

FIELD NOTES

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Art Altenburg's Concertina Bar
1920 South 37th St.
Milwaukee, WI

Art Altenburg's Concertina Bar is well advertized in the Wisconsin Orchestra Leaders' Association Yearbook and in every issue of the Wisconsin Polka Boosters Newsletter. Typically there is an concertina jamboree on Thursday nights, while on the weekends particular bands from the local area and from metropolitan Chicago provide entertainment. Figuring that Thursday night might be an interesting cultural scene to document as well as an opportunity for meeting local concertina players, I dropped by Altenburg's on a March afternoon.

South 37th is not the world's most scenic location. The bar is in a heavily industrial area and its windows open out on a vast parking lot behind which grain mills and railroad tracks sprawl. Neon and painted signs present the place's name, while a small handpainted sign of a concertina is wedged in the corner of an outer window. When I arrived there were only a handful of people in the bar. I approached the barmaid, a blond named Berneice who I later learned was a concertina player, and explained who I was then asked to see Art. Her initial response was suspicion. Was I a salesman? This was the manager's time off; he was downstairs but busy. After a few moments, however, I managed to clear up her doubts and she went off to summon Art. Meantime I looked around. The place was packed with musical instruments. Concertinas of various shapes and sizes lined the back bar or were spread out and affixed to walls. A few button accordions, a trombone, and a trumpet likewise added musical decoration. The wall opposite the bar held several glass covered cases filled with snapshots of various musical customers along with clippings from assorted newspapers concerning the bar and the musical fame of some of its habitues. There were a

few old black and white photographs of concertina players among the others. In terms of layout, the bar's interior was long and rectangular. Tables and chairs hugged the wall of glass cases, while the balance of the space between the wall and the bar was an open, tiled floor for dancers. The wall facing the street, the short end of the rectangle, held a small bandstand, perhaps 6x12, big enough for a drummer and one or two musicians.

Art emerged shortly. He's of medium height, roughly sixty, with thinning hair and a pleasant manner. I learned that he had been running his place for roughly a half dozen years, but I'm afraid I can't recall what he'd done beforehand. Art grew up in the Mosinee area, between Stevens Point and Wausau, on a farm. He learned to play button accordion while still a kid and hankered after playing the concertina. Unfortunately there were no teachers nearby. With his dad's permission, he hitchhiked some distance then caught a train to Wausau for evening lessons. It turned out, however, that the supposed concertina teacher was actually a violinist who knew nothing of Art's chosen instrument. In addition, after his second lesson, Art had trouble with train and thumbing connections and didn't get home until the wee hours. His lessons stopped abruptly. Thereafter he fooled around with the instrument and sought help from traveling players: he'd watch people like Whoopee John and Dominic Slusarski and then ask them for pointers during breaks. [Incidentally, I was delighted to learn that Art knew Dominic, former leader of the Jolly Seven out of Stevens Point. Dominic ran the Ritz Tavern on the square in Point and his place had been my chief hangout while doing fieldwork on jeketelling.] Anyway Art said it would be fine to return any Thursday but Holy Thursday to record and take pictures.

Accordingly Lewis and I arrived roughly 45 minutes before the music was to begin. Art and Berneice the barmaid were both ready for us and Art helped me set up the recording equipment while Lewis took pictures. The crowd was sparse

at first, but as 7:30, the time for music, approached, more and more people began filing in. The concertina players signed up in the order in which they'd play and Art made a point of introducing us to various musicians. Figuring rightly that we'd want things to be "natural," he hadn't told anyone we were coming. He had also reckoned rightly that none of his players would be put off by our presence--everyone was extremely friendly and cooperative.

Altogether I recorded three and a half reels of tape, including 36 performances. Art informed some of the musicians that we were particularly interested in German tunes, so perhaps a quarter of the numbers reflect that ethnicity; there were also plenty of Polish tunes, pop hits, and general "polka" numbers. The players on the tape include Danny Niemczyk of Waukesha who's a member of the Continental Concertina Club; Art himself; Richie Michalski; Joe Acker of Brookfield; Gene Siech; Ken Megal with Berneice; Joanne ? from Alaska; and Harry Dolata. I also heard John Poleczynski play while packing away the equipment.

During the evening Danny and his wife occupied spots close to where I was taping and, besides inviting me to attend Continental Concertina Club sessions [hope I can one of these days], he was very helpful in assisting my efforts to note the titles of all performances. Gene Siech was also a pleasure to talk with. Long retired, he plays in all four of the Milwaukee area's concertina clubs: Old Timers (composed entirely of retired people who play for nursing homes), Karpeks (people who get together to play under the umbrella of Milwaukee's concertina maker), Cream City, and Continental. Ken Megal, a man in his thirties with a bristling moustache, gave me his card and reckoned that, although he was Polish, he loved Minnesota's "Dutchman" style music: "The Germans invented the concertina, but it took the Polacks to play it." Joe Acker told me that he'd begun to play the concertina regularly since being widowed a few years. And, although I didn't say much to him beyond hello, Harry Dolata (sp?) made quite

an impression. He's 86 and still very active. As the evening progressed, Art told me periodically that Harry would be arriving around 9:30 when the place was full. Sure enough, he did just that, and all within applauded at his entry. Harry ordered his beer and shot and soon mounted the bandstand where he squeezed out a vigorous rendition of "Wir Gehen Nach Lindenau" while alternately sitting, standing, and swaying around.

Meantime people were dancing, chatting, and having a fine time. Apart from tending bar, taking his turn on the stand, chatting with customers and with me and Lewis, Art often played along with the musicians from the bar--sometime he twisted his concertina above his shoulders or raised it completely over his head while playing.

The place was really jumping as Lewis and I decided, regretfully, we'd have to get back to Madison to catch some sleep prior to an early meeting. As we packed up our equipment, tuba players suddenly appeared to add a "bottom" to the concertina/drum duo. The perfect host, Art plied us with complimentary beers and brandy while offering us his spare room if we wanted to stay overnight. We were severely tempted, but knowing our physical limitations and the mass of work confronting us in the next few days, we had to refuse. With luck, however, our next visit will be for the evening's duration. Altenburg's Bar is one of a kind and is, without a doubt, a real hub for concertina players and enthusiasts in the Milwaukee area.