

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
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Melvin Knaack
1216 Douglas St.
Watertown, Wi

Will Eske had mentioned that Mel Knaack, leader of the Watertown Dutchmen, was in the Musicians Union and was a concertina player, so I reckoned it was worth interviewing him. I called and made an appointment with no trouble. Things were slightly hectic at the Knaack home when I arrived. A son and daughter-in-law whose house is being remodeled were staying there and a late supper's dishes were just being cleared away at 7:30. Mel invited me to pull up a chair at the table in his ranch home's spacious kitchen. He was wearing a Midland Co-op work shirt with his name emblazoned above the pocket. We spent the first few minutes commenting on the project and on musicians I'd interviewed who were known to Mel, but conversation soon strayed to concern truck driving. Mel is a semi-driver for a Land O' Lakes company formerly owned by Midland. He hauls one way in an area defined by Lake Michigan to the west, Fond du Lac to the north, Madison to the east, and northern Illinois to the south. The fate of Pepsi plant drivers from Watertown was on his mind that day, since they'd all received notice that the company--a major distribution center for the region--was phasing out its trucking division to hire owner-operators.

Shortly the conversation turned back to music and I learned that Mel was not the product of an overtly German-American heritage. He wasn't sure at all when his ancestors came over from the old country, nor did he grow up speaking German (I'm guessing this is partially explained by his growing up in Watertown and the fact that he was not yet in his teens when WWII began), nor was there an old grandmother around to sing him German songs. Instead Mel had a father who loved dancing and concertina music--and who bought his son a concertina--and Mel himself had been a fan of New Ulm bands as a young man.

Consequently the chief inspiration for Knaack's Dutchman music is Harold Loeffelmacher's Six Fat Dutchmen. Sometime in the early 1970s Mel and his wife went with friends to a polka festival in Minnesota (probably Gibbon). M was delighted by the concertina playing and decided to take up the long ignored instrument of his youth. About 1979 he formed his band with his sister Marian on concertina along with a drummer and tuba player; his wife sometimes sings. Mel and his band draw considerably on the wide network of upper midwest polkaholics. Some of his sheet music is Vitak Elsnic stuff, or is from Patek and Silberhorn--holdovers from M's concertina training with Irving DeWitz. But most of M's music is written down for him on a custom basis by Marv Nissel, a band leader out of New Ulm. M reckons he's tight with Loeffelmacher and with the Wendinger Brothers of that vicinity. His concertinas are all made by Anton Wolfe of Stevens Point. His P.A. system was purchased from Don Gralak in Milwaukee. Jerry Minar of JBM Records and of the Ivan Kahle Band is reworking M's original Lang Concertina. Karl Hartwich of Karl and the Country Dutchmen and Ohio's Dan Witucki are friends. And on and on and on. As such M is an exemplar of modernday Dutchman music--i.e. music that is more in the style of New Ulm bands than it is necessarily German.

More on the polka scene and M's involvement in it can be gleaned from the tape index. After gabbing for twenty minutes or so in the kitchen, we adjourned to the basement and did roughly an hour of taping. The basement was a combination second kitchen, storage room, and music practice area. It was here that M stored his PA equipment, amplifiers, concertinas, an upright tuba, an alto saxophone, several read and white music stands reading Wisconsin Dutchmen, several blue vests emblazoned with the same logo in white, and ring binders full of sheet music. He gave me very detailed accounts of the purchase and capabilities of all of his equipment and showed a professional musician's

concern with having equipment that looked and sounded good, and with being able to get enough jobs to make a little money and pay off the equipment over a reasonable period. M does all the booking himself, rather than work through an agent, and he hustles work by approaching clubs and organizations. He's quite rigid about getting his standard price, although he occasionally kicks some of it back for charitable benefits. He figures on putting out recordings soon through Jerry Minar's JBM studio in New Prague, Minnesota and he reckons that one of these years he'll be bringing his band to one of the major polka festivals in the upper midwest.