

Collectors: Jim Leary & Matthew Gallmann

March 22-23, 1981

Informant: Art Moilanen  
Mass City, Michigan

ETHNIC HERITAGE  
SOUND ARCHIVE & RESOURCE CENTER  
NORTHLAND COLLEGE, ASHLAND, WI

Matt and I had written to and called Art Moilanen, noted piano accordionist and proprietor of Art's Bar, informing him that we'd like to record his Finnish repertoire. He suggested that Sunday afternoon and early evening might be a good time: the place wouldn't be too packed and he'd be playing alone. Accordingly, we arrived at 2:00 p.m., greeted Art, and checked into the Adventure Motel (which Art owns). At roughly four o'clock we returned to the bar. Art was eager to play and so we began to set up the equipment.

Sixty-four years of age, Art is a short, lean almost elfin looking man with blue eyes and dark hair straked with grey. He has a scar extending from the middle of his chin to his lower lip. Having worked cutting pulp and in sawmills for many years, he took over a tarpaper tavern in nearby Rousseau a decade ago. After turning the place into profitable establishment, he sold out. But a few years later he bought his present bar in Mass City. "Art's Bar" certainly has the appearances of a bustling place. A pool table and dartball board accompanied by various trophies show evidence of competitions held in the tavern. There are also T-shirts for sale, inscribed with "Where in the Hell is Art's Bar?" And then, there's the music. Art's piano accordion, small p.a. system, and amplifier are always set out. Fired by the Kessler's whiskey that he constantly sips on, Art is ever ready to play.

When we had the equipment ready Art asked Matt to join him on button accordion. Realizing that we wanted Art's repertoire, and not his own playing, Matt launched into a number of Finnish tunes. But, in each case, he asked Art how he performed the number. This technique worked quite well as Art, a natural teacher, invariable knew an additional part or wrinkle for the tunes. Soon Matt set down his instrument and Art was on his own. Knowing that we wanted Finnish tunes, he performed a dozen or so - often singing the lyrics in a hoarse voice. The tunes ranged from old Finnish numbers current fifty years ago, to Viola Turpeinen favorites, to polkas by Finland's famed piano accordionist Veikko Ahnenainen. Interspersed with the Finnish pieces were various songs of Art's "own composition." Most of these were parodies of popular C & W tunes like "Detroit City," "Born to Lose," or "I'd Have a Room Full of Roses." Often they were localized: "The Lumberjack" is set in "Art's Barroom," and "The Story of My Life" is comic autobiography. Occasionally, Art put Finnish words to "English" tunes like "My Darling Clementine."



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After a while Matt and I decided not to ask Art to play any particular tunes. Rather we figured we'd record whatever he chose to play. His working repertoire emerged as a mixture of late 1940's and 1950's C & W tunes (From a Jack to a King, "Today, I Started Loving You Again"), panethnic polka numbers by Frankie Yankovic and others ("Tick Tock Polka," "Sharpshooters Polka"), tunes beloved by other regional ethnic groups (the Croatian "Kukavica"), and Finnish dance pieces ("Rattikkoon"). As he told us later, Art doesn't have a worked out set or "program" when he plays; instead he performs what comes into his head and requests. There were plenty of the latter.

Many of the patrons were regulars - calling Art by name or wearing T-shirts and jackets emblazoned with "Art's Bar." They asked for particular tunes like "My Happiness," "Helena Polka," and "Newspaper Dress" (a parody of "Tennessee Waltz"). Sometimes, they would sing along with Art through the microphone as the song was played. Art really cultivated a good relationship with his audience: asking for and encouraging requests. Matt Gallmann was predictably invited not only to play button accordion, but also to perform "hoe down" numbers on the fiddle while Art chorded on the accordion. Later in the evening, Art and others coaxed Norma, a plump blonde in cowboy clothes, to sing "I Can't Help It (If I'm Still in Love With You)" and "Your Cheatin' Heart."

Beyond soliciting requests, Art also tried to mix the dance tunes he played. There were waltzes, polkas, schottisches, and that Finnish speciality "Rattikkoon." Each of these tunes brought different sets of dancers onto the floor. There was one nattily dressed Finnish couple in their fifties who'd come all the way from Calumet to dance to Art's music. There were on the floor especially when Art played schottisches or the "Rattikkoon."

The crowd in the bar was a mixed one. Early in the afternoon there were children of various ages present. They tagged along with their parents and a few played a game of pod. As the evening grew later, only adults were present, but their ages were certainly mixed. People ranged from early twenties to the eighties. There were several older couples, all dressed up, who sipped gently on their drinks, and shuffled through occasional waltz. And there were single men aplenty, young and old, attired in the wool, heavy denim, and boots that characterize men who spend considerable time in the woods.



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Since Art had commenced playing about 4:30, he ceased around nine o'clock. It was a Sunday night and most of the crowd had thinned out by then. Matt and I made arrangements with Art for an interview Monday morning and, in anticipation of a long day ahead, we retired to our motel room.

The morning was clear and bright; the day promised to be mild enough to melt some of the still heavy snow cover. Matt and I breakfasted in Mass City's only cafe and strolled around the town. There were a post office, a barbershop, a bank, a Lutheran church, a Settler's Co-op which was a kind of general store, two gas stations, another tavern besides Art's, a public library, some closed store fronts, and a few dozen frame houses. Pamphlets in the cafe promoted tours to nearby de-funct copper mine.

At 9:30 a.m. we entered Art's barroom. There were three or four older men, in woodsman's wool, nursing early morning beers. One of them we recognized from the night before. A stout woman in her fifties was behind the bar and we asked if Art was up and about. She rolled her eyes and reckoned he was never up this early, adding, with a trace of exasperation, that her employer "loved to booze." Nonetheless, she told us, if Art had made an appointment with us, she would give him a buzz.

Art's Bar is a turn of the century, two story brick building and the Moilanen's live upstairs. The barmaid's call to Art brought the assurance that he would be down soon. Within fifteen minutes, our host appeared. He was neatly dressed in green pants and western shirt with matching flecks of green. Although cheerful, he looked a bit ravaged and his watery eyes corroborated his admission that he'd been up until the wee hours.

Explaining again that we wanted to interview him about his life history, we sat down to proceed. Art's experience, related with deliberation and in detail, typified that of many another ethnic musician. He had a brother who fooled around with the accordion and, in his mid-teens, Art had mastered a piano accordion and was playing for dances. Beyond piano accordion, Art also toyed with the harmonica, the button accordion, and the guitar. The dances he played for took place in homes, local halls, and in taverns. Their occasions were weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, or weekend celebrations.

Beginning as a solo musician, Art eventually played with bands. Some were four piece aggregations (piano accordion, guitar, saxophone, and drums), but Art showed the greatest fondness for a two piece combination: piano accordion and six string guitar, both amplified. Currently, he often plays with an electric guitarist.



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While able to draw upon many musical wellspings, Art remains known for and dedicated to "featuring Finnish music." In recent years he has played for university programs at Michigan State University and over the radio. As a conscious bearer of ethnic tradition, Art has sought to pass on his knowledge. He now has three students, local married ladies in their thirties, who've been working under him for three or four years. Of Finnish descent, they've learned a good many Finnish tunes. As I mentioned in an earlier set of notes, Art also knows most of the accomplished Finnish-American dance musicians in northern Wisconsin and the U. P. Untrained and never able to make a living as a professional musician, he has clearly dedicated his life to his art. And, in return, music has given him a special satisfaction. As the interview closed, Art reflected that "music has always been great in my life."