deep polka dance music from the midwest

Karl and the Country Dutchmen
1. Minnesota Polka 2:25
2. Karl’s Bad Schottische 2:01
3. Fleetwing Memories Waltz 2:21
4. Gary’s Polka 2:13

The Norskedalen Trio
5. Remmem Valsen 2:39
6. Fylke Dans 1:36
7. All Smiles Tonight 2:38
8. Ed Quall’s Polka 1:41

Norm Dombrowski’s Happy Notes
9. Dorothy’s Oberk 2:04
10. Mountaineer Polka 2:18
11. Chicago Waltz 2:47
12. Happy Fellow 2:07

Vatra
13. Gde su oni lepi cajti? 3:03
15. Jeste li šuži ‘judi 2:20
16. Bijeli slapovi 2:12

The Steve Meisner Band
17. Jammin’ Polkas 5:49
18. Meisner Magic 2:07
19. Jump River Polka 2:17

The Oulu Hotshots
20. Säkkijärven Polka 2:12
21. Maailman Matti 2:23
22. Orpopoja Valissi 2:51
23. Finn Polka 1:41

The Clete Bellin Orchestra
24. Owl Polka 5:17
25. Little Vagabond Waltz 3:00
26. Around the Moon 2:43

CURATOR'S FOREWORD

In parts of the United States, polka music may seem distant and exotic; but in large sections of the Upper Midwest the polka and related European-derived dances are an important and enduring tradition that brings tens of thousands of people together to dance almost every weekend.

The polka is more danced than studied, and recordings of it are more often self-produced by the bands than distributed through popular music industry channels. The tracks on this collection were selected from recordings the seven bands had released previously. This CD is part of the celebration of the Wisconsin Sesquicentennial, which included a program at the 1998 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington D.C. Six of the seven bands performed in that program.

The title of this recording, “Deep Polka,” refers to the depth of the importance of this music in the Upper Midwest, to the deep musical roots tapped by the performances on this disc, and also to music as “deep play” in the sense that it is highly significant to its participants (Geertz 1971). Above all, though, this is dance music. Don’t just sit down and listen to it—tap your feet, then get up and dance to it. That’s what the musicians had in mind, and that is the power of the music itself. If you haven’t done so already, you might go later to a live performance, dance under a tent, and become a deep fan yourself.

Anthony Seeger, Curator and Director
Smithsonian Folklife Recordings

DEEP POLKA: DANCE MUSIC FROM THE MIDWEST
Richard Marek

From Europe to Mid-America

Nineteenth-century European immigrants to the Midwest arrived with polkas ringing in their ears. The polka, a lively couple's dance in 2/4 time, had emerged from its folk roots to become a European popular dance craze in the 1840s. In elite Paris salons and in humble village taverns, polka dancers flaunted their defiance of convention, eschewing older staid dance forms, the minuets and quadrilles, for this raucous and, for the times, scandalous new dance.

The nineteenth century was a period of revolution and social upheaval in Europe. Polka was symptomatic of the same historical currents of social unrest that launched thousands of European villagers on their uncertain and perilous migration to the American Midwest. They became farmers, miners, lumberjacks, factory workers, and entrepreneurs in the new land, but they continued to enjoy the music and dance traditions of their old homelands, passing them on to American-born generations.

The population of the northern Midwestern states was definitively shaped by this wave of migration from central and northern Europe. According to U.S. Census figures, more than 50% of the state's residents indicated German or part German as their ethnic origin. Scandinavians and Slavs also comprise substantial percentages of the population.

Consistent with the heritage of its inhabitants, the soundscape of traditional music in Wisconsin and neighboring states reflects a German-Slavic-Scandinavian synthesis and differs considerably from that of other American regions. Relatively speaking, there is little English- or African-American population in the region. As a result, music forms representing the Anglo-Afro synthesizes, such as jazz, bluegrass, or the blues did not become influential in the Upper Midwest until they were conveyed by the advent of the phonograph and the radio in the 1920s. By this time the European-based music styles were already well established in the region. Seventy years later, in the 1990s, the Midwest's unique Euro-American traditional musics born in the nineteenth century live on.

The Instruments

The emergence of the polka coincided with the booming popularity of brass bands in central Europe and in America. Many midwestern lips met the mouthpieces of trumpets, clarinets and tubas to play marches, waltzes, and polkas by popular band composers like John Philip Sousa and Frantisek Kmoch. Immigrant music instructors and band leaders, especially Germans and Czechs, had a tremendous influence. Town bands became an object of civic pride in Midwestern communities. Talent pools of wind instrument players were created in even the smallest rural communities.

The nineteenth century also saw the invention of a variety of squeezeboxes—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.

Using mechanical principles of the Machine Age, the squeezebox was a nineteenth-century technological innovation much like the programmable keyboard, whose electronic and digital technology has automated musical performance in the late twentieth century. A single accordion or concertina player could replace a small ensemble, producing melodies and harmonies on the right hand while the left hand provided rhythmic chords and bass notes. The prized possession in many an immigrant's pack was a button accordion or concertina, and that musician undoubtedly played a lot of polkas, waltzes, and schottisches.

The epicenter of the squeezebox and brassband earthquake was in central Europe. In its northern and southern fringes, other instrumental traditions were persisting or developing in other directions. In western Scandinavia, at the time of the big wave of migration to America, the fiddle remained the main folk instrument. In Midwestern Norwegian- and Swedish-American communities, the fiddler or spelmaan vies for the limelight with the accordionist. The shared common interest in the violin has attracted Scandinavian Midwestern fiddlers to the old-time fiddle contest scene where they gather with Anglo-Celtic fiddlers from the South and North and French fiddlers from Canada to play a repertoire that blends their Scandinavian violin, schottisches, and polkas with plenty of American sentimental tunes, two-steps, and hoe-downs.

Nineteenth-century Croatians and Serbs from the Austro-Hungarian Empire had an instrumental revolution afoot. As part of a South Slavic movement for cultural affirmation, a simple village lute, the tamburitza, was refined and standardized for orchestral use. Slavic peasants whistled these improved instruments out the back door of the concert hall and played them in small tamburitza combos in the village tavern. Mass emigration from these parts to America occurred around the end of the last century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, tamburitza combos that played polkas, waltzes, and kolo line dances were formed in midwestern mining and industrial towns where these later immigrants settled.

Like the South Slavs who emigrated in their greatest numbers from the 1890s to World War...
American Polka Styles

Upon its arrival in the Midwest, the polka became a regional American folk tradition, much as the people who brought it over became American midwesterners. At rural house parties with the rug rolled up or at corner taverns in industrial towns, a squeezebox or horn was likely to keep the neighbors' feet stomping. A variety of distinct 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—represented in this compilation—are Slovenian, Norwegian, Polish, Dutchman (from 'Deutsch' meaning German). The ethnic names refer to the origin of the musicians' core repertoire and ethnic heritage. It is important to note that the music often differs considerably from the respective old-country traditions. Music and dancing have evolved in the Midwest and are shared among several ethnic groups. In most bands, repertoires and musical styles reflect a mix of ethnic sources, national traditions, and classical and popular music.

The American polka style centers around an accordion—originally the diatonic button box, which was largely replaced during the 1940s and 1950s by the chromatic piano accordion. The musical element next in importance is the staccato chording of a four-string banjo, sounded on all four eighth notes of the 2/4 polka bar. A second accordion may be added, playing improvised runs and riffs, or a sax for additional melody. The rhythm section is a "walking" bass and drums.

The Polish style uses reeds and brass backed by a big rectangular Chemnitzer concertina—not to be confused with the much smaller hexagonal Anglo-American and octagonal English concertinas. The Chemnitzer, invented in eastern Germany, is an instrument that now is virtually exclusive to North American polka music (though its close relative the bandoneon is important to Argentine tango). Polish-American concertinists play melody embedded in full, slightly dissonant chords. An electric bass guitar and a trap set are the rhythm section.

Like the Polish style, the Dutchman bands use brass and reeds and a Chemnitzer concertina. There are the similarities ends. In contemporary Dutchman bands, the concertina is emphasized as a lead melodic instrument and is played with fewer chords and without dissonance. The brass and reeds blend in a smooth, euphonious tone. The bass horn or tuba provides a bouncy, rollicking bass line over sparse, clean drumming.

Czech or 'Bohemian' bands typically use a pair of brass and a pair of reed players backed by a chording piano, tuba, and drums. The brass and reed sections continually exchange roles. While the trumpets take the lead, the reeds play non-improvised runs between the melodic phrases. When the melodic passage repeats, the roles are reversed. Some bands, (like the Clete Bellin Orchestra in this compilation) have replaced the two reed players with an accordion. In contrast with Dutchman style, Czech wind players eschew a pear-shaped tone, favoring instead a piercing, brassy or reedy tonal texture.

With a fiddler up front rather than a squeezebox player, Norwegian-American bands don't fit the popular stereotype of a "polka" band, even though, like the other styles, they also feature the waltz, schottische, and polka as their most frequent tempos. A Norwegian fiddler plays polkas with a clear tone, mostly on single strings, sticking closely to the melody. An additional fiddle or fiddles playing in unison or harmony may join the ensemble. A chording piano is the most frequent accompaniment, but the accordion, guitar, and plectrum banjo often are found in these ensembles.

Finnish polka strongly emphasizes the accordion or a pair of accordions played in a fast, driving style. On slow numbers, waltzes in particular, the style of play is highly ornamented with grace notes and runs. The traditional Finnish repertoire includes many haunting melancholy tunes in minor keys. Minors are rarely used in traditional German, Slovenian, Czech, or Norwegian dance music, though they do appear in the Polish and Croatian styles. Since many Slovenian concertinists live near the Finns in the Lake Superior area, Finnish bands often play quite a few Slovenian tunes.

Tamburitza combos use the five fretted string instruments of the tamburitza 'family' which range in size from smaller than a mandolin to larger than a string bass. The small, oval-shaped prim ("preem") is the highest melodic instrument; the next melodic instrument, the brac ('brach') is a little smaller than a 3/4 size guitar. The čelo brac ('CHEL-o brach') and bugara ("boo-GAR-ee-yah") are shaped like dreadnought guitars with f-holes. The čelo plays low melody and counter-melodies, while the bugara, tuned in an open chord, hits rhythm on the weak beats. The berde (BEAR-deh), which resembles a giant acoustic guitar, nails the down beats. Tamburitza music originated in a cultural zone where central European musical traditions meet Middle Eastern influences. Songs in polka and waltz tempo alternate with tunes in asymmetrical temps.
Twentieth Century Changes
In the twentieth century, radio broadcasts and recordings brought the polka to wider audiences. Clear channel WCCO in Minneapolis broadcast Whoopee John's Dutchman music to six or more states, much like WSM's Grand Ole Opry spread southern traditional music far and wide. And the 78 rpm discs of groups like the Rony Gosz Orchestra and Lawrence Duchow's Red Ravens helped them become popular as regional touring dance bands.

Shortly after World War II, almost exactly a century after the original polka craze in Europe, polka music and dancing briefly entered American popular culture in a big way. Slovenian-American accordionist Frankie Yankovic from Cleveland became the biggest star. His hits "Just Because" and "Blue Skirt Waltz" sold from coast to coast. His style melded central European melodies with the rhythm of a chording banjo and walking bass borrowed from Dixieland jazz. His straightforward vocals were in English as well as the original Slovenian.

Frankie Yankovic's Slovenian polka synthesis attracted many devotees nationwide, but Lil' Wally Jagiello established Chicago as the center of influence for another style, the Polish-American polka. Wally has churned out record after record on his own Jay Jay label, with a plan which of the upcoming festivals to participate in, learn where to order new and vintage recordings, and buy or repair instruments.

The booking directory of the Wisconsin Orchestra Leaders Association lists 28 polka festivals, mostly in Wisconsin and neighboring states. There are many more festivals farther afield. The larger polka festivals like the Gibson (Minnesota) Polka Days and the Pulaski (Wisconsin) Polka Days draw several thousand participants and employ up to two dozen bands. Dancing is the main thing; it is the dancers who organize polka events and who decide which musicians to hire. This type of event features two or three separate dance floors under tents or in a ballroom and concertina jam sessions out among the RVs and trailers parked in a nearby hayfield.

In Wisconsin, radio stations WAUN in Kewaunee and WTKM in Hartford devote most of their programming time to polka. Another dozen commercial stations in Wisconsin feature daily or weekly polka programs. Polka shows even have gained a toehold in public radio—stations WYMS in Milwaukee, WXPR in Rhinelander, and ten statewide stations of Wisconsin Public Radio. Bandleaders such as Jerry Goetsch, Alvin Styczynski, and Dick Rodgers had long running TV programs. Nowadays, syndicated polka TV shows like Colleen Van Els' "Polka Polka Polka" are invading cable, and State Senator Florian Chmielewski of Sturgeon Lake, Minnesota, claims to have the longest-running program in TV history. "Chmielewski Fun Time" has been a weekly show on Duluth's KDAL ever since 1955—nearly 2,000 programs!

Seven Dance Bands From Wisconsin
Of the Upper Midwestern states, Wisconsin may have the greatest diversity of Euro-American old-time dance bands that play the polka. In this compilation we present seven active bands from Wisconsin representing seven different polka traditions from the Midwest. All of these bands are deeply rooted in the communities they play for; most of the musicians have grown up where their style comes from. Two of the band leaders, Karl Hartwich and Steve Meisinger, make their full-time living with their bands, touring extensively throughout the country. The others have day jobs but play a rigorous schedule of weekend and evening dance gigs, which often take them around the Midwest and beyond.

The musical intentions of the bands vary. Steve Meisinger and Karl Hartwich are innovators within two distinctively American polka traditions. Steve has experimented with newer instrumental technology like midi interface, while Karl adheres to the traditional acoustic instruments, using many vintage concertinas and horns. Nonetheless, both Steve and Karl strive to introduce original material and new musical ideas.

Clete Bellin and the Oulu Hotshots both play...
old-country musical traditions, consciously seeking to remain very close to their old-world models. Both ensembles are concerned to perform their vocals accurately in the original language. Still, the Hotshots will play Slovenian polkas in Finnish style and do the occasional American pop standard like "Red Sails in the Sunset." Upon request, Clete's band can cover 1930s pop tunes and big band footwork.

Norm Dombrowski and Tip Bagstad are loyal to old-time styles of music that originated in ethnic communities in the Midwest and for which there is no exact equivalent in Europe. Both the Happy Notes and the Norskedalen Trio have a core repertoire from their own ethnic groups, but they also play quite a bit of other material as well.

Continuing two-way influences across the Atlantic have been very important in the tammarita tradition. Vatra seeks accurate in the original language.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Karl and the Country Dutchmen

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 Hartwichs lived outside of town in rural Orion, Illinois, where they raised hogs and field crops.

Karl was raised in Illinois but his family kept in touch with their Wisconsin relatives. As an adult, Karl has moved back upriver to Trempealeau, Wisconsin, a location more central to his band's regular gigs. 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 added more syncopation, chromatic runs, and improvisational flourishes to his play than his predecessors but uses only the old acoustic instruments and adheres to the basic Dutchman style.

Kar! is one of the few full-time professional Dutchmen musicians. When not playing music, Karl loves living on the river. He is an avid fisherman. Between his band's dance gigs he catches Mississippi River catfish on treble hooks baited with chicken livers and then fillets and fries them to perfection.

1. Minnesota Polka

Karl Hartwich, concertina; Don Burghardt, trumpet and valve trombone; Myron Moulbauer, trumpet, saxophone, clarinet, Marty Nachreiner, trumpet, saxophone, clarinet; Doug Young, tuba; Jerry Minar, keyboard, Holly Johnson, drums (from Is Everybody Happy, Karl and the Country Dutchmen 4889 91.1.CD)

This is a Dutchman signature tune made popular both by Whoopie John Willfahrt, who is often called the originator of Dutchman music, and by Harold Loeffelmacher's Six Fat Dutchmen, the New Ulm, Minnesota band which (like Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys) provided the name to its musical genre. Karl's arrangement uses crisp horn lines alternating with his concertina over rhythm provided by a bouncy tuba and sparse, purposeful drumming. On this tune, Karl puts a big emphasis on the rhythmic accents and syncopation known as 'Dutchman snap.'

2. Karl's Bad Schottische

(written by Karl Hartwich)

Karl Hartwich, concertina; Mike Cielecki, banjo; Joyce Cielecki, keyboard; Frank Galewski, tuba; Andrew Minar, trombone; Don Burghardt, trumpet; Doug Young, tuba; Holly Johnson, drums; Karl J-Hartwich, concertina; Mike Cielecki, banjo; Andrew Minar, trombone; Don Burghardt, trumpet; Doug Young, tuba; Holly Johnson, drums in the style of the outstanding Dutchman concertinist of his generation. Paradoxically, his music is at once controlled and free; Karl has added more syncopation, chromatic runs, and improvisational flourishes to his play than his predecessors but uses only the old acoustic instruments and adheres to the basic Dutchman style.

Karl is one of the few full-time professional Dutchmen musicians. When not playing music, Karl loves living on the river. He is an avid fisherman. Between his band's dance gigs he catches Mississippi River catfish on treble hooks baited with chicken livers and then fillets and fries them to perfection.

1. Minnesota Polka

Karl Hartwich, concertina; Don Burghardt, trumpet and valve trombone; Myron Moulbauer, trumpet, saxophone, clarinet, Marty Nachreiner, trumpet, saxophone, clarinet; Doug Young, tuba; Jerry Minar, keyboard, Holly Johnson, drums (from Is Everybody Happy, Karl and the Country Dutchmen 4889 91.1.CD)

This is a Dutchman signature tune made popular both by Whoopie John Willfahrt, who is often called the originator of Dutchman music, and by Harold Loeffelmacher's Six Fat Dutchmen, the New Ulm, Minnesota band which (like Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys) provided the name to its musical genre. Karl's arrangement uses crisp horn lines alternating with his concertina over rhythm provided by a bouncy tuba and sparse, purposeful drumming. On this tune, Karl puts a big emphasis on the rhythmic accents and syncopation known as 'Dutchman snap.'

2. Karl's Bad Schottische

(written by Karl Hartwich)

Karl Hartwich, concertina; Mike Cielecki, banjo; Joyce Cielecki, keyboard; Frank Galewski, tuba;
Kim Ristow, drums

(from Is Everybody Happy, Karl and the Country Dutchmen 4889 91.1.CD)

One of the many original tunes Karl has composed in the traditional Dutchman style to showcase his concertina virtuosity. The schottische is a perky 4/4-time dance very popular with Germans and Scandinavians in the Midwest. It can be danced in couples, threes, fours or in a big ring (as seen on the cover of this booklet). The scat singing Karl and his band do on this number reflects his freewheeling yet serious approach to the music.

3. Fleeting Memories Waltz Karl Hartwich, concertina; Mike Cielecki, banjo; Joyce Cielecki, keyboard; Frank Galewski, tuba; Holly Johnson, drums

(from Karl & The Country Dutchmen: Concertina Solos with the Old and New Hengel Concertinas, JMB Sound JMB31005 1995)

In playing this waltz, Karl "breaks the rules" of Dutchman style. Dutchman improvisation is usually limited to grace notes or funs between melodic passages. Here Karl improvises quite freely, considerably departing from the tune of this well-known Polish folk song, Jak szypko. Living on the Mississippi River, it isn't surprising that Karl and his sidemen appreciate and sometimes play improvised traditional jazz. It is significant, however, that on this tune Karl does not use "blue notes" but improvises with the Dutchman genre's own set of tonal conventions.

4. Gary's Polka Karl Hartwich, concertina; Mike Cielecki, banjo; Joyce Cielecki, keyboard; Frank Galewski, tuba; Holly Johnson, drums

(from Karl & The Country Dutchmen: Concertina Solos with the Old and New Hengel Concertinas, JMB Sound JMB31005 1995)

Karl attributes this tune, also called "Kaputzer," to Leo Johnson, a tuba player from Minnesota. The tune has also caught on with Scandinavian fiddlers. Karl is playing his 1937 Patek triple note concertina on this recording, which produces a rich, reedy sound and showcases his awesome instrumental skills.

The Norskedalen Trio

Tilford "Tip" Bagstad was born on a western Wisconsin tobacco farm in the 1930s. The Norwegian farmers in the area southeast of La Crosse around Westby and Coon Valley have clung to their old-country traditions with the same tenacity it takes to farm in this rugged, unglaciated coulee country.

Though Tip had been a music enthusiast for a long time, he was 48 before he took up the fiddle. There was no shortage of older Norwegian fiddlers in his area to learn tunes from. In 1982 Tip and Eleanor joined forces with dairy-farm wife and a fellow Norskedalen stalwart Beatrice Olson to form the cultural center's house band—The Norskedalen Trio. The trio performs for weddings, for Sons of Norway lodges, for visitors to the Norskedalen museum, and for community events like Syttendemai, the annual Norwegian independence day festival in Westby. They perform in Minnesota and Iowa as well as in Wisconsin, playing a repertoire of Norwegian and American old time tunes.

Musicians: Tilford "Tip" Bagstad, fiddle; Beatrice Olson, accordion; Eleanor Bagstad, piano, perform on each track.

(all tracks from the LP The Norskedalen Trio, Encore Productions E-1083 1983)

5. Remmem Valsen

This Norwegian tune has entered the repertoire of many midwestern polka bands as "The Peek-a-Boo Waltz." Tip's fiddle plays the lead, blended with Bea Olson's accordion, to the rhythm of local organizations. Proud Norwegians, Tip and Eleanor have been key players in the establishment of Norskedalen, a local community organization that operates a Norwegian cultural center and historical farmstead museum.
Eleanor playing chords on the piano. The waltz is by far the most important tempo in the Norwegian-American dance repertoire.

6. Fylke Dans
This tune is in a rollicking 4/4 tempo suitable for dancing the schottische, as it is called in America, or reinlander as it is called in Norway—a very popular social dance among Scandinavian-Americans.

7. All Smiles Tonight
Tip learned this tune at an old-time fiddlers' gathering in Yankton, SD. It is a nineteenth-century sentimental song in waltz tempo typical of the American repertoire warmly embraced by Norwegian-American fiddlers.

8. Ed Quall's Polka
Tip learned this polka from the late Leonard Finseth, an outstanding fiddler from Blair, Wisconsin. Leonard had named it after the fiddler he learned it from—a typical Norwegian-American tune-naming custom.

Norm Dombrowski's Happy Notes Orchestra
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, Wisconsin, a rural area of central Wisconsin populated by Polish-American dairy and potato farmers. The Dutchman style of polka was the popular sound at old-time dances, but according to Norm, the bands he heard didn't sound lively or spontaneous. Perched behind bandstands, the musicians seemed to have their noses stuck in their sheet music.

Then, in 1956, Chicago's Lil' Wally Jagiello gave legendary performances for two nights at the Peplin Ballroom in Mosinee, just north of Stevens Point. Attendees say huge crowds overflowed the ballroom, standing six deep in a ring around the building. Norm made it inside, where he heard Polish polka sound modern yet firmly grounded in the Polish folk music familiar to him from house parties and weddings. Norm was impressed: there was no sheet music, and the musicians were as lively as a rock n' roll band. Norm decided he wanted to play in this style, and he was determined to become a singing drummer like his new hero Lil' Wally. 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.

Norm's musical talents seem to have been inherited by his children. By the 1980s, the Happy Notes evolved into a family band as Norm's sons and daughters grew old enough to become competent musicians. Unlike many Polish polka bands, Norm did not adopt the modern, streamlined style known as "Dyno" or "Push," choosing to remain closer to the "honky" style of music. Norm stresses Polish instrumental tunes and old songs but also includes German, Czech, and Norwegian numbers in the band's repertoire to satisfy patrons of other ethnic backgrounds.

Musicians: Norm Dombrowski, drums and vocals; Ken Camlek, trumpet and vocals; Mark Dombrowski, saxophone, clarinet, and vocals; Marie Kubowski, piano, concertina, violin and vocals; Jon Dombrowski, accordion and vocals; Joe Dombrowski, trumpet and vocals; Jane Dombrowski, vocals (all tracks from It's My 35th Anniversary, Gold Records G-C-5001 1993)

9. Dorothy's Oberek
The Happy Notes' raucous sound features trumpet, clarinet, and concertina playing contrapuntally over a rhythm section of electric bass guitar and drums. The oberek is a fast 3/4 time dance characteristic of the Polish-American style. An oberek has strong accents on the second and third beats for seven measures. Then there is an accent shift to the downbeat on the last (eighth) measure of the tune. Norm says this is an old tune, and he doesn't know who the Dorothy in the title might be.

10. Mountaineer Polka
The mountaineers referred to in the title of this tune are the Gorals, a distinct regional Polish culture group from the Tatra Mountains in southern Poland. Marie Kubowski's use of the fiddle and the modal feel of the tune are characteristic of Gorali music.

11. Chicago Waltz
Norm has heard this waltz played at Polish weddings around Stevens Point for as long as he can remember.

12. Happy Fellow
(Jestem Chlopak Wesoly)
Polka musicians frequently stress that theirs is
"happy music." The "happy fellow" in this song seems to be a spurned lover who makes a point to be quite cheerful about going out dancing and drinking. The Happy Notes sing this Polish folk song with a lot of verve.

Jestem Chłopak Wesoły
Nie potrzebuje ja ciebie.
Bo mam myśle inne w głowie.

I am a happy fellow
I don't need you
Because I have other things on my mind.

And when Saturday comes
To a good dance I am going
And good vodka I will drink.

Vatra
The name of this tamburitz combo means "fire" in Croatian. It is appropriate for this group of young musicians whose instrumental skills are pyrotechnic. Vatra’s members are all young Croatian-American men from Milwaukee, born in the 1970s. They learned their music and singing during the 1980s in Milwaukee’s junior tamburitza ensembles, which are community-based ethnic youth orchestras and dance groups.

The groups rehearsed at St. Augustine’s Church, a Croatian parish surrounded by the hulking remains of the closed-down Allis-Chalmers tractor factory, a plant that provided a livelihood to many local Croatian-Americans in previous generations. On the tile floor of the church school gymnasium, the boys who became Vatra met virtually every Sunday afternoon from the age of eight through their high school years to hone their playing and singing skills.

Learning the basics of the instrument by playing simple orchestral arrangements of Croatian folk songs, the boys soon became fluent in the idiom of the tamburitza. Then came opportunities to play in a small combo—accompanying other group members on stage in dance choreographies, playing for parties and receptions, or just jamming. At picnics and church dinners they watched and listened and sometimes were allowed to sit in with established regional tamburitza combos like Zagreb and Slatina.

In 1991, while they were still teenagers, Vatra started to take professional jobs. As they matured, Vatra eventually gained the reputation of being one of the best American tamburitza combos. They have played the Croatian ethnic circuit of lamb roasts and fraternal lodge halls from Pennsylvania to Los Angeles. Recently Vatra also has begun to “cross-over,” playing for mainstream audiences in a “world music” bar on Milwaukee’s trendy Brady Street and on Wisconsin Public Radio’s “Hotel Milwaukee” program.

Musicians: Ryan Werner, prim and brač and čelo; Chris Ulm, brač and vocals, Boris Kuzmanović, brač and vocals; Dave Plogej, bugarija and vocals, Ivo Gretić bari.

(All tracks from Pravi Hrvatski Dom, Sarma Records V-001 1997)

13. Gde su oni lepi caiji?
(Where have the good times gone?)

As is typical of American tamburitza combos, Vatra plays a repertoire drawn from various regions of Croatia. This song, in polka tempo, is sung in the Kajkavian dialect of northwestern Croatia. The title features the German loan word Zeit (cajti in Croatian). The lyrics about a poor peasant who loses his sweetheart to a richer man and therefore sets out into the world is a typical tale of emigration.

Navek sem bez grunta bil siromak
Rače sem sosedu kral
Da bi ih Račiči svoji dal
To je ljubavi bil znak.

Chorus: Gde su oni lepi caiju
Gde smo se skrivački znašli v kleti najti
Pak smo tam si kušeceli dali
Slatki kakti mladi.

Da ne bjam tak sam v teške dane to je
Koj' put sem znal pojit' vu kvar
Al Roža pozabili nis nigdaj
Z drugom ne bjam zeniš se.

Oženil japej je z drugim nju
Zato se spreman ja u svet
Vrnal se na bjam još puno let
Kaj bi kaj bez druge tu
I have always been a landless poor man
I stole roses from my neighbor's garden
To give them to my little Rosie
That was a sign of love.

Where have all the good times gone?
When we used to secretly meet in the vineyard shed
There we shared a little kiss
As sweet as honey.

So as not to be alone in these hard days,
Sometimes I've cheated a little bit.
But I will never forget Rose;
I will not marry another.

Her father married her to another,
That's why I'm setting out into the world.
I won't return for many a year.
What would I do here without my dear one?

14. Bunjevačko kolo/S one strane Dunava (Bunjevac kolo/On the other side of the Danube)
This tune is the kolo dance of the Bunjevci, a Croatian ethnic group which migrated from the Dinaric mountains to the plains of northeastern Croatia. It is joined to a wedding song in the frenetic style of the Romani tamburitza players of that region.

S one strane Dunava guda pravi svatove
Velike svatove, sve na travi zelenoj
Zove mena da igram a ja kazem da neznam.
Istina neću ja, nemaćemo da igram.

On that side of the Danube, the head of the household is putting on a wedding feast
A big wedding feast, all on the green grass.

They call on me to dance but I say I don't know how.
The truth is I will not. I don't have boots for dancing.

15. Jeste li čuli 'judi
(People, have you heard?)
This song is steeped in the traditions of Dalmatia, the coastal region of Croatia—its maritime commerce, the limestone karst landscape, and the infamous bura, a northeast wind which ravages the Adriatic shores. Dalmatian melodic style shares a lot with Italian folk music. This song, in waltz tempo and sung in the dialect of the Croatian coast, is a straightforward treatment of a maritime tragedy.

Jeste li čuli 'judi,
Dogđido se zlo
Ivanu klakaru, tmurna ja,
Potopija se brad.

I parti je iz Stona
Presoozija je klak
Zaspahala velika bura
Pu ga potopija.

I bija je veliki spraved
I velika žalost
Borbeni Ivanis, tuga ja,
Drža mnu je govor.

Nosiču crni veo
Crniji od oćiju,
Grijenu košulu nosiću ja,
Žalit će klakara.

People have you heard,
An evil thing has happened
The ship of Ivan the lime burner,
Oh sad me, has sunk.

And when he left the town of Ston
Hauling lime
A big northeast wind blew up
And sunk him.

There was a big funeral
And great sorrow
Ivanis the fighter, oh sad me,
Did the funeral oration.

I will wear a black veil,
Blacker than my eyes.
I'll wear a red shirt,
I'll mourn for the lime burner.

16. Bijeli slapovi (White Waves)
Ryan Werner, the combo's youngest member is from a prominent Milwaukee tamburitza family; his father, aunt and uncles are noted players. This original number by Ryan showcases his virtuoso playing of the prim tamburitza.
The Steve Meisner Band

Steve Meisner was born in 1960 in Whitewater, a small Wisconsin 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 still in their early teens when they started taking professional gigs. That was the early 1950s, just in the wake of Frankie Yankovic's ascendency. The Slovenian style of polka had become 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 got an ambivalent message from Verne when he showed an early 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 on 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 some jobs with the Meisner band, often placing the diminutive kid on a box so he could reach the microphone.

Steve started his own band 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 that expresses a wide range of emotions.

17. Jammin' Polkas

Steve Meisner; accordion, bass, piano, and vocals; Rick Hartmann, drums; Larry Sokolowski, saxophone; Carl Hartmann, banjo
(from Jammin' Polkas HG Records HG-5015 1988)

"Jammin' Polkas" is Steve Meisner's tribute to his musical mentors—a jumping medley of several of the signature tunes from the outstanding Slovenian polka musicians of the previous generation—Louie Bashell, Johnny Pecon, Frankie Yankovic and Steve's father, Verne Meisner. The opening and closing vocals give Steve's reasons for playing polkas today.

18. Meisner Magic

Steve Meisner, accordion, bass, and piano; Verne Meisner, accordion; Larry Sokolowski, saxophone, Rick Hartmann, drums
(from Meisner Magic HG Records HG 5029 1984)

This is an original polka tune by Steve, named after a scenic river in northwestern Wisconsin, showcases the vibrato-tinged sound of the "wet-tuned button box."
The Oulu Hotshots
County Trunk FF is a narrow country road running through Bayfield County's Oulu Township in far northwestern Wisconsin. In jest, Bill Kangas reckons that it stands for "Finn Freeway." On this hardscrabble cutover land thirty miles east of Duluth, named for the northernmost province of Finland, Finnish-American farmers scratch out a living not far from the south shore of Lake Superior. The Oulu Hotshots, singer/drummer Bill Kangas and accordionists Glen and Leroy Lahti, grew up in this highly ethnic community. As children they heard the music of local Finnish musicians Walter and Allie Johnson. And they discovered old Finnish-American recordings—78s with the music of songwriters like Hiski Salomaa and 1950s Ips from accordionist Viola Turpeinen, a Finnish-American cultural icon.

In the 1970s, young accordion prodigies brothers Glen and Leroy Lahti began to perform for local events with their elder brother Archie on drums. When Archie shipped out on the Great Lakes iron ore boats in 1974, Bill Kangas joined the group as a singer and drummer. Bill's strong Finnish and English language vocals, his insistent drumming, and the energetic accordion playing of the two Lahti boys made the Oulu Hotshots a sensation in the western Lake Superior area.

The Hotshots have played at all of the major Finnish-American festivals across the United States, from Massachusetts to California. They also have traveled to Finland, where their talents are appreciated. The Oulu Hotshots performed at Finland's largest folk festival in Kaustinen. But they did not ignore their hometown's Old World namesake—they also played right on the town square at the Garlic Festival in Oulu, Finland.

20. Sakkijärven Polka
Glenn Lahti, accordion; LeRoy Lahti, accordion, Bill Kangas, drums and vocals (from Oulu Hotshots—Bringin' It Back: Old Time Finnish Music Inland Sea Recordings 83033)

The Finnish polka repertoire includes many tunes in minor keys, the result, perhaps, of Russian musical influences. This song exalts the beauty of Karelia, a territory of ethnic Finns just east of Finland, which remains a part of Russia and the town of Sakkijärvi, which was ceded to Russia after the war. According to Bill Kangas, "Sakkijärven polka" was used by the Finnish Army to jam Russian radio signals during the Russo-Finnish Wars of 1939 and 1941-44. During a crucial point in the war, the Finns are said to have played this song for three days straight.

On kauininta muistona Karjalan maa mutta vieläkin syömessä seinätaa
Kun soitajan sormista kuulatsaa Sakkijärven polka
Se polka taas menneitä mieleen tuo ja se outoa kaipuuta rintaan luo

Hei soitaja hautarin soita suu Sakkijärven polkka!

Nuoren ja vanhan se tanssin vie ei sille polkalle vertaan lie
Sen kanssa on vaikka mieron tie Sakkijärven polkka
Siina on liplatus lainetien siinä on huojunta honkien
Karjala soi kaikki tietää sen Sakkijärven polkka

Tule tule tyytö nyt kanssani tanssin kun polkka niin herkästi helkättää
Voi hevo surko ja hamma turkoo kun sil on

niin ihmeesti suurempi pää
Tule tule tyytö nyt kanssani tanssin niin med on riemiu ja savinen sää

Sakkijärvi se meidät on pois mutta jät lokki
senttikän polkka
Kun nakkas rantat on jäänsee taa niin vial se
kuloja lokulan sau
Kun kuuntelee soittoa kuihaisaa Sakkijärven polkka
Se polkka on voin mutta sellainen että tielle se
johtavi muistajen
On sointuna Karjalan kaunoisen Sakkijärven polkka

The Karelian land remains a beautiful memory, still it rings in the heart. When you hear the music of Sakkijärvi from the fingers of the musician, that polka brings bygone times to mind and a strange longing to the heart.

Hey, musician, let the Sakkijärven polka play!

It tempts the young and old to dance, that polka has no match. You can travel the homeless road with the Sakkijärven polka.

It has the ripple of the waves and the hum of the pine trees.

Karelia sings, everyone knows the Sakkijärven polka.
Girl, come on and dance with me as the polka so gently resounds
The horse may worry and gnash his teeth, he has a great big head
Come on girl and dance with me; we have the joyous summer eve.

Siikkijärvi is gone from us but the polka has remained
When the beloved shores are left behind, the wanderer is comforted
By the yearning sound of the Sakkijalven polka
It is only a polka but it leads to the path of memories
As a sound of beautiful Karelia, the Sakkijärven polka.

21. Maailman Matti
(Matti, Man of the World)
Glenn Lahti, accordion; Leroy Lahti, accordion, Bill Kangas, drums and vocals
(from Oulu Hotshots—Bringin' It Back: Old Time Finnish Music Inland Sea Recordings 83033)
This song is attributed to Hiski Saaloma, a Finnish immigrant to Northern Michigan, a tailor with a talent for writing topical songs that reflected his leftist views. A master of irony, Hiski humorously glorifies the Finnish itinerant worker—Matti, the man of the world.

I still haven't found a daughter-in-law for my mother.
Since I was small I have made a living playing cards
Even though my parents wanted me to join the clergy
My mother is sad that I did not become a preacher.

22. Orpopojan Valssi
(Orphan Boy's Waltz)
Leroy Lahti, accordion; Glenn Lahti, accordion, Bill Kangas, drums and vocals; Marie Mattson, violin
(from Bill Kangas & The Lahti Brothers CMS Records 4804)
The image of the wanderer and the orphan figure prominently in some of the best known Finnish folk songs, 'Kuulkerin Valssi' (Vagabond Waltz) and this song. This nineteenth century waltz describes the hopes and dreams of an orphan boy.

23. Finn Polka
Leroy Lahti, accordion; Glenn Lahti, accordion; Bill Kangas, drums; Marie Mattson, violin
(from Bill Kangas & The Lahti Brothers CMS Records 4804)
The two accordions played by the Lahti brothers and Marie Mattson's violin expertly complement each other on this polka tune played at the fast 2/4 tempo favored by Finish-American polka dancers.
He's busy night and day; let him bum around. He will find me. I know him.

He was going to our village; He was bringing love to my heart and bouquets of roses He isn't coming anymore, maybe he's angry Where did he go? lie probably didn't love me anyway.

26. Around the Moon
Clete Bellin, piano; vocals; John Weidow; trumpet; Joe Jerabek, tuba; Mike Hager, trumpet; Diana Schroeder, accordion; Bill Jerabek, drums; vocal harmony
(from Clete Bellin & His Orchestra Invites You To 'Czech It Out' CJR Records 1993)
This polka features lyrics in Czech and English which refer to a folk weather belief important to Czech farmers in the Old World and the New.

Okolo měsíce kola se dělají
Tý naše panenky, ty naše panenky, tísice hledají
Tisíce hledají samy je nemají
Jen ty jedný šaty, jen ty jedný šaty, co na sobě mají.

V páté je vyperou, v sobotu naškrabí
a v neděli na ulici, a v neděli na ulici, parádou dělají.

(Sung in English)
Ring ring around the moon. There's going to be a change. Let the music play all day; rainy weather's on the way. There's going to be a change.
Translation of Czech verses: Around the moon there is a ring You, our little miss are looking intently. Looking intently, all you have is the one dress That you are wearing.
On Friday you wash it, on Saturday you starch it And on Sunday on the street you make a parade.

Richard March received his Ph.D. in folklore from Indiana University and he has been the Folk Arts Coordinator for the Wisconsin Arts Board since 1983. He co-curated the Wisconsin Program at the 1998 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. He is an active musician and plays the button accordion in the Downhome Dairyland Band.

FOR FURTHER READING

FURTHER LISTENING
To order music or for booking information contact: Karl & The Country Dutchmen, P.O. Box 81, Trempealeau, WI 54661, (608) 534-7450.

Steve Meisner: A Meisner Mini Concert; Jammin' Polkas; Songs of Love; An Ivory Romance (cassette only). To order or for booking information contact: Steve Meisner, 205 Hazel St., Whitewater, WI 53190-2119, (414) 473-7184.

Verne Meisner: Those Were the Days; Verne, Verne, Verne; Verne, El Rio Drive; Verne Meisner Plays a Song For You; Polkanna; The Happy Sounds of Verne Meisner; Dance Holiday, Martini, Manhattan, & Meisner. To order music or for booking information contact: Verne Meisner, 1309 S. Grand Ave., Waukesha, WI 53186, (414) 547-5379.


Vatra: Prawi Hrvatski Dom, Sarma Records V-001 1997. To order recordings or for booking information contact Davor Pozgaj, 1609 North Prospect #705, Milwaukee, WI 53202.

ABOUT SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS

Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print.

The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways from the Moses Asch estate in 1987 to ensure that the sounds and genius of the artists would be preserved for future generations. All Folkways recordings are available on high-quality audio cassettes or by special order on CD. Each recording is packed in a special box along with the original LP liner notes.

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings was formed to continue the Folkways tradition of releasing significant recordings with high-quality documentation. It produces new titles, reissues of historic recordings from Folkways and other record labels, and in collaboration with other companies also produces instructional videotapes and recordings to accompany published books, and other educational projects.

The Smithsonian Folkways, Folkways, Cook, Paredon, and Dyer-Bennet record labels are administered by the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies. They are one of the means through which the Center supports the work of traditional artists and expresses its commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding.

You can find Smithsonian Folkways Recordings at your local record store. Smithsonian Folkways, Folkways, Cook, Paredon, and Dyer-Bennet recordings are all available through: Smithsonian Folkways Mail Order 955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 7300, MRC 953 Washington, DC 20560 phone (202) 287-7298 fax (202) 287-7299 orders only 1 (800) 410-9815 (Discover, MasterCard, and Visa accepted)

For further information about all the labels distributed through the Center, please consult our internet site (http://www.si.edu/folkways), which includes information about recent releases, our catalogue, and a database of the approximately 35,000 tracks from the more than 2,300 available recordings (click on Database Search).

Or request a printed catalogue by writing to: Catalogue, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 955 L'Enfant Plaza, SW, Suite 2600, Smithsonian Institution MRC 914, Washington, DC 20560, USA. Or use our catalogue request phone: (202) 287-3262, or e-mail folkways@aol.com

CREDITS

Compiled, annotated, and produced by Richard March
Cover photo, rear card and back of booklet photos courtesy of Richard Hamilton Smith Photography, St. Paul, MN 55114
Tray card photo courtesy of Dick Blau
Mastered by Charlie Pilzer at AirShow, Springfield, VA
Sound supervision by Pete Reninger
Smithsonian Folkways production supervised by Anthony Seeger and Amy Horowitz
Production coordinated by Mary Monsieur and Michael Maloney
Editorial assistance by Peter Seitel
Design and layout by Visual Dialogue, Boston, MA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Arnold Alanen, Sinkilia McCabe, William March, Phil Nusbaum, and Dick Blau. Special thanks to the Wisconsin Arts Board.
deep polka dance music from the midwest

Deep Polka brings out the vitality and variety of the Polka and related European-derived dance music played by bands throughout the upper Midwest today. Although little known outside this region, these important and enduring music traditions bring thousands of people together to dance almost every weekend. Outstanding selections from recordings by seven bands, representing seven distinct regional traditions—“Dutchman,” Norwegian, Polish, Tamburitza, Slovenian, Finnish, and Czech—demonstrate the deep musical and cultural roots that are so significant to its participants. Extensive notes, song texts, translations, bibliography, discography. 62 minutes.

Karl and the Country Dutchmen
1. Minnesota Polka 2:25
2. Karl’s Bad Schottische 2:01
3. Fleeting Memories Waltz 2:21
4. Gary’s Polka 2:13
The Norskedalen Trio
5. Remmem Valse 2:39
6. Fylke Dans 1:36
7. All Smiles Tonight 2:38
8. Ed Quall’s Polka 1:41
Norm Dombrowski’s Happy Notes
9. Dorothy’s Oberek 2:04
10. Mountaineer Polka 2:18
11. Chicago Waltz 2:47
12. Happy Fellow 2:07

Vatra
13. Gde su oni lepi cajti? 3:03
14. Bunjevačko kolo/ Song on strane Dunava 2:47
15. Jeste li čuli ‘judi 2:20
16. Bijeli slapovi 2:12
The Steve Meisner Band
17. Jammin’ Polkas 5:49
18. Meisner Magic 2:07
19. Jump River Polka 2:17
The Oulu Hotshots
20. Säkkijärven Polka 2:12
21. Maailman Matti 2:25
22. Orpopojaan Valssi 2:51
23. Finn Polka 1:41
The Clete Bellin Orchestra
24. Owl Polka 3:37
25. Little Vagabond Waltz 3:00
26. Around the Moon 2:43