Don’t think all polka sounds alike. Building on the success of its predecessor, *Deep Polka*, which featured Wisconsin bands, this compilation goes deeper and wider, featuring great polka bands from seven states. You’ll delight in the exhilarating dance party music played by seven outstanding bands from urban Pittsburgh to rural Nebraska, each coming from distinct ethnic musical traditions that run the gamut from honky-style Polish to Norwegian polkabilly. This collection exemplifies the vitality of the continuing polka tradition, so put *Deeper Polka* on the box, roll up the rug, and grab a partner. 36-page booklet, extensive notes, 69 minutes.

**Stas Golonka and the Chicago Masters**
1. I Won’t Go Home 1:58
2. Iron Casket Oberek 1:59
3. Chicago is a Polka Town 2:26
4. Return to Me 2:34

**Jerry Grcevich**
5. Vatrogasna polka and Kada čujem tambure (The Fireman’s Polka and When I Hear Tamburitzas) 3:56
6. Daj mi daj (Allow me) 2:34
7. Moja Juliška (My Julie) 3:13

**The Mark Vyhlidal Band**
8. Betty Polka 1:42
9. Red Handkerchief (Cerveny satecku) 2:35
10. Grandmother’s Joy Laendler (Babicina radost) 3:01
11. Clover in the Woods Polka (Jetelicku v lese) 2:34

**Nancy Hlad**
12. Raisin-Nut Polka 2:23
13. Anne’s Waltz 2:15

14. Sweet Sixteen Polka 2:15
15. Top of the Hill Polka 2:13

**Al Reko and Oren Tikkanen**
16. Jätkäen Jenkka (The Logger’s Schottische) 2:41
17. Nujalan Talko Polka (The Work-Beet at Nujala Polka) 2:26
18. Suvivjön Valssi (Midsummer Night Waltz) 2:39
19. Lumber-Jäkkki (The Lumberjack) 3:02

**Brian and the Mississippi Valley Dutchmen**
20. Muziky Muziky Polka 2:51
21. Laughing Concertina 2:04
22. Chicago Waltz 2:32
23. Julida Polka 2:04

**The Goose Island Ramblers**
24. In Heaven There Is No Beer 2:28
25. There’s No Norwegians in Dickeyville 2:27
26. Wendy’s Schottische 2:32
27. Swiss Yodel Waltz 1:49
MORE DANCE MUSIC FROM THE MIDWEST

Jerry Grcevich
5. Vatrogsna polka and Kada čujem tambure (The Fireman’s Polka and When I Hear Tamburitzas) 3:56
6. Daj mi daj (Allow me) 2:38
7. Moja Jukiška (My Julie) 3:13
   (Jerry Grcevich/Miro Skoro)

The Mark Vyhilidal Band
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Nancy Hlad
12. Raisin-Nut Polka 2:23
   (Nancy Hlad)
13. Anne’s Waltz 2:15
   (Frank Gyovak/Del-Gay International, BMI)
14. Sweet Sixteen Polka 2:15
   (Nancy Hlad)
15. Top of the Hill Polka 2:13
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16. Jàtkàen Jenkka (The Logger’s Schottische) 2:41
   (Justeeri/Musikki Fazer, Helsinki 1970)
17. Nujalan Talko Polka (The Work-Bee at Nujala Polka) 2:26
18. Suvijyö Valssi (Midsummer Night Waltz) 2:39
   (Haikki Saine)
19. Lumber-Jäkki (The Lumberjack) 3:02
   (Arthur Kylander)

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24. In Heaven There Is No Beer 2:28
25. There’s No Norwegians in Dickeyville 2:27
   (Bruce Bollerud and K. Wendell)
26. Wendy’s Schottische 1:49
   (arr. K. Wendell Whitford)
27. Swiss Yodel Waltz 2:32

For lyrics to the songs performed on Deeper Polka in their original languages and the English translations go to www.folkways.si.edu/catalog/40140/lyrics.htm
INTRODUCTION

“It’s just another polka, like any other polka,” go the lyrics of a 1950s hit by Frankie Yankovic, but a listener to the seven bands included here will notice right away that these polkas sure don’t all sound the same! Each band plays polkas in a noticeably different style. Americans from diverse European origins have created a wide array of ways to play the polka. Some bands stress concertina and tuba, some feature banjo and accordion, some play polkas on fiddles and guitars, and some use the exotic fretted strings called tamburitzas.

With so many bands from so many parts of the United States playing so many types of polka, it is natural to ask the question “Where did this music and the dance that’s done to it come from?” For answers, we have to look back more than a century and a half.

POLKA BEGINS AS A EUROPEAN POP CULTURE DANCE CRAZE

A lot of treatises and encyclopedia articles offer an origin myth for the polka. Each variant is a little different, but certain key elements always seem to be present: in the 1830s, in any of numerous named locations somewhere in the Czech/Polish/German border area of Austria-Hungary, a Czech or sometimes a Polish servant girl demonstrates to her employer, a schoolteacher, or some other sort of learned person (in all versions a man), a dance that she has invented. He writes it down. The name polka is given to the dance, variously interpreted to refer to the word for Polish woman (polka), or sometimes to the Slavic word for half (pol, pola, polovica), supposedly in reference to some sort of half-steps or half-beats in the dance motions or rhythms. The learned person spreads the word, and within a few years, polka dancing is all the rage in the great cities of Europe.

If our concern is historical veracity, the origin story seems unlikely. A single person demonstrates a couple’s dance. It is "written down." Did this rural schoolteacher know some predecessor to Laban dance notation? and were there enough people who could read the notation to begin a dance craze?

The myth seems like appropriate Romantic-era hype to promote the polka, a popular culture fad that swept Europe in the 1840s. Connecting a hot new popular dance to supposed peasant origins must have made the polka appealing to Romantic-era intellectuals, infatuated with the idea of peasant culture but mostly from upper-class backgrounds and unacquainted with actual peasants. The underlying hierarchical notions that would have been typical of the thinking of their class in Austria-Hungary are embedded in the myth. The dance is a cultural appropriation from the romantic “other,” from servant to master, from female to male, from Slav to Teuton (in the frequent versions where the teacher is specified as ethnically German), and from illiterate to written.

Actually, no one can show a specific central European peasant dance that is clearly an antecedent of the polka. The courtly waltz, in vogue a few decades earlier, seems to be the more likely model. It had shocked conservative sensibilities in its era, just as the polka did in the 1840s. Unlike refined minuets, a man and a woman do the waltz, with arms around each other, gliding across the dance floor in leisurely 3/4 time. By the time the waltz had lost its shock value, along came the polka, still with couples dancing in each other’s arms, but now they hop frenetically to a peppy 2/4 tempo.

Speculative origins aside, we do know that polka sheet music appeared in Prague in 1837, around the time that brass bands from Bohemia began to spread the polka throughout Europe. By 1844, the polka was a major
dance craze in Paris and London, initially among the elite, only later adopted by the middle class and peasants. The polka came to America in the 1840s, initially popular among the elite as a European vogue.

A bit later in the 19th century, the time the elite polka fad was fading in the U.S., in Europe the social base of the polka was expanding greatly, as a part of the repertoire of popular brass bands. By the 1880s, John Philip Sousa was directing the U.S. Marine Band, and in Europe, František Knoch was an influential bandleader and composer, internationally famous as the "Bohemian March King." Urbanek & Sons of Prague published Knoch’s polkas, selling hundreds of thousands of copies in the late 19th century. For example, 120,000 copies of the sheet music for "Muziky Muziky," a polka performed by Brian Brueggen on track 20 of this CD, were sold.

**POLKA MIGRATES TO AMERICA WITH POLKA-LOVING CENTRAL EUROPEANS**

During the second half of the 19th century, just as the polka fad was spreading widely among the European populace, Central European villagers were migrating in large numbers to the Americas. Naturally they brought with them an affinity for the polka and its associated music. Once in America, the music and dance took on a new meaning. For decades after their immigration, European-Americans tended to associate mainy within their ethnic-based social groups. Several Central European ethnic groups began to emphasize the polka as emblematic of their Old World culture. For American Czechs, Germans, Poles, Slovians, and Swiss, the polka is an important ethnic symbol. Bands from these ethnic communities have produced most of American polka music. Many Belgians, Croatians, Danes, Dutch, Finns, Italians, Norwegians, Swedes, Ukrainians, and other European-Americans also identify the polka as a part of their heritage. Musicians from those groups have made significant contributions to American polka. Thus the polka, a creation of European popular culture, became a part of American ethnic folk culture.

The 19th-century polka craze also entered Mexico from Europe, and Mexican musicians interacted with musical German, Polish, and Czech immigrants in Texas to shape the polka style of Texas-Mexican *conjuntos* (bands). During the 20th century, Mexican-Americans have migrated to many areas of the United States, bringing the *conjunto* style of polka music and dancing with them.

The earliest recordings of American polka date from the early 1900s and reveal a diverse array of instrumentation and performance styles. Polkas were played by large brass bands, solo accordionists, and fiddle and concertina duos. The labels on 78-RPM discs were frequently in languages other than English, and often the music differed little from European antecedents. After several decades of gestation in the American environment, distinctive American polka traditions began to emerge, especially in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, each involving a standard instrumental lineup, a core repertoire, and distinct musical aesthetics. The names of polka styles refer to ethnic groups. The most widespread are Czech or "Bohemian," German or "Dutchman," Polish, Mexican, and Slovenian. A core constituency of dancers and players from the particular ethnic group is influential in each of these polka "scenes," but people from various ethnic backgrounds also participate. The exception is Mexican polka, played at dances where the dominant language is Spanish and few non-Mexicans participate. Though each polka tradition is distinct, mutual influences are common in the music and dancing. For more information about the history and development of the polka, see the liner notes to *Deep Polka*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40088.

On *Deeper Polka*, we present music from seven polka scenes. The players call their idioms honky-style Polish, tamburitza, Bohemian, Slovenian button box, Finnish, Dutchman, and Norwegian polkabily.
Chicago is often cited as the second-largest Polish city in the world. More than one million Polish-Americans live in the Chicago metro area. Since the late 19th century, Polish-American religious, cultural, and fraternal institutions have supported local Polish-American culture, whose vitality is shown by the facts that today more than 150,000 Polish speakers live in the area. Chicago is home to the Polish-American Museum and the Polish National Alliance, and more than forty Roman Catholic churches celebrate mass in the Polish language.

When it comes to Polish-American music, it is the Chicago-style polka that has swept Polish-American communities throughout North America. There are two distinct divisions in the Chicago sound: a slower, more contrapuntal, “honky” style, which originated in the 1940s and 1950s, and a driving, “push” style, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. The popularity and spread of each style can be attributed to the musical talent, innovations, hard work, and perseverance of a key proponent and musician: Lil’ Wally Jagielo for honky and Eddie Blazonczyk for push.

Stas Golonka was born in 1942 and grew up in the near-south-side Chicago neighborhood of Pilsen. His parents were Polish-American, and all of his grandparents were immigrants from Poland. The year he was born, Lil’ Wally Jagielo, a twelve-year-old sensation, was breaking into the Polish polka music scene in Chicago. He sang old Polish folksongs with a phenomenal voice, accompanied by bands that were developing a distinctively American way of playing Polish polka music.

Lil’ Wally played regularly at the famous Lucky Stop, where Stas and his schoolmates sneak ed in to listen. “I wanted to be a singing drummer—like Lil’ Wally,” Soon, Stas’s singing and drumming came to resemble Wally’s.

When Stas entered his teen years, in the mid-1950s, Wally was at the peak of his career. His grueling touring schedule, driving to one-nighters all over the Midwest and East, wore many of his sidemen down. “One of my friends told Wally that there was a kid who sounded ‘just like’ Lil’ Wally, singing and drumming, so he hired me to tour with him for the summer,” Stas recalls. On many records, Lil’ Wally had overdubbed a harmonic vocal to his own singing. With Stas in the band, he switched from drums to concertina and sang duets with Stas, coming close to duplicating the sound on the records.

Stas finished high school and went into the military, but he also continued to play with Lil’ Wally whenever he could. In 1967, Stas left the service, got married, and started to raise a family. By then, life on the road had damaged Wally’s health. Wally had moved to Florida, performing occasionally there and continuing to produce his polka records. He went north only in the summertime to perform, picking up local bands to back him. Stas’s band, the Chicago Masters, helped fill the honky music void in Chicago left by Wally’s departure. Sometimes they accompanied Wally when he was back in town.
For eighteen years, Stas combined music with a job as a meat cutter in a sausage factory until the firm went out of business. Since then, Stas has devoted his efforts entirely to music. He has toured extensively, following many of the same routes to Polish communities nationwide that Lil’ Wally used to follow. “I must have passed by the Statue of Liberty forty times,” Stas muses, thinking about the route from the Midwest to the Polish communities in Connecticut, where he often has played.

Stas remains devoted to the original honky sound. A couple of times he tried performing with his brother-in-law’s push-style band, the Keytones, but he maintains, “It just didn’t feel right. It wasn’t my style.” His clear and expressive voice is the trademark of his band. He usually sings solo, clearly enunciating the words in English or Polish. He speaks Polish fluently and understands the lyrics. He maintains a dignified stage presence. He makes it look effortless, setting a rollicking drumbeat and singing with heartfelt expression. He likes old Polish love songs and songs that celebrate good times. In keeping with his dignified manner, he avoids humorous parody songs.

1. I Won’t Go Home
With intertwining trumpet, clarinet, and concertina lines, this tune is a good example of a raucous, high-spirited, honky-style polka. The Polish-American polka tradition strongly emphasizes vocal numbers. In this Old World drinking song, the protagonist plans to make a night of it at the tavern.

2. Iron Casket Oberek
The oberek is a Polish folk dance in a fast 3/4 time, sometimes humorously called an industrial-strength waltz. Often the most traditional songs and tunes in a honky band’s repertoire are in oberek tempo. In this song, the protagonist suggests that cognac, flowers, and a Polish sausage can symbolize his life’s achievements.

3. Chicago is a Polka Town
Because English is the first language of an increasing number of Polish-American musicians and their audiences, many newer songs are composed in English. About half the vocal repertoire of most Polish-American bands is in English. This song, extolling the joy of polka dancing, is widely performed. In place of “Chicago,” bands often substitute the names of their own hometowns.

4. Return to Me
Male vocalists like Stas commonly sing folksongs that, like this one, reflect a female perspective. Many young Polish men working abroad for extended periods of time had to leave wives and girlfriends behind. Separation from a loved one is an especially frequent theme in the songs of immigrant communities.

Western Pennsylvania, where Jerry Grcevich has lived all his life, has more tamburitzas per square mile than any place outside of Croatia, and many argue that Jerry is the best. The greater Pittsburgh area and the surrounding mill and mining towns are home to the largest Croatian-American community. The prospect of work in Pennsylvania’s steel mills and coal mines attracted immigrants from impoverished South Slavic villages in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the most numerous of these were Croatians.

Croatian-Americans have made the tamburitza tradition their most visible and emphasized symbol of ethnic identity. In Europe and America, members of Croatia’s neighboring Slavic nationalities also play this family of fretted stringed instruments: there have been many important Serbian and Bosnian tamburitza players, and tamburitas are played in one region of Slovenia. Nonetheless, since the mid 19th century, it was Croatians who invested
the most effort in advancing the tamburitza and the song and dance traditions with which the instrument is associated.

Owing to a strong, ethnic community-based infrastructure, the tamburitza tradition remains strong, even among the third and fourth generations born in America. Since the beginning of the 20th century in the United States and Canada, Croatian ethnic communities have nurtured youth orchestras, and singing traditional folksongs and dancing choreographed versions of folk dances have become integral to their performances. In Pittsburgh, the Duquesne University Tamburitzans, a touring collegiate ensemble that performs eastern European music and dance, was established in 1937. Hundreds of graduates of Duquesne's "Tammies" have remained active lifelong ethnic musicians and/or teachers of youth orchestras. The network of youth groups, called "junior tammies," has become a de facto minor league for Duquesne. In the 1980s, the Croatian Fraternal Union organized its Junior Cultural Federation to support the work of the youth tamburitza ensembles, providing resources and organizing an annual festival.

Jerry Grocevich was born in East Pittsburgh in 1951. His family was deeply involved in tamburitza music. His maternal grandfather, Marko Sumrak, was a noted tambura player, and his uncle Marko Grocevich played in the tamburitza combo Sloboda (Freedom), led by his brother, Joe Grocevich. Jerry's father. Joe also served for many years as the music director of the St. George Junior Tamburitzans in Cokern, PA. In the Grocevich household, playing music was just something that was done and Jerry got an early start.

In the 1960s, he started playing with the St. George Junior Tamburitzans. As a teenager, he also played in Sloboda, where he gained poise, technique, and professional experience. Beginning in 1969, the St George group made several tours to Croatia and Serbia. On the first trip, in the city of Novi Sad, Jerry met Janika Balaz, the renowned Romany (Gypsy) musician and bandleader, considered the finest primas of his era. The primas plays the prim, the soprano melodic instrument, the smallest and most challenging of the tamburitza family. Janika recognized Jerry's potential, and Jerry became determined to become a fine primas. Janika's orchestra performed for many years in restaurants in the old Austrian fortress on the Danube at Petrovaradin. There Jerry met Zvonko Bogdan, the noted vocalist and composer of traditional-style songs, who frequently performed to Janika's accompaniment. Zvonko became a major influence upon Jerry in singing and composition. Years later, Jerry accompanied Zvonko on several concert tours of the U.S. and Canada. During one sojourn in the United States, Zvonko recorded an album of traditional and original songs with Jerry.

That album was made in Jerry's own studio, where he has produced several other recordings of traditional music and his own compositions. One of his best known songs, "Ja cu se vratiti" ("I will return"), was composed at the end of the 1980s in collaboration with the Croatian singer Miroslav Škoro, who then resided in the United States. The lyrics were prescient: the wars that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia began shortly after this recording was made. The words to the song express a yearning for home and the desire to return. It became a hit in Croatia and an unofficial anthem for the war's refugees and displaced persons, making Jerry the first American-born tamburitza musician to gain widespread recognition in Croatia.

For several years, Jerry performed with Joe Kirin's Slanina (Bacon) orchestra from Chicago, twice in the "Folk Masters" series at Wolf Trap and at national folk festivals in Chattanooga and Dayton. Since 1993, he has led his own combo, composed of Vjebo Dimer, Marko Dreher, Bob Sestili, and Steve Wagner.

Jerry has become a bridge between the American and Croatian tamburitza scenes. He makes frequent extended visits to Croatia, where he is involved with a widening circle of the finest tamburitza musicians. In 1994, in Slavonska Pozega at the biggest Croatian festival of tamburitza music, he was honored for his efforts to preserve Croatian music and culture in North America.
5. Vatrogasna polka and Kada čujem tambure (The Fireman’s Polka and When I Hear Tamburitzas)
This is a medley of two polkas, an instrumental and a vocal, the latter a well-known folksong. Both are played with an intricate intermingling of lead, harmony, and countermelody parts on various tamburitza instruments. The title of the first tune refers to the fact that in many Croatian villages, the volunteer firemen’s hall is the meeting place of fireman-musician tamburitza groups, brass bands, and choirs. The lyrics of the second polka reflect the facts that vineyards abound in Croatia and wine-drinking is celebrated.

6. Daj mi daš (Allow me)
In this waltz, Jerry slows the pace, emphasizing melodious tremolo as he combines elements of two songs. “Daj mi daš” is a typical waltz from Dalmatia, the southern Adriatic coast of Croatia, where there are strong Mediterranean musical influences. The lyrics are in the Dalmatian dialect. The chorus is from a song that is better known in its Slovenian version, “Pod mojim okicem.” The two languages are quite close; the words to the chorus are in a form of Croatian that seems incompletely translated from the original Slovenian lyrics. There are many instances of Slovenian-Croatian mutual musical influence.

7. Moja Juliska (My Julie)
The northern regions of Croatia bordering Hungary are hotbeds of the tamburitza tradition. Hungarian musical influences are common, like the csárdás (pronounced char-dosh), which is played and danced to an accelerating tempo. Jerry and the Croatian singer Miro Škoro made up this romantic song. From his virtuoso improvised runs on tunes like this one, Jerry has earned his reputation as America’s finest primas.

In the second half of the 19th century, drawn by the prospect of obtaining land through the Homestead Act and the Timber Claim Act, thousands of Czech immigrants settled on the plains of eastern Nebraska. It is a land of climatic extremes, heat and cold, droughts and floods. Most of the Czech pioneers initially had to live in dugouts and sod houses as they struggled to develop their farms. In traditional Czech culture, music is emphasized. Old Country songs and dances were always a part of life in the new homeland too. More than a century later, Czech traditions are proudly preserved in dozens of small Nebraskan agricultural communities and in the area’s larger cities, Lincoln and Omaha.

Mark Vyhlidal was born in 1961 about sixty miles northwest of Omaha, in the agricultural hamlet of Morse Bluff, where his father, Adolph Vyhlidal, worked at the farmer’s co-op. The boy showed an early interest in music. When his parents took him to local dances and fish fries, little Mark would tap rhythm on the tables; given the chance, he would rush to the bandstand to be near the musicians. Mark remembers an early trauma: being shoed away by the members of a legendary Nebraska Czech band; when the enthusiastic toddler ran up, they were taking a snort of liquor before starting to play. At the age of seven, Mark received a drum set for Christmas. He made good use of the following few days. Less than a
week later, he played his first gig for the New Year’s Eve dance in Morse Bluff. He soon became the littlest musician in Saunders County, playing for dances with various local bands. Inspired by noted Nebraska Czech bands like those of Ernie Kucera and Al Grebnick, he realized while still a child that Czech music was a tradition he wanted to carry on.

As a teenager, Mark learned to play numerous other musical instruments, all by ear: accordion, tuba, keyboards, trumpet, valve trombone, and bass guitar. He was finally compelled to learn to read music (“kicking and screaming” he says) in seventh grade, when he wanted to play in the junior high school band. But musical literacy proved to be good for him. Before long, he was penning his own band arrangements. In 1975, at age 14, he started his own four-piece band, with himself on accordion and his mother, Ann, playing the drums. Ann, who speaks Czech, supported Mark’s efforts to sing in Czech, helping him with the pronunciation and meaning of the words. Later the ensemble grew from four to six pieces, adding brass and reed instruments.

The Mark Vyhildal Orchestra has been together for over a quarter century. It has made several recordings and videos, and played throughout the Midwest and as far away as Las Vegas and Canada. A highlight was the opportunity to perform on National Public Radio on Garrison Keillor’s “Prairie Home Companion.” Besides being a husband, a father of four, a street superintendent for the town of Fremont, and a deejay for a four-hour Sunday polka show, Mark finds time to play dance jobs.

The musicians in his band—Joe Havlovic, Mike Helgesen, Kevin Koopman, Dan Pasonault, and J. Sam Zitek—all play multiple traditional instruments. The band achieves a tight and solid sound, traditional yet innovative. It pays special attention to dynamics and syncopation, and its arrangements are diverse and changing. Mark plays a 1928 Wurlitzer accordion that he rescued from a more-than-twenty-year exile in an attic. The band plays old tunes in new ways, and is always on the lookout for new pieces for its repertoire.

8. Betty Polka
In his arrangement of this lively polka, Mark patterned the style after Al Grebnick’s famed Nebraska polka band. The tempo is a bit faster than is typical, and there is a virtuoso tuba solo by Kevin Koopman.

9. Red Handkerchief Polka (Cerveny satecky)
Mark converted this well-known traditional Czech waltz to polka tempo, singing the Czech lyrics so no one can mistake it. The arrangement features tight, syncopated rhythmic interaction between the tuba and drums. To spice up the old favorite, there is even a brief foray into a Latin beat and a minor key riff.

10. Grandmother’s Joy Laendlr (Babcina radost)
The laendlr is a folk dance in 3/4 time from the Alpine region of Europe. It differs from the waltz because its accents are stronger on the second and third beats of the measure. “Grandmother’s Joy” is an astounding tune. Most traditional dance tunes played by polka bands have two sections, occasionally three. “Grandmother’s Joy” just keeps on changing, having six distinct parts. Mark’s arrangement emphasizes a clarinet-accordion duet, with J. Sam Zitek and Mark trading lead and harmony parts. For contrast, the third section features a three-trumpet harmony played by Mark, Mike Helgesen, and Dan Pasonault.

11. Clover in the Woods Polka (Jetellicu v lese)
The rural images that abound in traditional village songs from Europe still have relevance to Nebraska’s Czech farmers, whose songs feature flying geese, green meadows, circling pigeons, and clover in the woods. This polka, another example of Mark’s innovative arranging, features a unique trumpet, clarinet, and trombone sound, changing for a time to a trumpet trio and adding a tenor sax toward the end.
Slovenian-style polka is probably the best-known style of polka in America, thanks in large part to the tireless efforts of Cleveland's Frank Yankovic. Slovenians are a small nationality, whose homeland is in the eastern (or Julian) Alps. Their music shares many characteristics of other Alpine peoples: Austrians, Swiss, and Bavarians. Indeed, some Slovenian bands, like those of Stevko Avsenik and Lojze Slak, have been influential throughout the Alpine region.

The original European-style music and singing is still preserved in ethnic choirs and ensembles in places like Cleveland, which has the largest colony of Slovenian-Americans in the United States. In the 1930s, Cleveland musicians including Frank Yankovic, Johnny Pecon, and Lou Trebar began to develop an American polka idiom that drew upon Slovenian roots but incorporated influences from American jazz and popular music. To play the Americanized idiom, most of the musicians switched from the traditional button accordion to more adaptable chromatic or piano keyboard accordions.

Frank Yankovic emerged from this scene to become a national musical celebrity. For over half a century, his career was a one-man polka crusade, crisscrossing the country with his band, performing hundreds of one-nighters a year, especially in the "Polka Belt" from Pennsylvania to Minnesota. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, before the advent of rock 'n' roll, the band spearheaded efforts to make polka a major idiom in American popular music. Million-sellers like "Just Because" and "Blue Skirt Waltz" and a polka-dancing craze made polka as pop music seem possible. By the 1960s, however, the music industry had embraced rock and abandoned efforts to mass-market polka, but the music continued in its ethnic and regional strongholds. By the 1970s, in Slovenian-American communities, the pendulum swung away from the more Americanized Yankovic sound, and there developed a movement to revive playing of the button accordion. Button-box clubs expanded, comprising dozens of amateur players, who formed ensembles that often performed in ethnic costume.

Of course the "American" stream of Slovenian-style polka has continued too, including many musician-devotees of Yankovic's style who are not of Slovenian-American background. (Steve Meisner on Deep Polka is a good example: though of Austrian background, he views his Slovenian-style polka as "American" music.) Virtuoso button accordionist Nancy Hlad's music is positioned between the poles of the hard-core ethnic and Yankovic sounds. In her endeavors as a polka musician, dance promoter, and media personality, she is recapturing the sense of community she remembers from her early years in Cleveland's east-side St. Claire neighborhood. When she was a fourth-grader, her parents decided to move the family from there to suburban Mayfield Heights. "In the old neighborhood, everybody knew everybody else. At the butcher shop they had whole pigs hanging up and they knew what you wanted when you asked for kranjske kobase (Slovenian sausages)." Her father's Slovenian-Croatian-American parents and her mother's Lithuanian-American parents lived "just around the corner," and their predominantly Slovenian St. Vitus parish was a center for community social life and traditions, like the Palm Sunday procession in Slovenian village garb.

At family get-togethers, great uncle Hank Kersman played the button accordion. Even as a tot, Nancy noticed how everyone crowded around him, singing the old Slovenian folksongs. "When I saw that, I just said, "This is it! This is what I want to do."" So at age 7, Nancy began to beg her parents to buy her a button box. Two years of her consistent requests
and an ad in a weekly newspaper finally moved them to buy her a little Hohner two-row box. She began with lessons from Joey Tomick, a polka musician who lived nearby in Euclid. At age 11, Nancy had the opportunity to step up to a better accordion, a Melodija three-row, imported from Slovenia, and she began lessons with the dean of Cleveland button-box players, Frank Novak, a key figure in the 1970s revival of button-box playing in the Slovenian-American community: “It was Frank Novak who made me the musician I am. I learned his style; he taught me to understand rhythm, to pronounce the notes.”

Nancy began to play with Uncle Hank at family doings, for school programs at St. Francis of Assisi and Notre Dame/Cathedral Latin High, and at Slovenian lodge halls and joints like Sterle’s Slovenian Country House. After five years of lessons, Frank Novak pronounced Nancy ready to make a recording. Her “Sweet Sixteen” album established her as a youthful force in the Slovenian-style polka-music scene. Other recordings have followed.

While Nancy has endeavored to advance her own musical career, she has promoted the music of other musicians in the polka scene. She established Nancy’s Place for Polkas (www.polkas.com), a polka website, with links to dozens of individual bands’ pages. It is a clearinghouse for music, schedules, announcements, chat, and building an online polka-network community. Nancy’s Place is also the name of Nancy’s show on radio stations WERE in Cleveland and WALN in Allentown, PA. In 1998, she married Eric Noltkamper, an outstanding polka accordionist.

12. Raisin-Nut Polka
“Raisin-Nut Polka” is a composition by Nancy that reflects the influence of her teacher Frank Novak’s style. The title brings to mind the traditional Slovenian specialty, potica, a rolled nutbread. Nancy insists her grandmother Vera Hlad makes the world’s best. Slovenian polkas are typically played slightly faster than other polkas.

13. Anne’s Waltz
“Anne’s Waltz” is a composition by Frank Novak, named for his wife Anne. At a typical dance, Slovenian bands will play two or three polkas in a row, then slow the tempo to a waltz to let the dancers catch their breath. For button-box players at a lot of dances, those are the only two tempos employed.

14. Sweet Sixteen Polka
This is an original tune by Nancy, the title track of her first album. She says she wakes up in the middle of the night with an idea for a tune in her head and grabs her accordion and a tape recorder, and a new polka or waltz is born. Since her marriage, her husband has gotten involved in working out the kinks to make the tune “work” better. Nancy’s compositions are grounded in the traditional style: it is easy to mistake her original for an old tune.

15. Top of the Hill Polka
An old Slovenian folk melody, Na Gorence, has become one of the most widely recognized standards in the Slovenian-style polka repertoire. Nancy plays two differing versions of the tune’s B-section, giving it a three-part feel.

Although Finnish immigrants settled in many parts of North America, the Lake Superior region became a second homeland to numerous Finnish-Americans. Sisu is the Finnish word for a concept that embraces perseverance, strength, and industriousness, traits that the early immigrants needed aplenty to make a
living farming, logging, and mining in northernmost Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Career and educational opportunities led subsequent generations of Finnish-Americans to other climes, but for Finns who cherish old traditions, like Al Reko and Oren Tikkanen, Lake Superior pulls like a magnet.

When Al Reko started school in the northern Minnesota town of Crosby, he could speak only Finnish. In that predominantly Finnish-American farming area in the 1930s, it wasn’t unusual for a family to speak only Finnish at home. Finnish was the first language of Al’s father, Carl, an immigrant, and of his mother Alice, the daughter of immigrants. Carl and Alice scraped a living from dairy-cattle and subsistence farming, supplemented by Carl’s labor in an iron mine in Crosby.

In the tumultuous years of World War II, Al’s family moved to San Pedro, California, the harbor of Los Angeles, where Carl operated a tavern patronized by seamen, longshoremens, and shipyard workers. In 1945, when Al was 12 years old, his father brought home an accordion, which he had obtained as payment for a seaman’s bar bill. Al was already playing clarinet in his school band and the Los Angeles Youth Symphony, so Carl assumed that Al could figure out the accordion. The Reko family had originated in Ikaalinen, central Finland, an accordion-loving area that today hosts an international accordion festival. The forebears of Viola Turpeinen, the most famous Finnish-American accordionist, also lived in Ikaalinen. Teaching himself, Al quickly proved his father right: he could figure out the accordion.

After the war, the Rekos returned to Minnesota and settled on a farm in Bovey on the Mesabi Range, where Carl worked in an open-pit iron mine while Alice and the kids handled most of the farm chores. Al commuted to high school in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. Putting his accordion in a closet at home, he went on to the University of Minnesota, first at Duluth, then in Minneapolis, and finished with a degree in accounting.

Al had been in the Air Force ROTC, so after college he entered active service and was assigned to flight school in Florida. Driving home to Minnesota on leave, he was injured in a serious auto accident. Because of his leg injuries, the Air Force grounded him and sent him to Amarillo, TX, where he met an Amarillo girl, whom he married in 1959. His wife Molly was a teacher, and Al had become a computer programmer.

In 1968, Al’s firm transferred him to their headquarters city, Minneapolis. On a visit to his parents, Al got the old accordion out, and Molly was amazed to hear that he was a fine accordionist. Soon Al and Molly got involved with the Ksarit Finnish folk dancers; Al provided live accompaniment, but also danced well, despite his old leg injury.

In the early 1970s, a coworker introduced Al to Oren Tikkanen, a Finnish-American musician he had known in college. Ten years younger than Al, Oren was born in 1943 in Alabama, where his father was serving in the Army Air Corps. In 1949, the family moved to upper Michigan, where Oren’s father worked in a copper mine until 1967. Oren played football on the high-school team. He liked popular music, got a guitar at age fourteen, and learned the tunes of Elvis Presley, the Everly Brothers, and the Kingston Trio. He listened to local ethnic radio programs, like Lody Mihelic’s polka show, and saw polka bands at Italian and Finnish weddings. After a year at Michigan State University in East Lansing, he moved to Detroit, attended Wayne State part-time, got married, and received a degree in broadcasting at the University of Minnesota. Over the years, Oren had gotten more and more interested in all sorts of ethnic music. He learned to play a variety of stringed instruments including mandolin, banjo, and bass guitar. When he met Al Reko, he found a true musical partner in the Finnish idiom. They have been playing together ever since.
In the Upper Peninsula, Oren organized the Calumet Finnish-American Folk Festival, an annual event that enabled him to meet many of the finest Finnish-American musicians. Several times in the 1980s and '90s, he had traveled to Finland to perform at folk festivals—often with Al Reko. In 1983, Oren set up a home-recording studio, where he and Al Reko have recorded four albums of Finnish-American folk music. Oren and Al still perform, together and/or with other musicians, in the far-flung Finnish musical scene of the Upper Midwest.

16. Jätäkäen Jenkka (The Logger's Schottische)
The schottische, called jenkka by the Finns, is a dance in 4/4 time much favored by the Scandinavians. The Finnish predilection for haunting, minor-key melodies is well displayed in this schottische tune, featuring skilful tradeoffs between Al's accordion and Oren's mandolin. The mandolin has been used in Finnish traditional music for well over a century and currently is enjoying a resurgence in Finland.

17. Nujualan Talko Polka (The Work-Bees at Nujala Polka)
The title of this lively polka refers to talko, the village custom of shared labor at barn raisings or threshing parties. An American element in this arrangement is Oren's use of the tenor banjo and the spoons to produce a more raucous sound. Typical of Finnish bands, Al and Oren play the polka at a very fast tempo.

18. Suvivon Valssi (Midsummer Night Waltz)
A Finnish-American musician once commented to me, "When we play in a major key, it sounds like Swedish music, and when we play in a minor key, it sounds like Russian music." Al's accordion playing on this passionate waltz, augmented occasionally by Oren's tasty mandolin riffs, is evocative of Finland's big neighbor to the east, but nonetheless uniquely Finnish.

19. Lumber-Jäkki (The Lumberjack)
Al sings one of the most famous songs of Arthur Kylander (1892-1968), a Finnish immigrant songster and I.W.W. activist who worked as a lumberjack in Maine and Minnesota before becoming a tree farmer in California in the 1940s. He recorded "Lumber-Jäkki" in New York in 1927, during his first recording session for Victor. The song is an ironic debunking of the romantic image of lumberjack life. Kylander sang a sixth verse, omitted by Al, which promoted loggers' membership in the I.W.W.

The young concertina virtuoso Brian Brueggen was born in the 1960s on a dairy farm outside the village of Cashton, east of the bustling river town of La Crosse, in one of the most scenic areas of Wisconsin. As one approaches the Mississippi River from the east, green rolling hills become steeper and sharper. Limestone outcroppings and magnificent vistas culminate in the panorama of the mighty Mississippi, a wide channel, islands choked with trees, and luxurious wetlands along the shores.

Many of the locals refer to their area as the Ridgeland, and placenames like Middle Ridge, Ridgeville, and St. Mary's Ridge—location of the pioneer Brueggen homestead—recall the area's most notable topographic feature.

The connection of Brian Brueggen's concertina music to this land is evinced by the names of the bands in which Brian has played: he started playing professionally with his father and paternal uncles in the Ridgeland...
Dutchmen and now leads Brian and the Mississippi Valley Dutchmen. He has named some of his original dance tunes for local toponyms: “Pine Hollow Schottische” and “Brush Creek Laendler.”

Though Brian’s music is connected intimately to the land and his hometown, his “Dutchman” sound is widely known throughout the Upper Midwest. The most famed practitioners of this style, “Whoopee John” Wijffzart and Harold Loefflemacher with his Six Fat Dutchmen, all based in New Ulm, Minnesota, had success from the 1920s through the 1950s in the Midwestern mass media and entertainment business. From the time of the emergence of radio and phonograph records, these and other leaders and promoters of Dutchman bands were striving to achieve as much commercial success as Nashville’s country music had achieved.

The Ridgeland is about 200 miles east of New Ulm and the sounds of the Dutchman bands were heard via Twin Cities and La Crosse radio stations. The Minnesota bands often crossed the Mississippi to play for dances in places like La Crosse’s Concordia Ballroom. To German-American farmers, the Dutchman sound was a modern manifestation of German-American traditional music. The name of the musical genre expresses their ethnicity—Dutchman derives from Deutsche, meaning “German”—but appearing in an Anglicized form, the term indicates a type of American identity.

If this were not enough to gain acceptance of the Dutchman sound in the Ridgeland, there was Sylvester Liebl. A concertina player born in Wanda, Minnesota, just thirty miles from New Ulm, Liebl relocated with his family to Mormon Coulee (near La Crosse) in 1934, when Syl was only seventeen, already a veteran dance-band musician. Since the age of twelve, he had been headling a small family combo known in Minnesota as Liebl’s Concertina Orchestra. Once in Wisconsin, the band was renamed the Jolly Germans, which Syl changed during World War II to the Jolly Swiss Boys to avoid wartime anti-German sentiments.

Syl presented an introverted, bespectacled image, but he played with raucous abandon. So ingrained was his musical ability that his bands never needed written music: no one needed to count the beat; the band members simultaneously plunged into a tune. It was as natural as breathing.

Syl Liebl may have established the first true Dutchman band in the Ridgeland, but others soon followed. The spell of the Dutchman style must have influenced Brian Brueggen’s accordion-playing and drumbeating grandfather, Herman Brueggen, who changed the name of his group from Herman’s Accordion Orchestra to Herman’s Jolly Dutchmen. Brian readily admits Syl Liebl’s influence upon his playing. Syl’s infectious and improvisatory style has inspired younger concertinists, including Trempealeau’s Karl Hartwich (featured on Deep Polka SFW CD 40088), whose Country Dutchmen band is one of the most popular in the Upper Midwest, and Brian’s younger cousin, Gary Brueggen, who began, like Brian and Karl, as another teenaged concertina prodigy. With Brian’s paternal uncles Willard and Harry, Gary revitalized the Ridgeland Dutchmen, the old Brueggen family band, which had endured a setback when Brian and his father Phil had departed to form their own group. These bands spearheaded a stylistic revolution in Dutchman music. They fostered a freer style of concertina playing, replete with surprising melodic and rhythmic innovations.

20. Muziky Muziky Polka
This polka is a well-known Czech standard. Since the New Ulm German-American community from which the Dutchman style emerged includes many families from the German minority in Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic), it is not surprising that these Germans share many tunes with Czechs. The interplay of the concertina with the brass instruments, the rollicking tuba line, and the flowing transitions between tune parts are highly characteristic of Dutchman music.

21. Laughing Concertina
With this showpiece polka, originated by Minnesotan Jerry Schuft, Brian
presents a concertina tour de force, emphasizing the sound of his instrument's treble reeds.

22. Chicago Waltz
This waltz was a standard played by the pioneer Dutchmen bands like Whoopee John and the Six Fat Dutchmen. Brian performs it in a purely Dutchman style. For comparison, on Deep Polka (Smithsonian Folkways 40088), there is a Polish version of the same tune by Norm Dombrowski’s Happy Notes, emphasizing Marie Kubowski’s syncopated concertina playing.

23. Julida Polka
One of the best-known of all polkas, “Julida” is another classic Czech tune. Brian includes the seldom-played introductory parts, which build up to a dramatic explosion of the familiar vamp.

THE GOOSE ISLAND RAMBLERS

The Ramblers—K. Wendell Whitford, George Gilbertsen, and Bruce Bollerud—never rambled far. Their heyday, from 1962 through 1975, was inextricably linked with extended stints as the “house band” for two Madison, Wisconsin taverns: first Glen and Ann’s, then Johnny’s Packer Inn. Yet more than the music of any barnstorming band, their music swirls across the cultural landscape of the Upper Midwest.

Wendy (“Uncle Windy”) Whitford was born in 1913 in Albion; he worked at Oscar Mayer’s meat-packing plant in Madison and died in June, 2000. He learned to fiddle as a kid from his grandfather, Charles Square Smith. As he was fond of declaring, “my music teacher was born in 1849.” His mother sang old-time songs around the house, and the rural community and nearby Stoughton abounded with traditional musicians, like the Norwegian-American fiddler Clarence Reiersen. The “National Barn Dance” over Chicago’s WLS radio brought southern mountain and cowboy songs to the area in the late 1920s. Whitford was soon strumming a guitar, donning western tog, and emulating early country or hillbilly stars like Bradley Kincaid. From the early 1930s through the 1950s, Whitford performed in dancehalls and theaters, and over the radio with a variety of stringbands, including, in the late 1930s, the original Goose Island Ramblers.

Goose Island, an English corruption of the Norwegian god(t) land (good land), was applied by immigrant farmers to the fertile acreage surrounding a tamarack swamp near Whitford’s southwestern Dane County home. Ramblers, meanwhile, was a popular nickname for hillbilly and cowboy bands, like the noted Prairie Ramblers, who starred on WLS.

“Smokey George” Gilbertsen was born in 1925 on the outskirts of Madison. An older brother had a neglected five-dollar guitar and a stack of western songbooks. Gilbertsen was picking tunes and blowing a harmonica at seven, playing for house parties at nine, and working tavern jobs for pay at fourteen. In his teens, he picked up mandolin, Hawaiian guitar, and fiddle; he mastered the last well enough to win the Wisconsin Centennial Fiddlers Contest in 1948. Like Whitford, he assumed a western look and entertained with such groups as the Fox River Valley Boys, the Bearcat Mountain Boys, the Badger Ramblers, the Midwesterners, the Midwest Drovers, the Rhythm Rascals, the Dakota Roundup, and the WIBA Rangers. He is a retired repairman for the city of Madison.
Bruce Bollerud, a special-education teacher in the Madison school system (now retired), was introduced on stage as “Loose Bruce the Goose, the Hollandale Wildcat, the Scourge of Iowa County.” He was born in Hollandale, Wisconsin, in 1935. His Norwegian grandfather, Ben Venden, was an old-time fiddler; his mother, Selma, chorded on the piano. Bruce would watch and listen at house parties. As a ten-year-old, he acquired a mandolin (a squeezebox resembling the Chemnitzer concertina), but switched to piano accordion by his late teens. After forming a duo with fiddler Herman Erickson, Bollerud went on to play German and Norwegian dance music with Gilbert Prestebroten’s Rhythm Rascals, Emil Simpson’s Nighthawks, and bands led by polka stalwarts Roger Bright and Verne Meins. The late 1950s found Bollerud playing country music with Dick Sherwood. Then a rockabilly gig with the Johnson Brothers led to Glen and Ann’s tavern, where the new Goose Island Ramblers soon emerged.

The Ramblers’ repertoire drew on its members’ Midwestern backgrounds, with a strong dose of Southern hillbilly music and the Western cowboy sound. Wendy Whitford contributed fiddle tunes and ballads from her English forebears, round dance melodies from Norwegian neighbors, and the western and mountain songs of radiobroadcast barn dances. George Gilbertsen brought a penchant for fancy picking and exotic tunes (Hawaiian marches, Italian mazurkas, Russian waltzes). A natural clown, he favored trick fiddling and novelty tunes. Bruce Bollerud offered a skein of Norwegian dialect songs, Swiss yodels, and German-Czech polka standards. All three composed new songs in a regional vein.

Their live tavern performances were boisterous events. Bantering with the audience, punctuating tunes with bells and goose calls, donning funny hats, the Ramblers fostered a house-party atmosphere and frequently invited musicians from the audience to sit in. I’ve heard longtime fan Dick Bruce recall the era:

Smokey George, the fiddler, would ring his cowbell after most tunes, an acknowledgement of audience applause and cheers. Wendy Whitford, the guitarist and singer and sometimes fiddler, sang classic country ballads like “Soldier’s Last Letter” and many that he himself had written while on the job at Oscar Mayer’s packing plant. Loose Bruce Bollerud, the accordion man who also played a mean jug (Smockey George would warn the audience, “Cover your drinks, folks!”) donned a different hat for each type of song: cowboy, railroad, etc.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, their repertoire attracted Madison’s ethnic working class and its college set, a remarkable achievement in an era of polarization.

Although the Ramblers disbanded in the mid-1970s, all three members remained active local musicians, Bollerud with his Good Times Band and Whitford and Gilbertsen in various ad hoc combos. Memories of the Goose Island Ramblers, however, did not fade. They were called out of retirement periodically. Occasionally from 1989 to 1999, they played to enthusiastic throngs of old fans and newcomers, who knew of them only as a legend. They made several additional recordings. Their September 1999 farewell performance sold out Madison’s Barrymore Auditorium, a hall in which Whitford had first performed in 1933. Their sound remains a remarkable distillation of the Upper Midwest’s foremost folk-musical traditions.

24. In Heaven There Is No Beer

This German drinking song in polka tempo is so well known in Wisconsin that it has become something of an unofficial state anthem—appropriate for the Beer State. Bruce Bollerud sings it in English, German, and (a seldom-heard rarity) Norwegian—languages symbolic of the band’s repertoire.

25. There’s No Norwegians in Dickeyville

When Wendy Whitford played this tune on the “WLS Barndance” in Chicago about 1939, he didn’t know a name for it. A station staff member insisted that he needed a name to enter in the program log, so Wendy arbitrarily decided to call it the “Dickeyville Waltz.” More than twenty years later, Wendy played the
tune for Bruce Bollerud. In a 1998 interview on Wisconsin Public Radio, Bruce recalled, “I said, ‘Wendy, that sounds like a Norwegian waltz. How can that be the Dickeyville Waltz?’ I said, ‘There’s no Norwegians in Dickeyville!’ I assumed there weren’t any around there cause it’s a lead-mining area, and the people down there are Cornish and Welsh and so forth. And so we kinda laughed about that. I came up with a verse or two, and Wendy came up with a verse or two, and I get requests for it yet, every time we play.”

26. Wendy’s Schottische
The fiddle is the mainstay instrument of Norwegian-American traditional music in the Midwest, and the schottische is the most frequent dance played by Norsky fiddlers. In 1931, at the age of 18, Wendy began to attend fiddle contests at the town hall in the heavily Norwegian town of Stoughton, Wisconsin. Wendy and George’s twin fiddle rendition is as Norsky as it gets.

27. Swiss Yodel Waltz
Bruce’s home was in Wisconsin’s Iowa County, which borders Green County, a heavily Swiss agricultural community. Harmonious Swiss songs and yodels had a strong influence on the whole region’s music. Bruce learned a lot of music from Roy Anderson, a Norwegian immigrant hired on his parents’ farm. Bruce recalls, “[Roy] did a lot of yodeling and I was probably five years old and I said, ‘Roy, how can you do that, how do you yodel?’ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘ya got to eat a lot of grass,’ he said, ‘you gotta eat grass if you want to yodel.’ So I went out and started eating grass. And it worked, I’m yodeling now so he was right, I guess” (Down Home Dairyland radio show “The Goose Island Ramblers,” WPR, 1991).

*With slight modification, the essays on Brian and the Mississippi Dutchmen and the Goose Island Ramblers are taken from James P. Leary and Richard March, Down Home Dairyland: A Listener’s Guide (Madison: 1996), 47-50 and 25-28, respectively.

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