Vallimont

I also love basslines. I mean, that's one of the great things about being a piano player is that you can do basslines and other chords, you can literally do two different things with your hands. It's so great.

Anita Anderson

I can't imagine how I learned to do that. But I guess I was young enough that it worked.

Julie Vallimont

So in terms of playing by ear, you know, you mentioned you've played with folks who often play from sheet music. I've noticed that as a player, especially for English dances, where we often will open up [the Barnes books](#), or we'll get sheet music for something from a caller and sometimes if I have the tune memorized, it's still tempting just to get it out just to have it as a reference. But I find that if I have the tune memorized I could know it by heart but if I have the music in front of me, my brain turns off in terms of thinking about chords and things like that. It's really weird. I don't know if that's because I was a classical player and accompanist for so long, like accompanying vocalists and things that I just have

that follow the chart, passive brain, I don't know. But it's really interesting. It's like I can't ignore the chords, I can ignore them but it takes work, like, my brain still reads them and interprets them, even if I do something different. I feel like I am less creative even if I know the tune the same amount whether the music for it is in front of me or not.

Anita Anderson

Hmm, interesting. Well, I spend so much time looking up that I can somewhat forget the influence of the written notes, not entirely. It's all there. A lot of what I'm doing is relative minors. It's not big changes.

Julie Vallimont

The occasional V chord, maybe here and there, or IV chord or something.

Anita Anderson

Yeah, sure and maybe some startling stuff once in a while. But I tend not to take big risks in the moment. If you've got a loud instrument, like a piano, and you hit a crashing wrong chord, it's really painful.

Julie Vallimont

How do you define wrong? There's a fun question.

Anita Anderson

Depending on the style, I mean, if you're playing some baroque English tune, and then you come up with something really jarring. That's wrong.

Julie Vallimont

We all know wrong when we hear it, it's like something that isn't our intention and it also doesn't sound good, but in a way that we don't like in the moment, right? There's some times when I play the wrong chord, but then I love it, and I never would have thought of it. But that's not what we're talking about here. That's funny. Yeah. It sounds like you play quite a bit with Dave Bartley.

Anita Anderson

Oh, yes, he is the [Sam Bartlett](#) of the West Coast.

Julie Vallimont

Exactly. He's a very inventive, prolific, creative kind of person. What's it like? What's that dynamic like for you?

Anita Anderson

Oh it's wonderful, because he's so playful. He's the one who usually comes up with quotations. He just gives you the high sign and then launches into something that he hopes you know and you just play along and he finds things that fit really well. He knows just how long to play them before you've sort of worn out the joke and go back to the regular tune. Lovely. And he writes great tunes, and hundreds and hundreds of really great tunes. He knows how to put them together into medleys that show off the strengths of both and work well for the same kind of dance. So yeah, he's a great guy.

Julie Vallimont

I imagine he's one of the people who would probably frequently be putting new tunes on your music stand and say, okay, let's play this.

Anita Anderson

He's generally a little more considerate than that.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, good.

Anita Anderson

But there were times when he was composing so many tunes that we'd have to wait for an occasion to use them because we couldn't do too many in a given evening.

Julie Vallimont

That's a terrible problem to have isn't it, a luxury of riches.

Anita Anderson

One thing we haven't talked about so far is my own compositions. I started off with Bus Stop Reel, I just got lucky. My first tune was one that went a long way and by accident, it turns out that Bus Stop Reel fits well on just about every instrument. It's a good keyboard instrument, good stringed instrument, flute players even like it. So that's part of the reason that it spread so far, it was easy for a lot of people to play. It's been recorded a lot of times. One thing I came up with, I'm not even sure where I got this idea, when I didn't have any ideas for a theme was to use phone numbers. So you take your regular seven digit phone number and translate those numbers into the notes of the scale. For people who are listening who don't play, if you think of a scale as having eight notes in it, and you give them each numbers. Well, you play those numbers in a row and my rule is they have to be the first seven notes of the tune.

Julie Vallimont

That's fun. I want to do it right now. Let's pause the podcast, I'm going to go make a tune for my phone number, I'll be right back. Just kidding.

Anita Anderson

Watch out for the zeros. It's never clear what to do with the zeros.

Julie Vallimont

What do you do?

Anita Anderson

I try to play them as tens to keep going in the sequence.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, but that makes sense.

Anita Anderson

Tens are really hard to work into a medley, I have done it but it's harder and nines are hard. You know, how many times do you hit a nine in the course of a regular melody?

Julie Vallimont

It's an interesting interval, isn't it?

Anita Anderson

Yeah and sometimes the first note will be a pickup if the first note is a seven, okay, most students do not start on the downbeat on seven, but a pickup could be seven. So I've had...like that. Anyway, I've had good luck with them. The first one I ever did was a waltz for a Bob McQuillen's phone number.

Julie Vallimont

What's it called?

Anita Anderson

I would have to go look it up. I don't get a chance to play it very often. I'd have to go look that up. But anyway, it still exists, very simple tune. Turns out waltzes are easier because you can have a lot of sustained notes and get over awkward intervals.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, making a reel out of that is tricky because they come at it eighth notes. You can't play with the timing and the rhythm as much I imagine. Oh, that's a fun game. You know [Dave Wiesler](#), piano player from the east coast? Dave is one of those also endless creative people. I was at Pinewoods with him one summer, we were talking about tune smithing, and he was saying, a list of a million different games that he knows of to write tunes. He was saying something similar, but you, you roll a die and the number one through six is the number of the note that you choose.

Julie Vallimont

And then there's a way you can do with flipping coins where heads means there's a note in a spot and tails means there's a rest. So if you set an interval at eighth notes, then you flip a coin for every eighth note and that decides if there's a note or a rest there so that can lead to some strange rhythms and then you take it and then you massage it right into something that feels like music. Maybe you only get one or two phrases or motifs from that that feel good but maybe that's enough to then write a whole tune from there. It's fun. I love your phone number game. I guess you could also spell your name or other people's names as well, because you can just convert letters into numbers that way,

Anita Anderson

But there are 26 letters.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, but you could go A through G and then H would start over again.

Anita Anderson

Oh, okay. So whatever jolts your brain into thinking about sequences of notes in a different way than you would ordinarily. Anything is good.

Julie Vallimont

When you wrote [Bus Stop Reel](#) how did you write it? Did you write it on the piano?

Anita Anderson

I wrote it in my head, most of my tunes I write in my head. I was sitting at the bus stop waiting to go to work.

Julie Vallimont

And then how did you remember? Did you sing it into a recorder? Did you just keep it in your head 'til you get home?

Anita Anderson

I think I drew five lines on a piece of paper while I was sitting there and wrote it out. Because I don't carry music paper around with me as a rule, unless I'm going to a gig so I probably had to draw it.

Julie Vallimont

It's a good thing that it's easy to draw, five lines, add some dots in there. I've written tunes on airplanes that way, just like noodling on a sheet of paper. It's kind of fun. Even if you don't know what the tunes gonna sound like, totally, you can kind of look at the relationships between the notes in a different way and that's fun. Like seeing the patterns visually, is different than seeing the patterns on the piano, or on instrument like guitar or fiddle, where it's not linear up and down the way that it is on the piano. Have you ever played any other instruments besides piano?

Anita Anderson

I had a spell of hammer dulcimer for a while. I was a big [Malcolm Dalglish](#) fan and [Bill Spence](#) but I realized that a hammered dulcimer is essentially a proto piano. It doesn't have dampers and it has a small range. I realized I missed piano so that didn't last very long. And trying to play contra tunes at full speed on an instrument that doesn't have a damper you kind of get a lot of overlap.

Julie Vallimont

Do you use the pedals when you're playing for contra dances?

Anita Anderson

Somewhat. More in English.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, definitely, or for a waltz. There's been a few times where I'd have a keyboard and my sustain pedal would randomly stop working and that feeling or if you plug it in, if you turn it on, while your foot's on the pedal like if you're doing a rushed soundcheck and you forget, it reverses the polarity of the

pedal. I've had times when everything was sustained unless I pushed my foot down trying to play a waltz that way so way, it will mess with your mind.

Anita Anderson

It certainly would.

Julie Vallimont

It was the longest three minutes of my life. Do you use keyboards or do you try to stick to acoustic pianos, what's your preference?

Anita Anderson

I'll play anything put in front of me. I don't carry a keyboard to gigs. I rely on whatever's in the hall. Sometimes, if Dave and I are playing, he's got a keyboard that's reasonably portable, not too heavy and if we know the piano is going to be bad, we might bring his along. But generally, and as you know, pianos vary in quality and condition.

Julie Vallimont

And tuning.

Anita Anderson

Yes. The first thing is to try out all the notes to see which ones are duds and which ones are so out of tune they cannot be played and so I know that I need to avoid them during the gig, which is, which is tricky. You know, when middle D is not playable.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, and you have to make a mental note that you can't use that one. I've been there too. It's like an extra logic problem on top of all the other things you're already trying to do. Especially notes on the piano where like the unison strings are out of tune, like piano notes have two or three strings for each one and so if they're out of tune with themselves on a note, it is crazy. I feel like piano players often enjoy telling piano war stories of each other. I once played in North Carolina, and we were flying so I asked them to provide a keyboard for me.

Julie Vallimont

They procured this keyboard that had been in someone's basement for 10 years like untouched. The keys stopped working as I played them. So after I hit each key several times it would stick down and then not come back up again. And so I was trying to accompany by like lifting, I'd play a chord and then I had to flick all the keys up with my hands and so I'm like, okay, I can't reuse the middle C, I haven't lifted that one back up yet. It was like playing whack-a-mole but they didn't pop back up again afterwards.

Anita Anderson

Oh boy.

Julie Vallimont

It was the weirdest thing. It sounds like you haven't had too many crises. Are a lot of pianos out there on the West Coast in halls that you run into in the Northwest?

Anita Anderson

Grange halls tend to be pretty good for that, we do play a lot of Grange halls and more and more people, even halls are buying their own keyboards because it's easy to store, they don't have to keep tuning them. So there's generally something usable, or we get some warning that there isn't, and can make some kind of arrangements.

Julie Vallimont

Are there any of your other tunes that you want to talk about or any other of your favorite tunes? How many tunes have you written?

Anita Anderson

Oh, not very many, I'd say 15 to 20.

Julie Vallimont

Sort of like they come out when they just pop into your head and you write them down as they come up?

Anita Anderson

It's happened a couple times that they don't turn out to be usable for contra or English. Like one that I did for Susan Amato, it turned out to be a rhumba. It was the only thing that fit those particular combinations of notes.

Julie Vallimont

I think it's good to write music and just let it be what it is, let it come out of your brain as it is and then you can figure out later where it belongs. I feel like music doesn't have to be useful. I feel like once once folks reach a place where they're like a semi professional or professional musician, or you're just trying to make a body of work of some sort, you start being like, could that be a thing? Could that be a thing? I don't know, sometimes it's nice just to write things just for the sake of having ditties come out of your head, even if they don't all have to be tunes for a purpose.

Anita Anderson

Some of them can't be forced anyway. I tried to make a contra out of that rhumba tune, we actually played it at Lady of the Lake with a drum set behind to sort of help out and it was it was doable, but nah, it didn't want to be that. So now it's a rhumba.

Julie Vallimont

I think a lot of us have had experiences like that, where you write something, and you really try hard to make it work and like, nah, this is gonna be something else.

Anita Anderson

I don't do a lot of concerts so there's not a lot of opportunities to use things that are not obviously dance tunes. But every once in a while there is one and it's nice to pull those things out or to play something that wants to go slower. Some of those great slinky jigs, they just want to go at 104 and only in a concert can you play that kind of stuff.

Julie Vallimont

104 is kind of my favorite tempo. I was just talking with Sam Bartlett about this. We did an interview with him a few weeks ago. I feel like every time I hear music that I like, or I'm like, oh, what is that? I want that. It's like between 96 and 104. That's just my happy place tempo wise. Do you think about tempo when you're playing? Like when you're playing for contra dances what are your favorite tempos to play?

Anita Anderson

Well, it's not up to me. It's up to what works in the dance. When I first started, Frank's Reel was probably at 120. I was told 120 is the standard, always play that and gradually, things have slowed down. I generally set a metronome for 116 just to get it in my head and then adjust from there. But increasingly, I hear 112 and 108 if it's a really slinky jig, so there's getting to be more variety and definitely on the slow side. But it's whatever the dance requires, or whatever the tune can handle. It's not up to me really.

Julie Vallimont

How do you figure out what tempo you're going to do the potatoes at? What do you take into account?

Anita Anderson

Well, for contra, I usually always start at 116 until I watch the dance progress and see if people are having trouble and need to slow down. If it's a family dance, a round dance, that's kind of not quite a square but but very simple moves. I could move up to 120 or above, once I see it moving.

Julie Vallimont

I think it's common for dances to speed up a little bit so it's fine to start, like 116 is like on this slightly slow end of normal I think for New England or square end of normal depending on where you are and then just letting it creep up a little bit on its own is enough to give the dance some energy.

Anita Anderson

At the transition between two tunes and a medley that's a place where you can hop it up if you want to. As people learn the dance and get more fluid, sometimes you can increase the tempo as well without handicapping them.

Julie Vallimont

How much do you coordinate with your bandmates in advance? How much of what you play, and this is specifically for contras, I know English is a little bit different but for contras, how much of what you play is arranged versus made up on the fly?

Anita Anderson

Well, the medleys are almost always set ahead of time. That's a complicated matter to set up a good medley, in which one tune feeds into the other easily and they both fit the same kind of choreography so we generally don't mess with those. But picking the medleys sometimes we'll get advanced notice from a caller that I have a favorite dance that I like to do in the second half, could you be looking for something that would fit this kind of a dance, and we'll actually pick that up. But generally, callers like to be flexible to change the program as they see fit when they look at the hall and see who's coming.

Anita Anderson

You know, at the intermission, an entire family of beginners will show up, you know, you've got eight new beginners in the hall that weren't there before. They throw the program out, they start all over. As you know, callers differ on what kind of clues they will give you when you're scrambling to find the next medley. Some of them just say, here's the card, you pick something, some of them will try to describe it. I had one caller in particular, who said okay, for this next one I want billowy. And we said, "What?" "You know, billowy."

Julie Vallimont

I think that'd be fun is to have a little wiki where contra musicians can make a running list of all the words that callers have used to phrase their requests in. I think that would be really funny. They'd just collect the wide variety of terms. I certainly understand like callers, how do you get across this abstract concept? And billowy is evocative but what does that mean? What does that mean in musical terms?

Anita Anderson

Tell us where the balance and swing is please.

Julie Vallimont

I would say, billowy, oh great and can I also see the card please? Do you look at the cards when you're pairing music and dances together?

Anita Anderson

Oh, always. Well...if they let us. There are some callers that don't want you to look at cards.

Julie Vallimont

Why?

Anita Anderson

I don't know. They'll say I can describe it perfectly well, you don't need to see this and will actually grab them away. So, okay.

Julie Vallimont

When you look at a card, what kind of things are you looking for?

Anita Anderson

Punctuation points, obviously, the balance and swing, the forward and back. Extra balances for petronellas, that kind of thing. And if they've got circle followed by a hey, followed by figure eight

followed by mad robin, okay, there's no punctuation at all in that section. We're going to go very smooth. One thing that's useful I've found on the setlist is to include those clues in a separate column, like this medley has the second B has a big, a big thump. That's really useful for dances that have a balance of swing on the second beat. You don't necessarily look at the title of tune and know those things right off. But if you have that, as a note, you can just skim down the list and look for things that fit.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, I mean, when we're looking at our setlist picking tunes, a lot of us are kind of doing that mental work of how does the set go, oh, and has that transition or does that in the B part so making little notes for yourself about that. I often find the flip side of that is that, especially when you're in a band that plays a lot, and I don't want the material to feel like there's a way it always goes. It's fun to take a set that I think of as a really driving punctuated set and try to make it groovy or smoother, different dances bring out different parts of a tune just like different tunes bring out different parts of a dance. Sometimes it's fun to play with that. So you can have your cheat sheet but doesn't mean you always have to listen to it, right? It's just there if you want it. But you know, there's those moments you're like, oh, I just see something with a good B1 balance and having a way to scan seems helpful. What's the scene like out there? I kind of want to see a little, I don't know, what it's like in your world. I want a little window into your world out there.

Anita Anderson

It's all before times of course.

Julie Vallimont

Yes, we speak in present tense. But we know everything's on hold right now because of covid but if everything were running?

Anita Anderson

Seattle's lucky in that we have two big dances a week and they're Thursdays and Fridays. So you can have out of town bands on tour, who are looking for extra gigs, and they can have two in a row. If it's a really good band, there are people who will go to both gigs, because they can't get enough of that band. So it's a pretty lively scene, and Tacoma's got a dance once a month, and Bellingham is I think, every other week, I haven't checked up on their schedule. Olympia has got a dance once a month. So within an hour and a half, two hours drive, you could conceivably have four gigs and little towns in like Port Angeles, way out on the peninsula, would have a dance once in a while too, so you can get some scenery in with your tour.

Julie Vallimont

Having had the fortunate chance to play some of those Seattle dances, I was pretty impressed with just the energy and a wide variety of ages and a lot of gusto.

Anita Anderson

Yeah, especially on those Friday night dances, I can picture you and [Noah \[VanNorstrand\]](#) onstage where the young kids go.

Julie Vallimont

It's super fun. But the weird thing about being a traveling contra musician is that you get to see the community in terms of the dancers and the callers. But you don't get to hear the other bands, because you're the band for the night. We can't stick around for another dance because we're playing the only dance that week. and then there's not a chance to hear the other bands. I wish that there was a way that we could, I guess that's what camps and festivals are for, or dance weekends where there's two bands, where musicians really get to spend time together.

Anita Anderson

We do have our own local weekend called [Supersonic](#). I have a feeling it may not happen this spring, depending on...like Fauci says it won't be over till the spring. So we may miss two years of it. But it's a very well run weekend and that draws people from all up and down the West Coast so that's a great asset.

Julie Vallimont

I had been excited because [Buddy System](#) was gonna play it before covid hit and so one of these days it'll happen but that would have been cool. It sounds like a really great weekend. Do you have camps out there and things like that, festivals? Where did you learn when you were trying to learn? What was the milieu where you got to play along with people and meet people?

Anita Anderson

There were bar dances every once in a while the [Tractor Tavern](#) in Ballard used to have Monday night dances. You'd hear lots of jamming at places like that and get some ideas. Folklife has been a big resource, you had four full days. In the old days, there was a stage devoted entirely to contra and English all four days, and you'd hear it felt like hundreds of bands, and absorb ideas from them. There used to be a weekend called Wanna Dance. Fiddle Tunes is a big source of inspiration but it's really no place for a keyboard player because you can't jam. There's never a keyboard where you want it or if there is somebody else is already playing. I got my first Cape Breton lessons the one time I went to Fiddle Tunes but, yeah, I haven't found it to be a good source for new ideas for me.

Julie Vallimont

Who did you learn Cape Breton piano from? Have you been to Cape Breton?

Anita Anderson

I have. I went to [Celtic Colours](#) about three years ago I guess it was, maybe four and got to hear a steady diet of Cape Breton piano. Mac Morin is my hero there. Wow, and he step dances as well.

Julie Vallimont

It's just the best. Cape Breton piano is just the best. I'm not being very eloquent about it. But as you know, there's a lot of acoustic pianos over there still and just standing behind the piano you can watch the piano literally shake while they play it, like the thunder and the groove and the rhythm that comes out of that thing, it's amazing.

Anita Anderson

Well, Cape Breton is an interesting case. Traditionally, it was a lot of duos, it was piano and fiddle, maybe guitar and fiddle, but mainly piano because there was so many pianos, so many people played and so you didn't have a third person to consider. You just had the two of you. There was this enormous sonic acreage you got to fill, so they filled it. This bouncy, bouncy syncopated style grew out of...'you know, there's only two of you so better make some noise.' And they do and great basslines and great syncopations. That's just so much fun to play.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it is. What elements of Cape Breton piano do you bring into your contra playing? versus, do you do the whole thing or do you kind of modify it?

Anita Anderson

Oh definitely, it's very rare that there's room for full-on Cape Breton [piano playing]. If you've got, you know, three people in the band, you got to leave some room for somebody to do something and it just takes over. I might do a little bit of the syncopation in the right hand in a driving reel that can take it, where there's enough going on in the fiddle that they can stand up to it. I might briefly do some of that complicated bass work. But it's rare that I can do all of the above at full volume.

Julie Vallimont

[Tracey Dares](#) is another piano player from Cape Breton that I listened to a lot when I was learning. So great. And [Rachel Aucoin](#), who used to play for a lot of contra dances in the states with [Tidal Wave](#). She's got a really cool piano style because she plays for contra dances, but then she's got this really great traditional Quebec sound but then she's also done a lot of Cape Breton piano and her family's Acadian. I would love to have her on the podcast one of these days. I have a sweet spot for piano players.

Anita Anderson

I can't imagine why.

Julie Vallimont

Did you spend much time with Bob McQuillen when you were learning, you know, with him being such an influence on you?

Anita Anderson

I listened to his recordings, and he came out for [Northwest] Folklife seems like every year.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, that's what I thought.

Anita Anderson

He actually wrote me a jig as I remember. I haven't had many occasions to use it. But I felt I was very privileged to be one of those people that he wrote a tune for.

Julie Vallimont

That is a privilege, that's really cool. What do you think he would think about how people play now? I know that's such a loaded question. Why did I even ask you that question, but I'm curious.

Anita Anderson

Well, he wasn't always diplomatic. But he thought there was room for new ideas, sort of, but he didn't have any time for them himself. He would never alter his playing because he knew what worked. And he did that thing.

Julie Vallimont

Everybody's got their thing and he had this thing, but it didn't mean that no one should innovate or change or have their own personality. Where do you think that contra music is headed? Like, how have you seen it change? You've been playing since the mid 80s. What are some of the changes that you've seen?

Anita Anderson

Greater variety, one of the newer things I'm seeing is quarter note tunes. We always used to use marches for contras and they were often very stodgy. They sounded Scottish, even if they didn't mean to be Scottish and people seem to be kind of bored with them. But now with things like Tom Kruskal's. We're seeing quarter note tunes that are really popular that work well, as long as you don't play them too fast. I'm seeing more quarter note tunes being written. Should we explain that for the listeners who don't necessarily know the difference...

Julie Vallimont

They basically have half the notes at the same tempo. Tom Kruskal's I think was written by Emily Troll and Amelia Mason of [Anadama](#) but it was recorded by [Elixir](#). I think there's an English dance that uses that tune...

Anita Anderson

Yeah, Sapphire Sea.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, we could link to a few recordings of Tom Kruskal's in the podcast notes so that people could hear a little bit of it.

Anita Anderson

But I think that inspired people like Dave Bartley to write more quarter note tunes. They give lots of room for slinky-ness, they leave more space for a lot of things to happen stylistically so that seems new to me. And not quotations but borrowings from other genres, you know, taking jazz standards and turning them into contras, showtunes, whatever. I see a lot of freedom these days. But one thing I wonder about in the pandemic, when we get back to dancing, I think people will want to hear something from their past that they recognize, that they feel comfortable with them. There may not be as much innovation for a while because people will be just so busy regaining ground, getting used to the scene, again, getting used to being in crowds and it will set us back a little bit.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, maybe we don't even have to think of it as a setback as much as like a reconnecting with our roots. I mean, some of these glorious tunes that are so common that a lot of musicians don't even play them in their bands. Like they're the kind that you hear a mega band or an open band play. I miss those tunes the most and it's partly those tunes and it's also partly just the sound of a whole bunch of people playing together, it's gonna be so great. As much as I've loved, interesting, obscure, rare, quirky tunes, I think it's these great classic tunes that I miss the most, they're like old friends.

Anita Anderson

I'm seeing a trend toward bringing them back little by little, and maybe not playing them the same way, finding something different in them. But there was a reason that those tunes lasted so long and they should be they should be appreciated for their longevity and their adaptability.

Julie Vallimont

As should we I guess, like any contra musicians who come back to this, the whole tradition. When I say we, I don't mean you and I, I mean the tradition as a whole, it's made it a few 100 years, and there's a lot of roots there, just got to keep them going. We have a lot to draw on to bring all this back. But there's always a question of, what is innovation? That's coming out of inspiration and then what is innovation just for the sake of feeling like we need to be different. You're kind of nodding your head from side to side, in a sort of hmmm motion.

Anita Anderson

Definitely both. But again, until you try it, you don't know if you're just being silly for the sake of silly or whether you've come up with something really good. There's nothing like trying it in front of a roomful of dancers to see whether it works or not.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, yeah, that's right. What have been some of your favorite moments playing on stage for dances or some of your favorite places to play or things like that?

Anita Anderson

I'm not sure I can come up with single favorite places. There have been events, weekends in general and weeks, like playing [Hey Days](#), for example in California, that's one of one of the best gigs, a whole week of playing high quality English music and having very experienced dancers out there who don't need any coddling. They know exactly what they're doing. In fact they can do things from memory, English dances from memory, you don't see that very often.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it's, it's a great feeling. Because for us that's like the equivalent of not reading sheet music. It's when you're trying to remember how the dance goes, it's hard to get in the dance. But when you know the dance by heart, then you can really interact with it and play with it. Just like you can play with the tune that you know by heart and you can see all different sides of it. It's such a cool feeling playing for

dancers who already know the dance. That sounds really blissful. That sounds like a blissful week, I want to go.

Anita Anderson

They keep changing the location. I haven't been to the new one. I hope it's just as good as the old one.

Julie Vallimont

Do you play at Folklife?

Anita Anderson

If I'm invited, sure.

Julie Vallimont

What's that like being on that stage?

Anita Anderson

It's crazy. You're very limited, you have to be pouncing from the back of the stage. As soon as the other band gets off, you've got a very quick turnaround time. You don't have time to talk to the sound person and say, oh, I'd like a little more of this and a little more of that and could we move this? Nope, sit down play. It goes really fast. But you've got 500 people screaming at you, if they like you. That's very nice.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it's a cool feeling. Any of these big festivals like this, like this, or [NEFFA](#) or [the Flurry](#) or [Falcon Ridge](#), or there's some in the midwest that I haven't been to, but it's an unusual thing to have to get onstage in 10 minutes and sound check really fast, and then play for all these people where you're not worried about the nuances of how you connect with them in the same way. But it's exhilarating, it's really fun. It's just a whole other animal. And then you get up and the caller's also dealing with a different crowd and maybe the caller might be nervous or whatever, and you just get up and you go, that's it. But it's really fun watching that many people move together in time. Just one of my favorite feelings.

Anita Anderson

Folklife may be different from some of these other festivals in that it's a free event. You've got people who are not dancers who wander into the hall and they just somehow get pulled into the dance. Someone says you can do this. You're watching 500 people with maybe 50 of them really flailing but they're having a good time and they're not quite sure how they got there but they're having a good time.

Julie Vallimont

That's so special, the chance that like, just people could come in from outside and not know anything about dancing and get exposed to it or try it. It's a really cool resource. Do you think about tradition much and where the tradition is going and where either community of contra dance is going or the music itself or do you think it will be around for a long time?

Anita Anderson

I worry that because of the pandemic, people are going to find other things to do, and get involved in them and maybe not come back. I think there's going to be some rebuilding that has to go on. But I'm old enough to have seen young people get old like me and not be replaced for a while and then all of a sudden, be replaced by a really vibrant young community. If those people come back, we're fine. If for some reason they find something more fun to do and that's the cool place to be, well, we're gonna have to rebuild again so I'm concerned about that.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, things wax and wane for sure and it might take us a little time to come back. But there are a lot of people who are impatiently chomping at the bit to be able to contra dance. Hopefully most of the communities have critical mass, it might take a while for that full buzz to come back of like touring bands, touring bands might not be a thing for a while. It might be more local to start with. Who knows? I feel like we're all on this roller coaster ride together. We don't necessarily know how or when it's gonna end but we all know that somehow it will, somehow something will change. It's hard to know what that looks like.

Anita Anderson

We had one huge contra dance live in a hall before things clamped down again, one.

Julie Vallimont

Oh really? Recently, after everybody got vaccinated before the Delta variant was widespread, what was that like?

Anita Anderson

Oh, people were ecstatic. They were just jumping up and down. Countercurrent played, Susan Michaels called.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, lovely people, high energy people Countercurrent is Brian Lindsay and Alex Sturbaum, they're a lot of fun.

Anita Anderson

Again, to show you what a duo can do when they both know what they're doing, and they know each other, they don't need a third person. Just like Buddy System doesn't need a third person.

Julie Vallimont

Do you like playing in duos?

Anita Anderson

I've gotten kind of spoiled with trios that give more color and there are times when I can actually drop out. Dave Bartley and I kind of have an arrangement that with our trios that if it's a regular contra, he'll play mando, cittern, whatever, and I'll play piano. If it's a square I play bassline and he plays guitar and that's really fun when you're playing just bassline. You can really get creative.

Julie Vallimont

So you literally just play with your left hand in that case?

Anita Anderson

I might double, I might double the octaves with my right.

Julie Vallimont

That's fun, and let him crank out the rhythm for a while. That's great. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add?

Anita Anderson

I think that's it.

Julie Vallimont

Well, it's been really wonderful to speak with you and to get to hear a little bit more about your musical life. It's been really great. Thank you so much.

Anita Anderson

Thanks for inviting me.

Julie Vallimont

Take care.

Anita Anderson

Bye.

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