
Chapter 26

The Milwaukee Polka

Program 26 Performances

1. Joey Klass, "Peppy's Polka." 2. Louie Bashell, "Dad's Polka." 3. Joey Zingsheim, "We Love Our Wives (But Oh You Gals)." 4. Richie Ostrowiecki and the Polka Pals, "Don't Cry, Anna." 5. Richie Michalski, "No Beer Today." 6. Don Gralak, "Lori Lynn Ländler." 7. Verne and Steve Meisner, "Meisner Magic." 8. Straight and Fuzzy Band, "Kramer's."

Germans, Poles, and Slovenes

"Beer from Milwaukee, the very best in town . . ." is the first line of "The Milwaukee Polka," a Frankie Yankovic hit celebrating the city's best-known product. Despite the efforts of high-toned local boosters to promote a cosmopolitan image and eliminate the beer and bratwurst associations of the city, Milwaukee retains a strong cultural particularity based on the European origins of much of its population. In this "German Athens" of America, the descendants of nineteenth-century immigrants still proudly proclaim their Pomeranian, Saxon, or Bavarian roots in *liederkranz* choirs, *schuhplattler* dance groups, and brass *kapelle*.

While the Germans dominated the north side of the city, the Poles have been everywhere, especially on the south side. From the soaring dome of the St. Josephat basilica to the Polish Falcons and Polish Legion of American Veterans halls, the immigrants from the lands between the Tatras and the Baltic Sea have made their own indelible imprint on their part of Milwaukee. Aside from the big populations of Germans and Poles, Milwaukee has dozens of other ethnic communities, many from central or eastern Europe. Most of them have retained such ethnically specific musical traditions as church choirs and instrumental ensembles, and these play in the ethnic group's domain or represent the group at international folk fair events.

Aside from the overtly ethnic music, there is also polka—urban vernacular music emblematic of Milwaukee. Despite the vast numerical superiority of the Germans and Poles among Milwaukee's European-Americans, the music of Slovenia, a tiny European country of two million people, has become the dominant Milwaukee polka style. While much has been written on the ethnic history of Milwaukee and the city's tendency to maintain old-world traditions, symbolized today by the summer-long succession of ethnic festivals on the lakefront, scant attention has been paid to the ethnic impact on the grassroots vernacular music of Milwaukee, its rich polka tradition.

Milwaukee along with a handful of other American cities—Buffalo, Cleveland, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Youngstown—claims to be a Polka Town. Some polka traditions, such as the Nebraska Czech style or the southern Minnesota

Dutchman style, are rural based. The urban traditions, however, have been supported since the late nineteenth century by the children and grandchildren of immigrants from central and eastern Europe who labored in the smokey, grimy industrial towns of the Great Lakes and East Coast.

The Silk Umbrella Man

The immigrants carried on their old-world musical traditions in their primarily blue collar ethnic neighborhoods. For example, Joseph Bashell, a Slovenian immigrant and the father of Milwaukee's most influential polka musician, Louie Bashell, kept a tavern in the Walker's Point neighborhood. Besides making good wine and beer, Bashell played Slovenian folk music on the diatonic button accordion, an ability that drew customers to his tavern. Immigrant families lived in crowded apartments, often made more so by boarders from the homeland. So they socialized and put on family festivities at the corner tavern run by a compatriot.

By the time Joseph's son Louie was seven, about 1921, he was helping out, sitting on a table with a button accordion on his lap, while the elder Bashell tended to other matters. Bashell's was a Slovenian tavern, but in dozens of other corner taps across Milwaukee, German or Polish or other ethnic music was playing.

Growing up in Milwaukee, children of immigrants experienced the influence of their own ethnic heritage, but they were also in contact with other ethnic groups. Neighborhoods solidly populated by only one nationality were rare indeed. In Walker's Point in the 1910s and 1920s, Slovenians lived among numerous Poles, Greeks, and Croats and some Germans, Irish, and Italians. Louie grew up speaking English to these kids, each of whom might have spoken a different native language at home.

He learned the Slovenian music from his father, and friends hired him from time to time to play Slovenian folk songs for their parties. But he also studied music at Boys Tech High School, heard American popular music on the radio, and had a chance to hear the sounds of other ethnics. He shared the experience of growing up ethnic in a blue collar neighborhood with all the other local youth of his generation. When the time came for him to make his own music, it reflected all of these influences.

Still in high school, he formed a popular trio with a drummer and a reed player, and they made some records in the 1940s on Milwaukee's Pfau label including Bashell's signature tune, "Zidana marela [Silk umbrella polka]," a Slovenian folk song. But Louie's bands have also played Polish polkas and obereks, Viennese waltzes, Scandinavian schottisches, "The Twelfth Street Rag," "The Oklahoma Boogie," Swiss ländlers, an Italian tarantella, and whatever else his multiethnic Milwaukee fans have wanted to hear.

By his late twenties, Louie was married, had two of his four children, and opened his own tavern in another primarily Slavic neighborhood, near the Allis-Chalmers tractor plant in West Allis. His polkas figured significantly in the tavern business, but ultimately he gave up the bar to devote himself exclusively to music.

Although his training at Boys Tech qualified him to be a plumber, he only worked briefly in that trade. Demand for his musical skills kept him employed full time all of his life. For over thirty years, the Bashell orchestra was the most influential band in town. Bands like Roman Haines and Louie Byk made their own contribution to the Bashell style. Dozens of accordionists patterned themselves after Louie, and a good many, like Ferd Buchele and Johnny Drozdibob, served an apprenticeship in Bashell's band before striking out on their own. Milwaukee accordionist Gary Frank has said, "Sure I took lessons, but I really



Louis Bashell, Milwaukee polka king, Milwaukee, 1987 Photo: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Used with permission.

learned about polkas by going and listening to Louie. You won't find a polka musician in the Midwest that Bashell hasn't influenced" (Zurawik 1975).

Other polka styles had their Milwaukee adherents—Max and the Merrymakers, Polish-American musicians who played in the Minnesota Dutchman style, entertained for years at the Wisconsin Roof Ballroom; Sammy Madden (né Salvatore Madence), of Italian extraction, headed a very popular Milwaukee band playing Bohemian-style polka. These styles linked Milwaukee to the sounds most popular in the surrounding countryside. Nonetheless, through Bashell's influence, the typical Milwaukee polka became a Slovenian sound, and the typical Milwaukee polka band had a multiethnic repertoire with plenty of tunes to a jitterbug swing.