

Collector: Jim Leary

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Informant: Bob Mathiowetz

A number of people - Fritz Swanson, Louie Kolonko, Stan Stangle, Fel Milanowski - had told me that Bob Mathiowetz would be a good man to see if I wanted ethnic music. Accordingly, I called him, set up a meeting and, in the company of photographer Larry Dunlap, arrived to record. Bob greeted us at the door. He is a broad shouldered, tall man in his early sixties with thinning black hair and horn-rimmed glasses. We took off our coats and he led us into his basement music room.

As Larry's photographs will show, the basement was pretty amazing (see my diagram for the layout). Bob had amplifiers, a PA, a drum kit, several amplified concertinas, and a piano accordion all set up for playing. There were an acoustic and an electric guitar hung on the walls, and a few more concertinas in evidence - one of them reputedly "over a 100 years old." Beyond instruments, pictures dominated the walls and were also under glass atop the bar. Several portraits showed Bob as a young man with his concertina; and there were shots of different bands (The Northernaires, The Solid Sound) that Bob had played in with Louie Kolonko, Rod Lahti (father of the Oulu Hot Shots), and others. There were also some miniature statues of musicians, Bob's podium for the "Solid Sound," and other accoutrements scattered about. In evidence as well were various notebooks - filled with words, notes, arrangements - of polkas, waltzes, schottisches, and "modern" dance numbers. Truly a musician's environment.

I suggested to Bob that I set up the tape recorder so that we could do an interview concerning his background. Larry, meantime, readied his camera equipment. Instead of sitting down to talk, however, Bob turned on the amplifier for his "stereo concertina" and launched into "My Polish Girlfriend" and a few other numbers.

Eventually, we sat down and began to talk of Bob's life, the bands with which he'd played, his experiences, his repertoire, his aesthetics. I won't go into detail here about the content of the interview since it can be gathered from my log of our session, but there are a few points which I'd like to underscore. Youngest of ten children, Bob was very much influenced by his musical father who was born in New Ulm, Minnesota and had been a musician. One of Bob's older brothers also played concertina out of New Ulm with Babe Wagner's Band. New Ulm, of course, is the



center of German and Bohemian music in the middle west - home of "Whoopee" John Wilfahrt, Six Fat Dutchmen, and other such bands. Although raised in Ashland, Bob traveled with his family to this Mecca quite often. In fact, he still buys instruments from Brown's music store in New Ulm.

Beyond following in his family's German/Bohemian footsteps, Bob was also an eclectic musician. He played trumpet in Big Band and Dixieland style with the Northernaires; meanwhile he soaked up other kinds of ethnic music common to this region. He knew Finnish pieces, Polish numbers, Croatian melodies (his wife is Croatian), Yankovic's Slovenian style, and Swedish tunes. This wide knowledge partly derived from the exposure Bob had through the musicians of diverse backgrounds who played in his band: the Polish Louie Kolonko, Rod Lahti the Finn. Bob's multi-ethnic mastery also came, in part, through his joy in the fellowship of other musicians.

Living here in Ashland, he sometimes visited and played with the Swede Fritz Swanson from whom he learned tunes like "Johann Pa Snippen" - a schottische - and Viola Turpeinen's "Finn Polka." He also admired the "fast" Finnish playing of Washburn's Hugo Maki; and he had jammed with the Croatian Tom Marincel. As he told us after the tape recorder was turned off, Bob felt a great pleasure in any ethnic music. He believed that the tunes and their heritage were worth preserving and promoting. As a result Bob at

As a result Bob attended plenty of polka festivals (in Merrill, Wisconsin and Gibbon, Minnesota, for example). Here bands differing widely in style and coming from dispersed locales gathered to play on stage and in informal groups during parties alongside their campers. During these sessions, the insatiable Bob garnered many new tunes. He even carried a portable copying machine with him so that he could instantly reproduce a piece of sheet music.

What all of the foregoing leads up to is that Bob Mathiowetz is not simply a musician who plays some old time tunes; he is, rather, a promoter, a collector, an archivist, an amateur scholar, an advocate.

Once the tape was off, we trooped upstairs for coffee, zucchini bread, and Christmas cookies prepared by Mrs. Mathiowetz - a short, trim, energetic woman. As we talked over coffee I soon learned that Bob was not alone in his affection for old time music. His wife was a big fan of the stuff as well. Apparently, the



two often hitch up their camper in the summertime and travel to festivals where they meet with old friends (from Rhinelander and elsewhere). Mrs. Mathiowetz has a whole crew of female friends to hang out with while her husband plays.

The pair keep in touch with the old time music world through periodicals like Minnesota's Entertainment Bits and Wisconsin's Music and Dance News (Rt. 3, Box 320, Mosinee, 54455). They also carry some of Bob's instruments whenever they travel, and they have a whole string of anecdotes about bars into which they've stumbled for a drink only to find some kindred musicians and play for hours. As they recalled these moments, the pair became highly animated and enthusiastic. They really enjoyed old time music.

In that context, both noted sadly that ethnic music is in a pretty moribund state here in Ashland. Bob stopped playing with "The Solid Sound" because they drew small crowds; meantime the pair lamented that they can't really talk with many around here about their experiences with polka festivals because people "would think we were nuts, that we were lying."

Interestingly, the pair were heavily involved in one of the few long-lived ethnic music hot beds in this area - the Swedish country centering around Fritz Swanson's tavern. Apparently Bob would show up at Fritz's to play from time to time. He knew men like George Dybedol and Clarence Isberg and told interesting anecdotes about each. George, apparently, is a reknowned strongman who, as a boy, made himself a harness on the upper floor or hay area of the barn. The harness was attached to the saddle of a horse directly underneath and George would exercise by lifting the horse off the ground - til his father unexpectedly came in the barn and saw the horse peculiarly dangling in mid-air.

Clarence, according to Bob, would tell hilarious anecdotes about the old Swedish community once he'd had a few snorts. One involved the Vervils (sp ?). Apparently, they'd tried to kill an animal (a dog?) by tying a stick of dynamite to its tail. The ornery beast ran under their house and blew it up.

Shortly after three, we took our leave. I made arrangements to meet with Bob sometime after the holidays. At that time we reckon to record the various ethnic tunes he's mastered.