

Chapter 22

Pulaski Is a Polka Town

Program 22 Performances

1. Alvin Styczynski, "Pulaski Is a Polka Town." 2. Dick Rodgers, "Dan's Dizzy Hop." 3. Dick Rodgers, "Chocolate Soda Polka." 4. Alvin Styczynski, "Hup Sadyna." 5. Polka Dimensions, "Merka, merka." 6. Maroszek Brothers, "Kujawiak." 7. Steve Rodgers and Friends, "Down on the Corner." 8. Polkatown Sound, "I've Just Seen a Face."

Polka Town

On a long weekend at the end of July every year a transformation takes place in the northeastern Wisconsin dairy-farming village of Pulaski. Wire-and-lathing snow fences enclose the city park just past the small downtown commercial strip. Tent-covered dance floors and beer bars appear, food stands exude the aroma of Polish sausages on the grill, and Pulaski becomes, as promised in local musician Alvin Styczynski's song, the quintessential "polka town."

Pulaski is a polka town
With loads of boys and girls around.
It's very plain to see, they're singing merrily
Dancing and hopping up and down.

Pulaski Polka Days are the biggest of many local dance events. Polka enthusiasts from miles around more than double the town's population of under two thousand. From midday until late each night, at least two bands—one in the pavilion, the other in the tent—pump out polkas and an occasional waltz, *oberek*, or *kujawiak*. As the trumpets, concertinas, electric bass, and drums blare at the ear-ringing level to which modern sound systems have inured us, dancers whirl about the floor in sweeping counterclockwise circles. The dancers are old and young, teenagers in blue jeans and tee shirts, and farming folk sporting seed company baseball caps, print dresses, and billowy blouses and slacks. The most serious dancers wear polka club outfits—frequently vests in shades of red, trimmed with rickrack and bearing the club's insignia on the back—worn with matching slacks or skirts over rustling crinolines. The polka dancing styles are as diverse as the crowd. As they execute jitterbug swings, the heads of the hottest club dancers bob up and down like pistons in double time to the music, while the more casual dancers glide or hop in one-step, two-step, or heel-and-toe polkas. Somewhere among the dancing throng, gaudy golden plastic crowns glisten on the festival's king and queen.

It takes a lot of bands to keep the two dance floors filled for three days. Most of the bands each year are from the Pulaski area—Chad Przybylski, the Polka Sweethearts, the Maroszek Brothers, Alvin Styczynski, Steve Rodgers, the

Polkatown Sound, Mike Ryba and the Changing Times Orchestra, Eldon Otto, and the Polka Dimensions. Nationally known "name" bands are also a must for the big event—Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones out of Chicago always appear, guarding their status as the number one purveyors of the modern Polish-American "Dyno" style. Former Chicagoan Lil' Wally Jagiello, who originated the rootsy "Honky" style revolution in Polish-American music, comes back up north from Florida. Appearances by hot younger performers like Scrubby Seweryniak and the Sunshine Band from Buffalo or the Toledo Polkamotion give the crowd a chance to meet the bands from far away whose synthesis of rock with polka has been making waves on local polka radio shows. Some years even Cleveland's Frankie Yankovic, a living legend pushing eighty but still touring, is a big draw despite the fact that his trademark Slovenian-style polka is not the prevalent sound at this Polish music-oriented event.

The polka scene in Pulaski has retained a few of its local peculiarities—circle two-steps, non-hop style polka dancing, and the older fans' appreciation for the northeastern Wisconsin Bohemian style of music—but increasingly it manifests the national Polish-American polka culture. For instance, Mike Ryba's band is a proponent of Lil' Wally's Honky style, and most of the other local bands mentioned above perform in the Dyno style of Eddie Blazonczyk, arguably the most influential Polish-American musician and a man with personal connections to northeastern Wisconsin.

It is not surprising that nationally popular Polish music styles are now favored in Pulaski. Pulaski's Poles have long been part of a midwestern, if not national, ethnic network. The Polish settlers in Pulaski did not come directly to northeastern Wisconsin from a single isolated village or region in Poland. Rather they are the descendants of immigrants from various parts of Poland who worked in American mines, mills, or lumber camps and who may have lived in several Polish-American communities before they accumulated the wherewithal to purchase farmland in this corner of Wisconsin. Many have relatives in Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit, or other large urban Polish-American centers.

Well into the 1940s the Pulaski community enjoyed village music from Poland in instrumental trios or quartets combining fiddle, concertina, clarinet, and bowed string bass at local weddings and festivities. The music was appropriate to their rural conditions and stemmed from their peasant roots. Pulaski had no large Polish-American orchestral groups like those based in New York and other cities of the eastern United States, though some of the 78 rpm records of these groups certainly found their way to this rural outpost of Polonia. When a larger polka band was formed in the 1940s by a local Pole, Dick (Rodzicak) Rodgers, it followed the model of the Bohemian bands popular in their region.

From Honky to Dyno

In the 1950s Lil' Wally began to record and tour, playing Honky, his updated American version of the raw village music of Poland. This style immediately attracted devotees among northern Wisconsin's Polish musicians like Pulaski's Alvin Styczynski and Stevens Point's Norm Dombrowski. By the mid-1960s, a second revolution in Polish-American music was effected by Eddie Blazonczyk.

Blazonczyk was born in Chicago to a family which hailed from the southern Tatra region of Poland around the city of Zakopane. His mother Antonina was a community cultural activist who led a *goral*, or Polish highlander, folk music and dance ensemble. His father was a tavern keeper, who exposed his young son Eddie to Honky music by hiring musicians like Steve Adamczyk and Marion Lush. When Eddie was still a boy, the elder Blazonczyk purchased a tavern in the northwoods hamlet of Hiles, Wisconsin, about a hundred miles northwest of Pulaski. As a student at Crandon High School in the late 1950s, Eddie formed a



The Polish Sweethearts of Pulaski, 1985 Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection

rockabilly band that covered the hit tunes of the likes of Carl Perkins and Gene Vincent. By the time they left high school in the early 1960s, the band became known as Eddie Bell and the Hillcroppers, a reference to the musicians' other occupation—timber workers in a pulp lumbering operation.

Blazonczyk's musical aspirations drew him back to Chicago, where he started a band. From 1962 to 1964 he worked a day job for the Mercury Record Company with the expressed purpose of learning everything he could so that he could start his own record business. In 1964 he launched the Bel-Aire record label to record his own Versatones as well as the other Polish bands of the Windy City.

The trademark sound of his band's Dyno style spread rapidly and soon became the standard for younger Polish-American musicians. The archetypal Dyno band features two trumpet players, one or both of whom can also handle reeds. They play mostly unison or parallel melodic parts. A concertina player is required for melody, countermelody, and slightly dissonant fill chords. Three players provide rhythm: an accordionist who scarcely needs a right hand since rhythmic chordal "bellows-shaking" on each eighth note of the 2/4 polka measure is the main task; Blazonczyk's own highly amplified electric bass guitar (Eddie's bass is so live that he rarely uses his right hand to pluck the strings—the notes ring out from his "hammering on" the strings with the fingers of his left hand), and a drummer with a full trap set playing in the characteristic Polish style with lots of rim shots and syncopation.

Over the years the Dyno style has evolved, taking on more rock elements in one direction, or reviving aspects of the more contrapuntal Honky style. Some bands have even resurrected the fiddle as a conscious "old-timey" Polish element, which paradoxically has made it possible also to "Americanize" their sound by introducing trendy Nashville country or Cajun musical quotations into the Polish polka.

The musicians jamming and the dancers twirling at Pulaski Polka Days are affirming their connection to a broader Polish-American polka scene. The most ambitious Pulaski bands like the Maroszek Brothers and the Polkatown Sound follow the latest trends in Polish-American music and through their recordings and appearances at other polka festivals around the Midwest contribute to the ongoing artistic evolution of the Polish-American polka.

The Polish Sweethearts of Polka! 1982 Warsaw Folk Dance Competition