

# Polka: Wisconsin's State Dance

The 19th-century European immigrants to Wisconsin arrived with polkas ringing in their ears. The polka, a lively couples dance in 2/4 time, had developed from folk roots and became a European popular dance craze in the 1840s.

In elite Paris salons and in humble village squares and taverns, polka dancers flaunted their defiance of the staid dance forms, the minuets and quadrilles, which had preceded this raucous and, for the times, scandalous new dance.

The political and social upheavals that coincided with the polka craze also launched thousands of European villagers on their hazardous migration to the American Midwest. They became farmers, miners, lumberjacks, factory workers, and entrepreneurs and continued to enjoy the music and dance traditions of their homelands, passing them on to the American-born generations.

Concurrent with the emergence of the polka was the booming popularity of brass bands and the invention of a variety of squeeze boxes — accordions and concertinas. Innovative tinkerers in France, England, and Germany developed a new family of instruments based on the principles of the *sheng* (a Chinese free reed instrument) but using the levers and springs of the Machine Age.

Richard March



*Couples at the Ellsworth Polka Fest in Ellsworth, Wisconsin, dance a ring schottische, in which ladies advance to the next partner as part of the dance's pattern. Photo © Richard Hamilton Smith*

Like the electronic keyboard in the late 20th century, the squeeze box was the 19th-century's most popular mechanical instrumental innovation. A single musician could replace a small ensemble, playing melodies and harmonies with the right hand while producing rhythmic chords and bass notes with the left. The prized possession in many an immigrant's pack was a button accordion or concertina, and that musician undoubtedly played a lot of polkas.

Upon its arrival, the polka became an American folk tradition. At rural house parties with the rug rolled up or at corner taverns in industrial towns, a squeezebox or a horn was likely to keep neighbors' feet stomping out polkas. A variety of American polka styles evolved in different sections of the Midwest, shaped by the creativity of particular talented and influential musicians. The styles have ethnic names — for example, Polish, Slovenian, Bohemian, Dutchman — based on the origin of the core reper-

toire and the ethnic heritage of many of the musicians. But in the Midwest, music and dancing are shared among ethnic groups, and most bands are ethnically mixed.

In the 20th century, radio broadcasts and recordings delivered the polka to more new enthusiasts. Clear channel WCCO in Minneapolis broadcast Whoopee John's Dutchman music to six or more states, much as WSM's Grand Ole Opry spread Southern traditional music far and wide. The recordings of groups like the Romy Gosz Orchestra and Lawrence Duchow's Red Ravens aided their efforts to become popular as regional touring dance bands.

Right after World War II, almost exactly a century after the original polka craze in Europe, polka music and dancing briefly entered popular culture in a big way once more, this time in America. Slovenian-American accordionist Frankie Yankovic, of Cleveland, became the



biggest star and attracted devotees nationwide to his style. Lil' Wally Jagiello's recordings on his own Jay Jay label established Chicago as the center of influence for Polish polka and converted many musicians to his "honky" sound. By the 1960s, rock 'n' roll had captured the popular music industry, but polka has endured in enclaves of a variety of communities.

In these communities, during the last quarter-century, polka musicians and dancers have organized institutions to perpetuate their passion. These include a network of polka dance halls, clubs, festivals, newsletters, mail-order recordings outlets, accordion makers and dealers, and radio and television shows.

Karl Hartwich was born in Moline, Illinois, in 1961. His father had relocated about 200 miles down the Mississippi River from his hometown near La Crosse, Wisconsin, seeking the good-paying factory jobs making agricultural implements in the Quad Cities area. But farming was in his blood, so the Hartwiches lived outside of Moline in rural Orion, where they raised hogs and field crops.

Karl's family kept in touch with their Wisconsin relatives. Karl remembers that at least twice a month they would make the trek upriver to attend dances where his distant cousin Syl Liebl and the Jolly Swiss Boys were playing. Syl Liebl, a Dutchman-style concertina player, is a natural musician, inventive, spontaneous, and passionate. Little Karl must

have absorbed the style like a sponge.

In response to his pleas, Karl received a concertina as a Christmas present when he was 12. A few months later he was sitting in with the Swiss Boys, and six months after that, at age 13, he had his own band, the Country Dutchmen, now in its 24th year. Karl has turned out to be just as original and passionate a

Virtually every weekend he packs up the van and instrument trailer, and he and his sidemen converge on a dance hall or outdoor polka festival. Casual in his dress and personal style, Karl is nonetheless very serious about his music. He is recognized as the outstanding Dutchman concertinist of his generation. Paradoxically, his music is at once

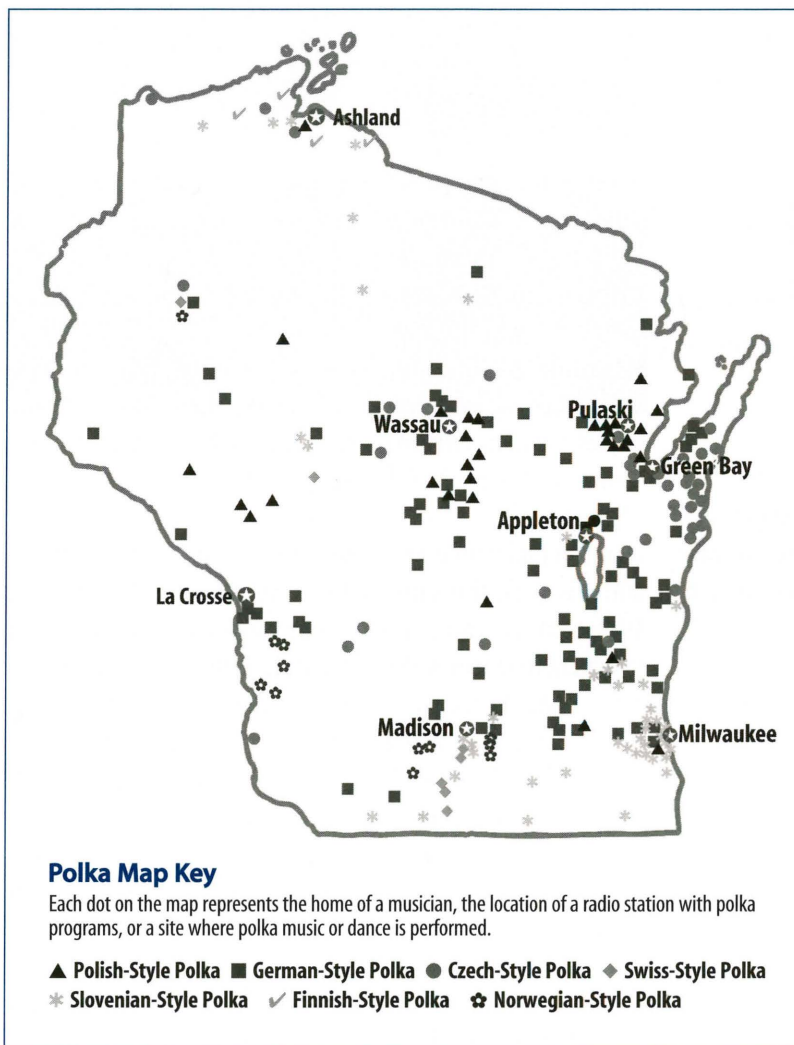
controlled and free. Karl has emphasized the syncopation, chromatic runs, and improvisational flourishes of the basic Dutchman style more than any of his predecessors.

It is indicative of the unique cultural milieu of eastern Wisconsin that Cletus Bellin, a proud member of the Walloon Belgian ethnic community of northeastern Wisconsin, is also the leader of one of the finest Czech-style polka bands in the Midwest, the Clete Bellin Orchestra. A proficient pianist and a very strong singer, Clete took the trouble to learn the correct pronunciation of the Czech folk song lyrics from a friend in the nearby town of Pilsen.

As a boy in the 1940s on a farm in southern Door County, Wisconsin, Clete was as likely to use the Walloon Belgian dialect of

French spoken in his highly culturally retentive community as the English he learned in school. Clete has had a life-long interest in his Belgian culture, and, now in his fifties, he is one of the area's youngest remaining truly fluent speakers of Walloon.

Clete's career in music has included playing in the Wisconsin Bohemian- or



musician as his mentor. He recalls driving the tractor on his family's farm, with dance tunes ringing in his head — the engine roaring, his left hand on the wheel, his right hand on the tool box beside the seat pressing out concertina fingerings on the vibrating metal.

Karl has moved back upriver to Trempealeau, Wisconsin, a location more central to his band's regular gigs.



Czech-style bands of Marvin Brouhard and Jerry Voelker and working for many years as the radio station manager and on-air personality for a Kewaunee, Wisconsin, polka station. Moved by the style of singing and playing of the Czech musical performing groups Budvarka, Veselka, and Moravanka, which toured Wisconsin in the early 1980s, Clete resolved to start a band to perform in a style closer to the European manner from which the other Wisconsin Bohemian bands had diverged. His group is widely acclaimed at polka festivals and Czech ethnic events throughout the country.

Steve Meisner was born in 1960 in Whitewater, a small town southeast of Milwaukee. At the time, Steve's father Verne was already an established musician, an accordion prodigy whose original band, Verne Meisner and the Polka Boys, was aptly named — the members were in their early teens when they started taking professional gigs. That was the early 1950s, just in the wake of Frankie Yankovic's having made the Slovenian style of polka one of the most popular forms of music in Wisconsin. By the 1960s, the Verne Meisner Band was one of the best-known polka groups in the region.

Steve received an ambivalent message from Verne when he showed an interest in music. Seven-year-old Steve's entreaties to his father to teach him to play were rebuffed at first. Then Verne thrust a momentous decision upon his young son: "If you begin to play, you have to promise that you'll never quit." Steve leapt at the challenge without a safety net and made it. Only a year later his father began to bring Steve along to play with the Meisner band, often placing the diminutive kid on a box so that he could reach the microphone.

Steve started his own band, the Steve Meisner Orchestra, while still in his teens

and has continued the family tradition in the polka-music business, playing regionally and nationally, producing his own CDs and videos, and organizing polka tours and cruises. Steve acknowledges his musical debt to the Slovenian-style musicians of the previous generation but has pushed the envelope of the form in hot arrangements and in original material which expresses a range of emotions.

When Norm Dombrowski was a teenager in the 1950s, he wasn't particularly inspired by the polka bands active in his hometown of Stevens Point, in a rural area of central Wisconsin populated by Polish-American dairy and potato farmers. The Dutchman style was the popular sound then at old-time dances. According to Norm, the bands he heard didn't sound too spontaneous; perched behind bandstands, the musicians' noses seemed to be stuck in their sheet music.

Then, in 1956, Chicago's Lil' Wally Jagiello gave two legendary performances at the Peplin Ballroom in Mosinee, just north of Stevens Point. Huge crowds turned out. Norm heard a modern Polish polka sound firmly grounded in the Polish folk music familiar to him from house parties and weddings. What impressed Norm were the band's lack of sheet music and their liveliness, reminiscent of rock 'n' roll bands. Norm decided he wanted to play in this style, and, like his new hero Lil' Wally, he was determined to become a singing drummer. By 1960 he was able to start the Happy Notes Orchestra with three friends, playing for dances locally and as far afield as Minneapolis and Chicago.

The Happy Notes evolved into a family band as Norm's children grew old enough to be competent musicians. Unlike most other Polish-style bands at the time, Norm's did not adopt the streamlined "Dyno" or "Push" style, but remained closer to Lil' Wally's "honky" sound, which emphasized call and

response. Norm stresses the singing of the old Polish songs but also includes in the band's repertoire German, Czech, and even Norwegian numbers to satisfy patrons of other ethnic backgrounds.

These four polka musicians represent the ways in which ethnic polka styles have remained distinct in Wisconsin. Their repertoires also demonstrate the transformation of polka traditions in the Midwest, the development of regional sounds played by bands of mixed ethnicity. The dedication and artistry of these and many other musicians, who continue to reinvent tradition, attest to the vitality of the polka in Wisconsin.

The polka was a rebellious dance in the 19th century and has become a Midwestern regional tradition since. Today Midwesterners have the opportunity to dance to rock music, join square dance clubs, or do Country line dancing, but instead choose to polka. It is a validation of their regional and ethnic roots, an expression of their determination not to be homogenized out of existence. Through the polka they reaffirm membership in a supportive and embracing community based upon friendship, eating, drinking, and socializing, as well as plenty of dancing.

## Suggested Reading

Greene, Victor. *A Passion for Polka*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

Keil, Charles, Angeliki V. Keil, and Dick Blau. *Polka Happiness*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992.

Leary, James P., and Richard March. *Down Home Dairyland: A Listener's Guide*. Madison: University of Wisconsin-Extension, 1996.

## Suggested Listening

*Deep Polka: Dance Music from the Midwest*. Smithsonian Folkways 40088. A new release featuring the groups discussed in this article and others.