

Contra Pulse Kickoff

By Ben Williams

Contra dancing has a long and storied history on the North American continent, and is a unique intersection of music, dance, and social activity. Each aspect that combines to create a contra dance—the musicians, the caller, and the dancers—also has its own history and evolution. One of CDSS’s core values is that of stewardship—documenting and preserving these traditions—so we were excited when Julie Vallimont, the talented and beloved pianist from bands like Nor’easter and Buddy System, presented us with a proposal to document the history of contra dance piano.

Her plan started off with a desire to document the history of her passion—contra piano—from its boom-chuck roots to its more modern, free-form style. We all quickly realized it would be amazing to expand and include fiddle players and other musicians, too. Now, after much planning and discussion about what form the documentation might take—we’re excited to announce the new online format called **Contra Pulse!**

Contra Pulse is kicking off this month, and it will feature audio and video from some of the major forces in contra music through the years. Julie will be interviewing musicians from across the country with a range of different styles—taking a snapshot of the “state of the artform,” and exploring the evolution across the lifetimes of each artist. These interviews will dive into how artists think about their playing, who and where they learned from, how their styles are distinct, and how they may have influenced others.

Throughout this project, we will be exploring all aspects of how music and dance intertwine and affect each other. For example, callers are increasingly asking for tunes with specific characteristics—bouncy, swingy, stompy, and so on. How does this affect musicians? Contra musicians today are incorporating outside influences and writing more modern-sounding tunes. How does this affect the other aspects of contra dance? Contra Pulse will be documenting answers to many, many questions. What’s the difference

between playing for a monthly dance in a grange hall and more specialized dance weeks? How does that affect the musicians, dancers, and callers, all of whom are interconnected? What about bands that are releasing albums intended for listening outside of the dance context? All of these questions have interesting answers that depend on who you ask, and Contra Pulse plans to ask a variety of people.

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We’ll be releasing each interview in a podcast format, along with video interviews and musical clips. Interviews with Dudley Laufman, Charlie Pilzer, and Larry Unger are due to be released soon, with more to follow in the coming year.

Julie’s interest has sparked other ideas at CDSS! We’re currently exploring ways we might present similar projects that examine the intersection between calling and dancing and other contra-specific aspects. As we get our feet under us with this project we’ll look at branching out further—we’d love to hear what you’d be interested in hearing about! Visit contrapulse.cdss.org to follow along!

Below: Julie Vallimont interviews Dudley Laufman at Maine Fiddle Camp.



Photo by Julie Vallimont