

The war in Czechoslovakia's music, but R. A. Bookwalter  
New Carlisle, Ohio, 45344  
December 11, 1986

Dear Jim, I am sorry to delay responding to your letter, but I have been busy with all kinds of things since coming back here.

Thank you for your prompt letter to me. You must have gone immediately back to Wisconsin after the symposium was over. I went to the Austin and Fort Worth-Dallas areas to see family and friends before returning to Ohio the following Friday. I am sorry to delay responding to your letter, but I have been busy with all kinds of things since coming back here.

That was a very interesting lecture you delivered about the different sounds of diverse polka bands in different parts of the U.S. at different periods of history. I wish you could have dwelled more on some of our better Texas bands, however.

I guess you may have the impression that I prefer the "old-country" brass-band sound of polka music. As I see it, the polka music should resemble the old-country sound as much as possible. I realize one should try to keep an open mind, but after listening to polka music for over 30 years, I have quite made up my mind as to what I like and do not like. I do not know how familiar you are with the music of "Whoopie" John Wilfahrt or not, but there is a marked difference in the way his music sounds in the late '20's and the '30's when the "Six Fat Dutchmen's" influence caught on. In the recordings of the '20's, "Whoopie" John sounded more like the old country. From the '30's on, he adds the "bouncing bass" of the Six Fat Dutchmen. As I perceive it, the bouncing bass is an influence of jazz. Likewise are the "extra notes" played by the "front line" instruments, clarinets, trumpets, and saxophones. "Whoopie" John lacks these extra notes in his early recordings but adds them in as the Six Fat Dutchmen influence expands. My criticism of the bouncing bass is that when you finally do get a strong bass passage in a polka or waltz, where is your extra "oomph" and "schmaltz"? Unfortunately this seems to have caught on very heavily. In my own band I will not do it.

In Czechoslovakia during the period of the '20's and the "Golden Thirties," there were some different types of ensembles and polka bands. If you already know about them, let me know. There were small accordion-violin combos like waltz Franta Poupě (pronounced POE pyeh) and T. Pauch, and the separate Grätz combo that sounded similar. The '20's featured brass bands like Pan Herman. Then the Golden Thirties produced a band, kind of brass, that recorded on Columbia with various singers. Then there were mixes of brass, woodwinds and strings using an bowed string bass, like R. A. Dvorský, Vaclav Bláha, Karel Vacek, Karel Valdauf, Alf Langer, František Tichý, Dol Dauber, and many many more. Maybe you have even heard of Harry Harden. He had a band in pre-World War II Czechoslovakia that was brass dominated and very good. He recorded on the Esta (78) label. There was another 78 label called Ultraphon. It was about the most advanced label there was at the time. Most recordings on the Ultraphon label were excellent--almost equivalent to hi-fi. But for some reason the big orchestras of the 1930's Czechoslovakia did not seem to go over too well with the U. S. Czechs, particularly second and subsequent generations.

He emigrated to the U.S. possibly after Munich in 1938 & set up a band that sounded like Lawrence Welk.

The war might have impeded some of Czechoslovakia's music, but R. A. Dvorský and Karel Vacek recorded during the war. For a while, between 1945 and 1948 the Ultraphon label continued but after the Commie takeover in 1948, Ultraphon was taken over by the Supraphon corporation, which still exists to this day. For many years, possibly up through the late 50's, Supraphon continued to manufacture and issue the old Ultraphon labels, but when 45's and 33's took over, the issuance was stopped. The Dvorský-Bláha-Vacek and Valdauf orchestras all sounded kind of alike. They used bowed string basses for the bass, trumpets, clarinets, and violins for the "front line," drums, guitars, and possibly piano for rhythm. Accordions were also in these fancy-sounding orchestras. They all seemed to use for trombones counter melody and some harmony.

But because Joe Červený, next door was preferred over here, not too many people seemed to care for the fancy-sounding Bláha, Dvorský and Vacek type orchestras. A few DJ's played them in the 50's and there must have been a few people who liked them to buy the APON reissues of many of the old Ultraphons.

After the Commie takeover, brass bands began to predominate again, like Jindřich Bauer, and in the early 50's there was one brass band from Czechoslovakia that for a few years became popular over KFRD in Rosenberg, Texas, where Joe Gavranovič was the MC for his "American-Czech Hour" from 8:30 to 9:30 weekdays. This band was the Vladimír Hala band from the Doudleby-Křenovice area of Czechoslovakia near Plzeň. The most popular of his recordings was "Haymaking" (Sedlák na louce seče). Others almost as popular were "In That Old Mill of Ours (V tom našem starém mlyně) polka, "Parents, Don't Be Angry" (Nezlobte se, rodičové), "The Fishermen" (Lovili Rybáři), "Miller's Dorothy" (Mlýnařovič Dorotička), and others. Then there came Moravanka, Budvarka, Veselka, Vacláv Zelinka, and Mistrinanka. These have come out on LP's and 45's, and possibly now, cassettes and CD's.

I guess I've rambled on enough about Czechoslovakia, so I'll return to polka bands, particularly bands that play Ozech music in the U.S. I told you in person about Roman Gosz, Lawrence Duchow, Rudy Plocar, and Dick Rogers. To remind you, the common denominator of all these bands is that they do not have a trombone or baritone playing counter melody. Since I am a trombone player, that does not set well with me. I have spoken to people who personally knew those fellows, and they cannot answer my question as to why these bands did not use lower brass counter melody. Both Roman Gosz and Lawrence Duchow, and I think Rudy Plocar are deceased, so it is now impossible to ask them why they did not use trombones. In 1971, I asked Dick Rogers personally why he did not use a trombone, and he replied without further explanation, "We just don't use one!" I could get no more out of him. While talking to some members of the Hi-Toppers (New Braunfels, Texas) in the mid 1960's, I complained about this problem, and they said that at that time the preference was for woodwind domination. Brass was out. I was not too happy with that. Most larger American polka bands, including Jerry Mazánek, whom I venerate, had harmonizing saxophones, while bands from Czechoslovakia almost never had saxophones. It seems that this saxophone harmony was more important than lower-brass counter melody.

Ernie Kučera of Abie Nebraska, used to have a trombone in his band, but after he recorded his first "D" LP, the trombone was no longer in his band.

*The emphasis for the US... set up a band that sounded like Lawrence Welk.*

Al Grebnik also used no trombone for counter melody, although he was trying to simultaneously sound like Jerry Mazanec and the Six Fat Dutchmen. He ended up sounding more like the Six Fat Dutchmen. I guess the only reason he was accepted in Czechoslovakia is that he was an American, and he brought many tourists with money to Czechoslovakia. In my opinion, he murders Czech music! (Please do not repeat this to anyone or show this letter to them).

Jim, I know you are busy, but if you have time, could you possibly do some research and find out why the Gosz, Duchow, Plochar and Rogers bands did not use a trombone or baritone?

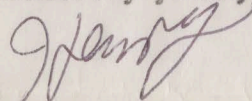
Thanks for the information about the LP Texas Czech Bohemian Bands. I certainly will write Arhoolie Records. Thanks also for the information about "Ach Ya!"

As of now, my own band, Miami Blasmusik has only one job in 1987--the Springfield, Ohio, Oktoberfest. But I certainly do intend to work on more.

If you ever make it over to Cudahy way, be sure to call my friend John Sikora who lives on Ramsay Avenue in Cudahy (he may have moved, for he has retired).

Thanks again for your letter, and keep in touch.

Sincerely yours,



Henry Peck

P.S. Have you done much about S. 676 the bill to outlaw the independent-contractor status of bands? Do you want more literature on it? Thanks  
