

Chapter 11

Music before Milking: The Very Musical Brueggen Family

Program 11 Performances

1. Brian and the Mississippi Valley Dutchmen, "At the Mill Polka."
2. Herman's Jolly Dutchmen, "Gary's Polka." 3. Ridgeland Dutchmen, "While You're Away." 4. Ridgeland Dutchmen, "Jolly Coppersmith."
5. Brian and the Mississippi Valley Dutchmen, "Cherry Polka." 6. Brian and the Mississippi Valley Dutchmen, Excerpts from "Pine Hollow Schottische," "Reh braune Augen," and "Koster's Waltz." 7. Gary and the Ridgeland Dutchmen, "Seven Beers with the Wrong Woman."
8. Gary and the Ridgeland Dutchmen with the Polka Mass Trio, "Christ Is Knocking."

Ridgeland Dutchmen

The young concertina virtuoso Brian Brueggen was born in the 1960s on a dairy farm outside the village of Cashton in western Wisconsin. Cashton is east of the bustling river town of La Crosse, in one of the most scenic areas of the state. As one approaches the Mississippi River, Wisconsin's green rolling hills become steeper and sharper in a pattern of ridges. Limestone outcroppings are frequent, and magnificent vistas culminate in the panorama of the mighty Mississippi itself, the wide channel, islands choked with trees, and luxurious wetlands along the shores. Many of its inhabitants refer to the area as the Ridgeland, and places like Middle Ridge, Ridgeville, and St. Mary's Ridge—location of the pioneer Brueggen homestead—are named for the area's notable topographic feature.

The connection of his concertina music to this land is evident in the names of the bands in which Brian has played: he started professional play with his father and paternal uncles in the Ridgeland Dutchmen and now leads Brian and the Mississippi Valley Dutchmen. Brian has also named some of his original dance tunes for local sites: "Pine Hollow Schottische" and "Brush Creek Laendler."

While Brian's music may be intimately linked to the land and local community of his birthplace, his "Dutchman" sound is also a widely known style of vernacular music played throughout the Upper Midwest. The most famed practitioners of this genre in the past, "Whoopee John" Wilfahrt and Harold Loefflemacher with his Six Fat Dutchmen, established a foothold in the midwestern mass media and entertainment business from their home base in New Ulm, Minnesota. From the 1920s—when radio and phonograph records emerged—through the 1950s, these and other leaders of Dutchman bands were striving for widespread commercial success like that eventually achieved by Nashville's "country" music.

Since the Ridgeland is only about two hundred miles east of New Ulm, the Brueggens and their neighbors heard the famed Dutchman bands via Twin Cities and La Crosse radio stations, or live when the Minnesota bands crossed the Mississippi to play for dances in places like La Crosse's Concordia Ballroom. Besides being attracted by its style, these German-American farmers liked Dutchman music for another reason: to them, it represented a modern apotheosis of German-American traditional music. Even the name Dutchman expresses both ethnicity and an American identity, since it is an Anglicized form deriving from *Deutsch*, meaning "German."

If these were not reasons enough for the Ridgeland to accept the Dutchman sound, then there was Sylvester Liebl. A concertina player born in the town of Wanda, Minnesota, just thirty miles from New Ulm and steeped in the local style, Syl relocated with his family to Mormon Coulee (near La Crosse) in 1934 when he was only seventeen. Syl was already a veteran dance band musician; since age twelve he had headed a small family combo, Liebl's Concertina Orchestra. Once in Wisconsin, he renamed the band the Jolly Germans, and during World War II he changed it to the Jolly Swiss Boys to avoid anti-German sentiments.

At first glance, the bespectacled Syl seemed introverted, but when he strapped on the concertina and played a dance tune, his instinctive musicianship conveyed freedom and a raucous abandon. So innate was his musical gift that his bands never needed written music, and no one even needed to count the beat; the band members simultaneously plunged into a tune. It was as natural as breathing (Jim Kirchstein, personal communication, 1991).

Syl Liebl may have started the first true Dutchman band in the Ridgeland but others soon followed. The spell of the Dutchman style must have influenced Brian's accordion-playing and drum-beating grandfather, Herman Brueggen, who changed the name of his group from Herman's Accordion Orchestra to Herman's Jolly Dutchmen.

Brian readily admits Syl Liebl's strong influence upon his playing. Indeed, Syl's infectious and improvisatory style has inspired several younger concertinists, including Fountain City's Karl Hartwich, originally from Orion, Illinois, whose Country Dutchmen band is one of the most popular in the northern Mississippi Valley, and Brian's younger cousin, Gary Brueggen, another teenaged concertina prodigy. Since Gary's emergence as an accomplished lead concertinist in the latter half of the 1980s, Brian's paternal uncles Willard and Harry have been able to revitalize the Ridgeland Dutchmen, their old band which had endured a setback when Brian and his father Phil departed to form their own group. Syl Liebl Sr. retired from active music making in 1984, but Syl Liebl Jr. of Coon Valley has kept the family's musical tradition going with his own band, the New Jolly Swiss Boys, fronted by Kevin Liss of Stevens Point, yet another young Liebl-influenced concertina standout.

With four first-rate Dutchman bands in the area, the Ridgeland is a hotbed of this German-American midwestern music. But the Ridgeland's population is not homogeneous in terms of ethnicity or religion. Among its hillside farmers, besides the numerous German Catholics, there are many Norwegian Lutherans, some Irish, a big Czech settlement around Hillsboro, and Wasps. Each ethnic group has added its own particular influence to Ridgeland culture and traditional music. In addition to a core repertoire of German music, the Brueggen Dutchman bands typically play a lot of perky Scandinavian schottisches, plenty of melodious Czech polkas and waltzes, some Irish chestnuts, country music fox-trots, and perhaps a few oompah versions of Anglo hoedown fiddle tunes.



Brothers Henry Brueggen, clarinet, Bill Brueggen, fiddle, and Herman Brueggen, button accordion, Cashton, 1920s Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection



Brian Brueggen of the Mississippi Valley Dutchmen playing concertina at the Red Barn Polka Festival, Evansville, 1988 Photo: Jim Leary

Polka Masses

Though Dutchman is a secular tradition, the strong Catholic religious orientation of the St. Mary's Ridge community, the home place of the Brueggens, has also influenced the local music. The religious tradition is so strong in St. Mary's Ridge that the brief local history prepared for America's bicentennial practically equates St. Mary's parish with the community. According to the *Monroe County Pictorial History* (1976), the hardy group of German immigrants who settled on St. Mary's Ridge in 1855, while residing in log cabins and struggling to clear agricultural land on the steep slopes, also found the energy to walk the forty miles to church in La Crosse. In 1856 they built a small log church in their own community which was served by a missionary priest from La Crosse. A few years later, they finally received a stationary priest, S. Florentint.

The community was exclusively German until 1862 when four Irish families moved to the Ridge. More than a century later, the same families still predominate as does the vitality of their religious practice. Gary's Ridgeland Dutchmen combine the area's musical and religious heritages as active purveyors of the polka mass, a relatively recent innovation. Since its purported inception in the 1970s in Eveleth, Minnesota, by a Slovenian priest, Fr. Frank Perkovich, polka masses have been celebrated across the Midwest at parish festivals and polka fests in a variety of ethnic polka styles.

In response to many requests that their band provide a polka mass, Gary's mother, Dorothy Brueggen, compiled the songs for a mass. In some cases she penned religious lyrics to standard polka tunes. For example, Dorothy transformed the polka favorite by Chicago's Lil' Wally, "Johnny's Knocking," from the Polish folk song "Puka Jasiu," into a sacred song, "Christ Is Knocking." In other instances she borrowed items from the Perkovich polka mass, setting "We Offer Bread and Wine" to the tune of the Slovenian "Psi zalajaju" (Barking dog polka) and "At This Sacrifice" to the tune of Fred Rose's "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain" (which no doubt entered the Perkovich mass via the Serbian and Croatian tamburitza version, "Suze liju plave oči"). The harmonizing voices of her nieces Donna Elsen, Carol Brueggen, and Kathy Wacker became the Polka Mass Trio, who perform the mass to the accompaniment of the Ridgeland Dutchmen.

A polka mass is often celebrated on Sunday mornings at midwestern polka festivals where old-time music and dancing enthusiasts from several states congregate. The music of the Brueggen family bands is firmly rooted in the folk culture of the local Ridgeland community. At the same time they are not isolated but participate in and have helped shape the broader vernacular traditions of the Upper Midwest.