

Chapter 18

The Manitowoc Bohemian Sound

Program 18 Performances

1. Romy Gosz, "Ja mam kocoura (Tomcat polka)." 2. Tuba Dan and the Polkalanders, "Narrow Path." 3. Jerome Wojta (1988 I), "Svestkova alej." 4. Romy Gosz, "Svestkova alej." 5. Lawrence Duchow, "Red Raven Polka." 6. Sax Steiner, "Flying Dutchman." 7. Jerome Wojta and the Two Creeks Farmhands, "Tinker Polka." 8. Larry Hlinak, "Squeekers Polka." 9. Harold Schultz, "Louka zelena."

Bands, Parks, and Parades

Jerome Wojta's little band is called the Two Creeks Farmhands. If he were of another nationality, or from another region, one might expect him to be a fiddler, a banjo player, perhaps a guitarist, but this Czech-American farmer is from Manitowoc County, and the instrument he plays in his rural dance combo is the trumpet. Wojta emulates the style of local legend Romy Gosz. He has vivid memories of country dances where everyone was there "from the grandchild to the grandpa and grandma," where dancers swirled to the piercing trumpet and biting reedy clarinet like "big waves on the sea" (Wojta 1988 I).

Of all the musical traditions that the Czechs of east central Wisconsin brought with them from their homeland, they have nurtured none more lovingly than their brass and woodwind dance bands. Band music was all the rage in central Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, when numerous Czech immigrants settled on farms in Manitowoc and Kewaunee counties. Like their many German-American neighbors, the Czechs, following central European custom, put considerable effort into forming local town bands to march in parades and perform afternoon concerts in park gazebos.

Town bands were requisites of civilized life; even crossroads hamlets in farming communities like Pilsen in Kewaunee County and Yuba, farther west in Richland County, had them. Czech composer Frantisek Kmoch, internationally celebrated as the Czechoslovak March King, inspired Czech Americans with his marches, waltzes, and patriotic anthems (Leary 1987a).

The early Czech brass bands typically had six or seven pieces. A pair of clarinets and one or two trumpets played melody parts, the brass and reeds taking turns as the lead voice. A pair of peckhorns (alto or baritone horns with an upright bell) played the rhythm on the weak beats, and a tuba played the steady downbeat and the bottom anchor.

The most influential band, the Pilsen Brass Band from Pilsen, started in 1910. Joe Altman was the leader and trumpet player, and Wencil Janda and George Sladky were the clarinetists, Janda playing the high-pitched E₄ clarinet. Three

players were responsible for the oompah rhythm: Mike Suess and Mike Nejedlo on alto and baritone peckhorns and Frank Schleis on tuba (Janda 1976). Traveling by horse and buggy and by sleigh in heavy winter snows, the Pilsen band was extremely popular, and not only with the Czechs. The local Germans, Belgians, and Poles loved the music as well. According to one report, they were known to play as many as sixty dates in a row before having a night off! The music of very few town bands has been recorded. Fortunately, some examples of the Pilsen band's music have survived. They were recorded for the Library of Congress in 1940, by University of Wisconsin music professor Helene Stratman-Thomas.

If the Pilsen Brass Band was as much at home parading down Main Street with its old-time instruments as it was in the dance hall, other local bands, influenced by mainstream dance bands in the era from the teens through the thirties, used instruments which were more modern but sometimes less mobile. A piano, saxophones, and a trap set of drums became common in groups like the Dan Zahorik Band, Gloe-Naidl Orchestra, and Cy Urbanek's Players, while the Lyric Orchestra included a trombone, a banjo, and a xylophone.

While the core repertoire of these ensembles remained the locally popular polkas, waltzes, and ländlers of Czech and German origin, some Manitowoc bands also began to play contemporary American music. Art and Regis Brault were two members of the Lyric Orchestra, a largely Bohemian aggregation. They formed their own band, naming it Brault's Canadiens to celebrate their French-Canadian roots. They exclusively played popular music and spent months at a time on tour in the southern states. Another successful Manitowoc-based road band whose repertoire all but eschewed old-time music was Tiny Laude's Orchestra. These early groups paved the way for the 1940s Manitowoc popular dance bands of Bob Mlada and Duke Janda.

Romy Gosz, Polka King

While the road bands sought wider success by adopting modern music, it is ironic that the Manitowoc musician to achieve the most national acclaim was Romy Gosz, who stuck almost exclusively to the old-time sound. Gosz was born in 1910 in Rockwood, just north of Manitowoc. His musical precociousness is legendary. At the age of seven, Romy took his first piano lesson, but the following Saturday he notified his teacher, Mrs. Charles Kirchen, that he could not make it to the next lesson because he had to play for a dance.

In 1921, Romy's father Paul formed a unique entertainment combination, a family basketball team/dance band. Paul Gosz, along with sons Frank, Mike, George, and Romy, would play a local team and after the game would break out their instruments to make music for a social dance. This arrangement lasted until 1924 when Paul formed another band, Pauly's Playboys, leaving the boys on their own, under brother George's leadership. When George quit the band in 1928 to open a tavern, Romy took over at the tender age of seventeen.

Until 1931, Romy had been the band's pianist, but when a trumpet player was unavailable for a job, Romy switched to the horn that was to make him famous. Romy's piercing tone, iron lip, and prodigious volume became the trademark of the Gosz band. Romy's tone was so unmistakable that one of his sidemen once asserted, "In a twenty member trumpet section, you'd be able to pick him out" (Janda 1976). In the era before reliable amplification systems, Romy's band was able to play quite audibly in outdoor picnic groves and to jam-packed halls.

Romy had an uncanny ability to excite the big crowds without resorting to any flamboyant antics on the bandstand. The music itself conveyed such intensity that the dancers' spirits were lifted. But offstage Romy was known to cut up. At one point, he bought an old hearse to haul the band's equipment. It came com-



Romy Gosz (center with trumpet) and his band striking a barnyard pose amidst wedding festivities, Manitowoc area, 1950s Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection

plete with a siren and red flashing lights. Late one night, returning from a job, he tore through the little burg of Maribel, lights flashing and siren screaming. He quickly pulled in behind a tavern, went inside, and looked out the front window to see the locals run about trying to find out what the commotion was (Janda 1976).

Between 1933 and 1938 the Romy Gosz Orchestra recorded seventy-four sides for the Broadway, Decca, Okeh, Brunswick, and Columbia labels. His renditions of the best-known Czech folk tunes, like "Picnic in the Woods," "The 'Crying' Barbara Polka," and "Modre oci," became the definitive versions and many of his records featured incidental singing in the Czech language. It is another irony typical of ethnic sharing in rural Wisconsin that Romy was not Czech himself but of German-American background.

A humorous parody of one of his records has become a midwestern classic. In 1934, at a time when Gosz's waltz-tempo recording of the romantic Czech folk song "Svestkova alej" was very popular, the parody appeared. A *Milwaukee Journal* (April 9, 1945) article attributes its origin to the 1934 state American Legion convention, held in Green Bay. This ditty to the old Czech tune became widely known, competing even with "In Heaven There Is No Beer" as a favorite Wisconsin drinking song. Its new English lyrics:

We left our wives at home,
We left our wives at home,
We left our wives with six other guys,
We left our wives at home.

Years later, Romy recorded his own version of the parody.

More records were made in 1945 for Mercury. By then the wartime shellac shortage had eased. Pent up demand for his recordings was such that Mercury received eleven thousand orders for a Gosz recording, even before it was marketed.

Records brought national exposure and the Gosz band traveled as far as Texas, California, and New York, though they preferred to tour closer to home in the Midwest. Though national magazines like *Time* and *Coronet* declared him "the polka king" in the era prior to Frankie Yankovic's use of that title, Romy's most treasured recognition was a papal blessing from Pope Pius XII, given in recognition of his band's playing at the diamond jubilee celebration for St. Mary's Church in Tisch Mills (Ebner 1985 P).

Unfortunately, his musical success also had its dark side. Romy suffered from alcoholism. Like country music's Hank Williams, Romy Gosz was a brilliant and creative artist whose life ended much too early, in 1966 at age 55, owing to the deleterious effects of alcohol.

The Gosz legacy lives on. His son Tony kept the band going for a number of years, and after a hiatus the band is playing again with trumpeter Del Dassow, who many contend has an uncanny resemblance to Romy. His recordings are still popular and kept in print through the efforts of Greg Leider of Fredonia and his Polkaland record company. Moreover, numerous bands in the Manitowoc area and elsewhere in Wisconsin perpetuate his style. Tom Siebold's Brass Buttons, the Mark Jirikovec Band, the Harold Schultz Orchestra, the Bob Kuether Orchestra, the Larry Hlinak Band, Tuba Dan and the Polkalanders, and Jerome Wojta's Two Creeks Farmhands are some of the better-known bands actively playing the Gosz style in the 1990s.