

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
March 4, 1985

Thomas Eisenhut
Weissgerber's Gasthaus
Waukesha, WI

Tom Eisenhut responded to the Fokklife Center's press release with a postcard suggesting he had "German Music," "some information of value," and that he played evenings at several different restaurants (The Seven Seas and the Gasthaus). I guessed from the reference to German music that this meant sheet music, while the reference to prized information suggested a certain amount of intellectual presumption; finally the man's role of entertainer at a place called the Seven Seas suggested easy listening music of some sort. Nonetheless, though folk music's what this project's after, the entire German-American continuum ought to be covered. With that in mind, I gave Tom a call.

He proved to be very pleasant over the phone and, since I reckoned it would be interesting to capture his live repertoire at a German-American eatery, we made arrangements to meet for dinner at the Gasthaus where I'd interview him and then record him during his hour and a half set. We both arrived at the same time carrying suitcases; mine held recording equipment, his held an Italian Dallape piano accordion made to his specifications. We went in and made our way to a quiet table on the restaurant's second floor. Eisenhut was nattily dressed in a sportcoat and white turtleneck; he's a small man of fifty with glasses, thinning hair, and a gentle, friendly manner. A veteran player at the restaurant, he was well known to and on good terms with assorted employees.

I set up the recorder at the dinner table and, while our orders were being taken and prepared, we began the interview. I followed my usual procedure of outlining the thrust of my questions briefly prior to switching the machine on. Tom took off with an extended monologue. Not all of it was musicological--he interjected plenty of commentary about various stages of his career--and a good

deal of the musical commentary was fairly general. Efforts to probe for more detail were thwarted by the fact that we had to eat and to finish our meal prior to Tom's music job. As the index will reveal, Tom's dad played concertina while his mother was a pianist. Her father had been master of many instruments. Eisenhut fancied the piano accordion at an early age and studied it, along with piano, at various institutions. He has been a professional musician and a music teacher for much of his life and has played considerably with many highly skilled ethnic-American musicians in the greater Milwaukee area. As Eisenhut's attached business card suggests, the man's musical tastes run toward "elegant sounds." Indeed he has an upper class continental aesthetic that combines an appreciation of orchestral music with a feel for more vernacular, as Tom put it, "cafe music."

Consequently Eisenhut puts together numerous musical ensembles for ethnic occasions demanding elegant continental dance music. He gave me an old poster of one band made of three other music teachers and symphony musicians, and he occasionally assembles a lederhosen clad dance band; but the man's real forte is playing alone or with a mandolinist as a strolling musician. Indeed this was his act at the Gasthaus. He wanders around, beginning on the balcony, then descending into the restaurant's main hall, playing at tables. He's quick to read whether or not a party welcomes his interest and he always plays requests. By repeating such staples as "Spanish Eyes," "Somewhere My Love," "If I Was a Rich Man" (get the elegant continental picture?) and, in places like the Gasthaus, "Edelweiss," he's able to win tips and warm response. He also plays a fairly limited repertoire over and over in these contexts as he weaves hither and yon to various parts of the restaurant. Obviously such an act does not allow for easy recording. I set up the machine near our table so that Tom could play a handful of numbers into the Nagra prior to wending his way among the

crowd. The most notable was "Coffee Klatsch (sp?) Polka," a lively number with complicated fingering; it was one of Tom's own compositions.

As I observed at the outset of these notes, Tom's rendition of German tunes and his overall repertoire do not correlate directly with the main thrust of this project. Nonetheless he is an important figure in Milwaukee's German music scene. As Richard March reckoned, in a conversation we had shortly after my meeting with Eisenhut, such men are often looked up to as teachers by the less classically inclined, less elegant tavern or domestic musicians. [March mentioned the concertinist Don Gralak in this context.] And indeed Eisenhut's skill as a performer and his warm personality have won him many friends and admirers among less "elegant" regional musicians. Harry Kosek of the "Red River Boys" has been an Eisenhut student and Tom mentioned his acquaintance with a concertina playing farmer among others. Indeed Eisenhut is roughly comparable to Irving DeWitz of Hustisford.