

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
May 1, 1985

Harbor Lights
Milwaukee, WI

Back in late March, while making inquiries about German music at the Schwabenhof in Menomonee Falls, I met Ken Schuetzler, a part time bartender in his early twenties. Ken reckoned he was part of a young German-American band, The Harbor Lights, and that I was welcome to come and record them sometime at his place on Nth. 76th in Milwaukee. The band practiced Wednesday nights in the Schuetzler basement. I made plans to meet with them on May 17, but complications arose and the session was put off until the evening of May 1. By that time I had talked several times on the phone with Gerhardt "Gary" Schweinert, the band's leader. He took pains to ask what I was after and to express his appreciation for the honor of recording for the project. I told him that we only had two microphones and wondered if some acoustic or only slightly amplified performances might be managed. He reckoned this would probably be fine, but he also said we would see the band at their best on May 11 when they were playing for a May Dance in the German-American community; at the same time, he expressed some consternation over recent personnel changes in the band.

Lewis and I arrived an hour late as a result of enjoying Hungarian goulash at Frieda and Bob Haese's. We found the Schuetzler residence, a brick bungalow with precisely kept lawn and hedges, on busy N. 76th just north of Capitol. The band was crammed into a small basement barroom. Their P.A. and amps were all set up; instrument cases, plugs, and cords were scattered and strewn everywhere. We picked our way through the electronic jungle while Ken and Gary were making introductions to the other musicians. Those present included:

Gerhardt Schweinert, cordovox

Ken Schuetzler, drums

Julie Leszczynski, vocals

Dennis Tomaschek, saxophone, keyboards, vocals

John Barich, bass guitar, vocals

Tim _____, guitar

I soon learned that Ken, Julie, and Gerhardt formed the band's core. Tim used to play with them some years ago, but was only sitting in tonight since the regular guitarist, John Koppel, had had his wisdom teeth out and was all swollen up and in pain. In addition, Dennis had only recently joined and didn't know the material particularly well--although he was a good musician and could play along. And John Birich was another old band member who was filling in since the previous bass player had quit. Given this situation, Gary's main concern was getting his makeshift band to run through some numbers so as to sound as good as possible for their upcoming May Dance. There was no real opportunity to shift things around for a good recording, so I was stuck with miking amps and p.a. systems so as to capture something of the band's sound while abandoning any hope of getting a clean recording for the WFC's purposes.

As the tape index will show, the band ran through five numbers, then members began to pack up and leave. The young men were all students at UW-M and were facing papers and exams; Julie, a student at MATC, also had to study. By nine only Gary and John Birich remained. Since Gary was busy with equipment, Lewis and I started gabbing with John who was leaning against the basement bar. Before saying a little about the substance of our conversation, it's worth describing the setting sans instruments.

Ken Schuetzler's parents were very recent immigrants, having come over in the mid-1950s, and their basement was full of old country and American ethnic

artifacts. German and American flags were pinned to the ceiling. Ledges behind the bar and against one wall held various full size and miniature beer steins and boots. There were pictures, posters, and pennants from Milwaukee athletic and dance events involving German Americans. Indeed we learned from Ken that his dad was vice president of the United Donauschwaben Societies that ran the Schwabenhof.

To return to John Birich, he was an insouciant twenty two year old dressed as a neo Beach Boy who enjoyed both German music and rock and roll. He had had a first accordion recital at age six and with his accordionist brother had played wearing lederhosen for nursing homes--something he's done for more than a decade. Currently he has a band called the "Tyroler Boys": John Barich, piano accordion; Johnny Heizmann, drums; Jeff Stehr, synthesizer; and Robert Barich, guitar. For rock numbers John trades his accordion for a bass guitar.

Midway through our conversation I turned on the tape recorder and John said a bit more on tape. There was hope briefly that John and Gary might sing some "folksongs" they'd learned as kids in their German-American community, but John's mother arrived to take him home and, since she had her hair in curlers and it was late, she couldn't be persuaded to come in while we made the recording. Only Gary was left and, as the tape index will show, he had plenty of interest to say about the difficulties of keeping a band together. The major problems lie with finding young people who'll play the German music and with pleasing the old Germans who constitute their audience and who don't want their music to ever change. The Harbor Lights have had numerous personnel changes and, at the moment, few of its members are even German. In fact, Gary has taught Julie the words to songs since, with her Polish background, she speaks no German. The grumpiness of audiences can be gleaned from the tape index, but we got a taste of it from Mrs. Schuetzler.

She smelled Lewis's cigarette and came down to chastise him. From thereon she complained to Gary about leaving the band's gear all over the basement, and about not letting her son sing more numbers with the band. Gary took it all well and traded joking remarks with his adversary; indeed the two seemed to have a longstanding joking relationship. But dealing with such ambiguities was more than Lewis and I could handle since it was late, this was our third session of the day, and we faced along drive back to Milwaukee.

We said goodbye and voiced hopes of seeing The Harbor Lights in action at one of their future jobs.