

Chapter 13

Humorous Scandinavian Dialect Songs

Program 13 Performances

1. Goose Island Ramblers, "Paul pa haugen." 2. Goose Island Ramblers, "Ole Olson the Hobo from Norway." 3. Ragnar Hasselgren, "Swedes in North Dakota." 4. Slim Jim and the Vagabond Kid, "Nikolina." 5. Goose Island Ramblers, "Mrs. Johnson, Turn Me Loose." 6. Bruce Bollerud, "No Norwegians in Dickeyville." 7. Vivian Brevak, "Swedish Waltz."

Peasant Comedians

When John Forsell, the celebrated Swedish opera singer, visited Chicago around 1910, he found a nearly empty concert hall. Perplexed and indignant, Forsell demanded, "Where are the other 200,000 Swedes who are supposed to live in this city?" He was told, "They have gone to hear Glada Kalle." The rotund Kalle, a native of the rural Swedish province Dalarna, was a *bondkomiker*, or peasant comedian, who played the button accordion (Ericson 1978).

In the Scandinavian halls of Chicago, Rockford on the Illinois/Wisconsin border, and Minneapolis, rustic comic entertainers consistently outdrew urbane classical performers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Wry songs concerning the misadventures of ethnic newcomers to America were their stock-in-trade. Initially offered in some backwoods old-country dialect, these songs were increasingly rendered in the "yah shure" fractured English of Scandinavian Americans.

The most noted Scandinavian comic singer was Hjalmer Peterson (1886–1960). Born in Munkfors, Värmland, Sweden, Peterson emigrated to Minneapolis in 1906. He toiled briefly as a bricklayer before discovering his life's work as the *bondkomiker* "Olle i Skratthult" (Ole from Laughtersville).

In his costume of squeaky boots, overcoat, long scarf, peasant cap with a big flower, and a blacked-out tooth under a straw-colored wig, Olle would recite poems in Värmland dialect, tell jokes, and sing comic songs. (Harvey and Hulan 1982)

Through the 1920s, Skratthult toured Swedish America with a company numbering as many as twenty. Besides Olle's obligatory comic antics, the program might include Leona Carlson, "the Swedish Nightingale," and Olga Lindgren, who, clad in folk costume, performed not only Swedish traditional songs and dances but also sentimental compositions like "Barndomshemmet" (My childhood home) that expressed the immigrant's longing for the old country. The

Skratthult troupe likewise offered humorous skits and full-length plays, the most ambitious of which, *Värmlänningarna* (The people from Värmland), was in six acts. Following the evening's formal program, chairs were cleared from the hall and Skratthult's orchestra played for a dance (Harvey 1983).

Olle i Skratthult's fame as the leader of a touring company was greatly assisted by his success as a recording artist. Between 1914 and 1929 Skratthult made roughly seventy recordings for Columbia and Victor (Spottswood 1990:2715–2718). His "Nikolina," a comic song about a father's opposition to his daughter's romance, was an enormous hit. Skratthult recorded it three times and it reportedly sold an unheard of one hundred thousand copies in a narrow ethnic market (Gronow 1977:13).

Unlike the Swedes, the Upper Midwest's Norwegians were found more frequently in rural than in urban environs. They could claim some barnstorming musical and theatrical troupes, like that led by Thorstein Skarning, but none to rival the fame of Skratthult. Skratthult's "Nikolina" was, nonetheless, absorbed by a pair of Norwegian-American brothers who added a dialect-inflected English translation to their rendition of the Scandinavian hit.

Singing Scandihoovians

Ernest and Clarence Iverson (born in 1903 and 1905) grew up in North Dakota and northern Minnesota. Their mother died in 1910 and they were raised with the help of an immigrant housekeeper, Molly Ruud, who taught the boys to play guitar and sing Norwegian songs. By the early 1920s Ernest had left home to work in the Dakotas' wheat harvest, travel with a carnival troupe, run a garage, and operate heavy equipment in the Texas oil fields. While in Texas, Iverson's lanky frame earned him the nickname Slim Jim. In Texas, he was also badly injured. Unable to do any heavy work, Iverson turned to music (Pine 1980).

By the early 1930s, after five years as a radio entertainer in Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota, Slim Jim found a home in Minneapolis where he was joined by brother Clarence, the erstwhile "Vagabond Kid," who had begun his radio career in Fargo, North Dakota, in 1929. From the mid-1930s through the 1940s, Slim Jim and the Vagabond Kid were among the most popular entertainers in the Twin Cities' expansive listening area. Their repertoire embraced cowboy songs, hymns, sentimental recitations, polkas, Molly Ruud's old country favorites, and, besides "Nikolina," a generous dose of such comic Norsky dialect songs as "Johnson's Wedding," its sequel "Name It after Me," "When I Pumped the Organ for Tina," "Scandinavian Hot Shot," "The Vistling Drifting Snow," "I Ban a Swede from Nort Dakota," and "Ay Don't Give a Hoot." The latter pair of songs tap larger reservoirs of Scandinavian dialect tradition.

Circulating in oral tradition at least as early as 1900, the variously titled "Swede from North Dakota" shares plot elements, themes, and a stereotypical itinerant Scandinavian working man with a probably earlier song, "Ole Olson the Hobo from Norway." Bruce Bollerud of the Goose Island Ramblers learned his version in the 1930s from Roy Anderson and Bert Vinje, Norwegian immigrant hired men on the Bollerud farm in Hollandale, Wisconsin. But the song of wandering Ole has been attributed to Norwegian loggers in Wisconsin as early as 1877, and it was certainly widely known by the 1890s (Folstad 1987:34–35; Rickaby 1926:220–221).

While comic Scandinavian dialect songs probably first emerged in oral tradition, they were eventually penned by professional songwriters. In the early twentieth century, tunesmiths in New York City's Tin Pan Alley sought hits by writing songs in contrived versions of African-American, Irish, Yiddish, and other dialects. "Holy Yumpin' Yiminy," produced in 1918 by the team of Grossman,



*Dialect performers in western garb, (L-R) the Vagabond Kid and Slim Jim, postcard, 1930s
Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection*

Morton, and Vincent, was one such composition. In it Hilda, the stereotypical Swedish maid, boasts about her equally typecast beau, "Yohnny Yohnsson."

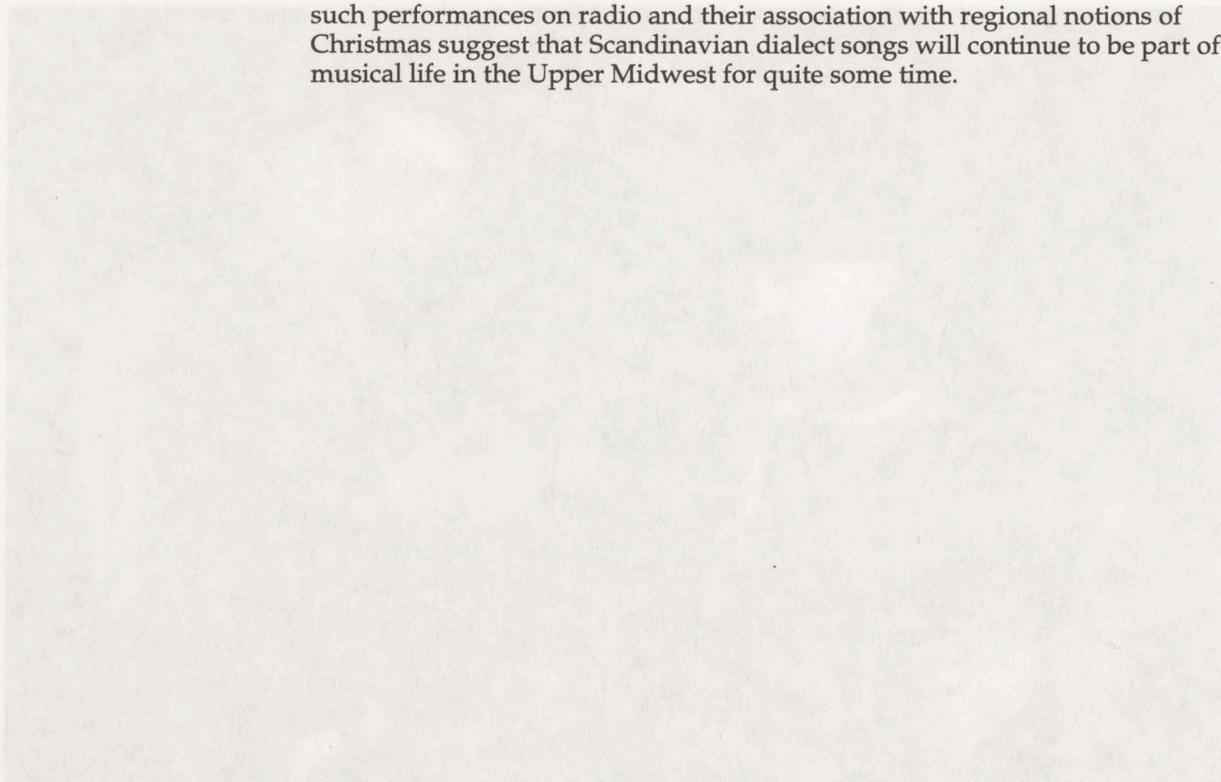
Now if you look at Yohnny's picture
You might think he's slow,
But he seems to know
'Bout cows and everything . . .
Oh! Holy Yumpin' Yiminy,
How my Yohnny can love!

(Harvey 1981 P)

"Ay Don't Give a Hoot," which has been sung for the past half century by nearly everyone who has dabbled in Scandinavian dialect songs, was likewise widely popularized by an urban pseudo-Scandinavian, Harry Stewart. In the guise of "Yogi Yorgeson," Stewart made numerous dialect records in the late 1940s for Capitol Records. One of them, "Ay Yust Go Nuts at Christmas," sold a million copies in 1948 (Gronow 1982:25).

"Ay Yust Go Nuts" and other Yorgeson Yuletide sendups continue to be heard at Christmastime on upper midwestern radio stations. Indeed they share the airwaves with more recent compositions like Red Stangland's "O Lutefisk" and the Minnesota Scandinavian Ensemble's "I'll Be Home for Lefse." The persistence of

such performances on radio and their association with regional notions of Christmas suggest that Scandinavian dialect songs will continue to be part of musical life in the Upper Midwest for quite some time.



Dialect performers in western garb (l-r) the Vagabond Kid and Slim Jim, postcard, 1935. Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection

photon and Vincent, was one such composer. In Hilda, the stereotypical Swedish maid, boasts about her equally typical bear, "Johnny Johnson."

How if you look at Johnny's picture
You might think he's slow
But he seems to know
'Bout cows and everything...
Oh! Holy Yarnen, Yarnen,
How my Yarnen can love!

(Harvey 1981: 7)

"Ay Yarn! Give a Hooc," which has been sung for the past half century by nearly everyone who has dabbled in Scandinavian dialect songs, was likewise widely popularized by an urban pseudo-Swedishman, Harry Stewart. In the guise of "Jost Yorgeson," Stewart made numerous dialect records in the late 1920s for Capitol Records. One of them, "Ay Yarn! Go Home at Christmas," sold a million copies in 1948 (Grunow 1982: 23).

"Ay Yarn! Go Home," and other Yorgeson tuneside sendups continue to be heard at Christmas on upper midwestern radio stations. Indeed they share the air waves with more recent compositions like Red Starbuck's "O Litchik," and the Minnesota Scandinavian Ensemble's "I'll Be Home for Laska." The persistence of