

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary  
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Faschingsball  
Park Ponderosa  
McFarland, WI

The Park Ponderosa's schedule advertized a "German Fest" for 2/23, so I went not knowing quite what to expect. As it turned out the event was put on by the German Club of Madison, now seventy-five years old. The club essentially rented the hall from owner Don Ring and took care of ticket sales at the door. As the accompanying poster testifies, the occasion was a "Faschingsball," despite the fact that Ash Wednesday and the onset of Lent had fallen the previous week. According to German Club president, Walter Naujeck [3200 HWY 78 N, Mt. Horeb, WI, 53572], other Madison German organizations (the Turners and the Madison Maennerchor) as well as German-American aggregations from Janesville and Sauk City were present. Perhaps one fifth of the 200 plus crowd was in costume: cowboys, Indians, Pope John Paul, Prussian officers, clowns, bikers, chickens, bums, Bavarian peasants, Mexican caballeros. About 10:30 pm there was a grand march during which those in masquerade marched around while judges deliberated and the crowd cheered. The pseudopontiff drew special attention by blessing the crowd and looking pious, and, as a result, he was consistently applauded. The band was more respectably attired. Dubbed "Die Sterne der Heimat" (The Homeland Stars), band members wore tuxedo pants and shirts with scarlet cumberbuns, matching bow ties, and no coats. Their instrumentation consisted of drums, bass horn and electric bass, piano accordion and electric organ, electric guitar, and saxophone. During the break I gabbed a little with the drummer. He and the rest are from the Milwaukee area and are in their late 20s and early 30s. Their parents are recent emigres, Donauschwaben from Austria and Yugoslavia and the second generation bandmembers grew up learning songs from



their folks both at home and while participating in a German singing group. They were inspired by older emigre bands like that of Johnny Hofmann and his Herzbuben Orchestra and have been playing together for about fourteen years: mostly weddings, Octoberfests, private and club parties. They've played in Madison a few times previously. According to Tony they've issued three LPs, but all are now out of print.

In dress, instrumentation, and repertoire they are quite distinct from "Dutchmen" bands like Karl and the Country Dutchmen. The latter, probably a fifth generation German-American band, offer little German singing; they emphasize the tuba's heavy bass, melodic brass choruses, and concertina fills; and they dress in overtly old world German style (i.e. as idealized Bavarian peasants). Karl and the CD play polkas, waltzes, and schottisches with a few "mixers" thrown in along with some C&W standards. "Die Sterne der Heimat," by contrast, offered a "continental" look. No hick attire here, but urban second generation men of the world. While the tuba was employed on a few polkas, the electric bass provided the predominant bottom. German was employed for most of the songs, often via three part harmonies, and the Stars even managed a version of "Spanish Eyes" auf Deutsch. Their yodeling was refined and the interplay of piano accordion and electric guitar in many of the tunes suggested that this band looked to Europe for inspiration rather than to New Ulm. The only counter to this continental allegiance was a taste for rock 'n' roll. As a wedding band, the Stars were prepared, as their business card suggests, to provide "enjoyable music for all occasions." They rocked out pretty respectable versions of "Memphis," "Hang on Sloopy," and Bob Seeger's "That Old Time Rock and Roll." From this brief comparison it's clear that the Stars, as a second generation urban band, are comfortable extending their ethnicity into the modern world while simultaneously playing American rock music; while bands like Karl's



Dutchmen are much more consciously old-timey. It's also apparent that Die Sterne der Heimat are not part of the "polka" scene either in Milwaukee or in the upper midwest region.

The same might be said for the audience. While I noticed a few Park Ponderosa polka "regulars" whirling about the dancefloor, most of those in attendance were affiliated with one or another of the aforementioned German clubs and their dancing style contrasted with that of the diehard polkaholic. There were only a few hop step polkaers in evidence, although that had been the predominant step when Karl's Dutchmen played. The polka regulars' pattern of rapid counterclockwise movement around the dancefloor was modified as well inasmuch as many couples defined a small space and moved around within it.

It will be interesting to see, as fieldwork begins in the Milwaukee area, to what extent the club German/urban German/emigre German scene differs from the polkaing, country, fourth and fifth generation German scene.