
Chapter 28

Old-Time Dance Music in Madison

Program 28 Performances

1. Sammy Eggum with John Schermerhorn, "San Antonio Rose" / "Hoop-de-do" (theme song from *Dairyland Jubilee*).
2. Bruce Bollerud, "Stegen vals."
3. Emerald Isle Ceili Band, "Kesh Jig."
4. Joey Tantillo, "Accordion Polka."
5. Rudy Burkhalter, "My Swiss Girl."
6. Madison Maennerchor with Lawrence Duchow's Red Ravens, "O Tannenbaum."
7. Lawrence Duchow, "Our Mike Polka."
8. Rhythm Kings (Don Ring), "One Has My Name, the Other Has My Heart."
9. Uncle Julius and His Boys, "Helena Polka."
10. Wanta Dance Band, "Dutch Festival Waltz."

Wonderful Madison

For several years during the 1980s, if on a Friday night you had stopped at the Club de Wash, a tavern in the old Washington Hotel beside Madison's Milwaukee Road railway depot, you would probably have heard an original humorous song by the accordion-guitar duo Peter and Lou Berryman teasing Madisonians for their cosmopolitan pretensions: "Wonderful Madison, jewel of Wisconsin," they sang, "... more than one high school ... five hundred lawyers and cable TV."

As the state capital, Madison boasts a gleaming granite capitol dome dominating the narrow isthmus between lakes Mendota and Monona. As the home of the University of Wisconsin, a feature of Madison has been the campus, with its venerable stone edifices, Camp Randall Stadium, and a sprawl of utilitarian rectangular buildings and dormitories, a city within a city for more than forty thousand students.

So many newcomers are attracted to Madison that you can spot bumper stickers proclaiming Madison Native. The university has drawn people from around the world and spawned a professorial community concentrated on the near west side and a countercultural bohemian community centered on the near east side. Civil servants from every corner of the state live all over the metropolitan area. But intermingled with "the state" and "the U," there is also a small upper midwestern city, with the main offices of regional insurance companies and typical midwestern industries serving agriculture, especially dairy farming, or engaged in meatpacking and machinery making.

Ethnic Connections

This intermingled small midwestern town is as tuned in to regional and ethnic traditions as the university community is to cosmopolitan trends. As elsewhere in the Upper Midwest, ethnicity is a major organizing principle in local cultural

activities. The most numerous and longest-established ethnic groups in Madison's cultural matrix are the Germans, Norwegians, Swiss, Italians, and Irish.

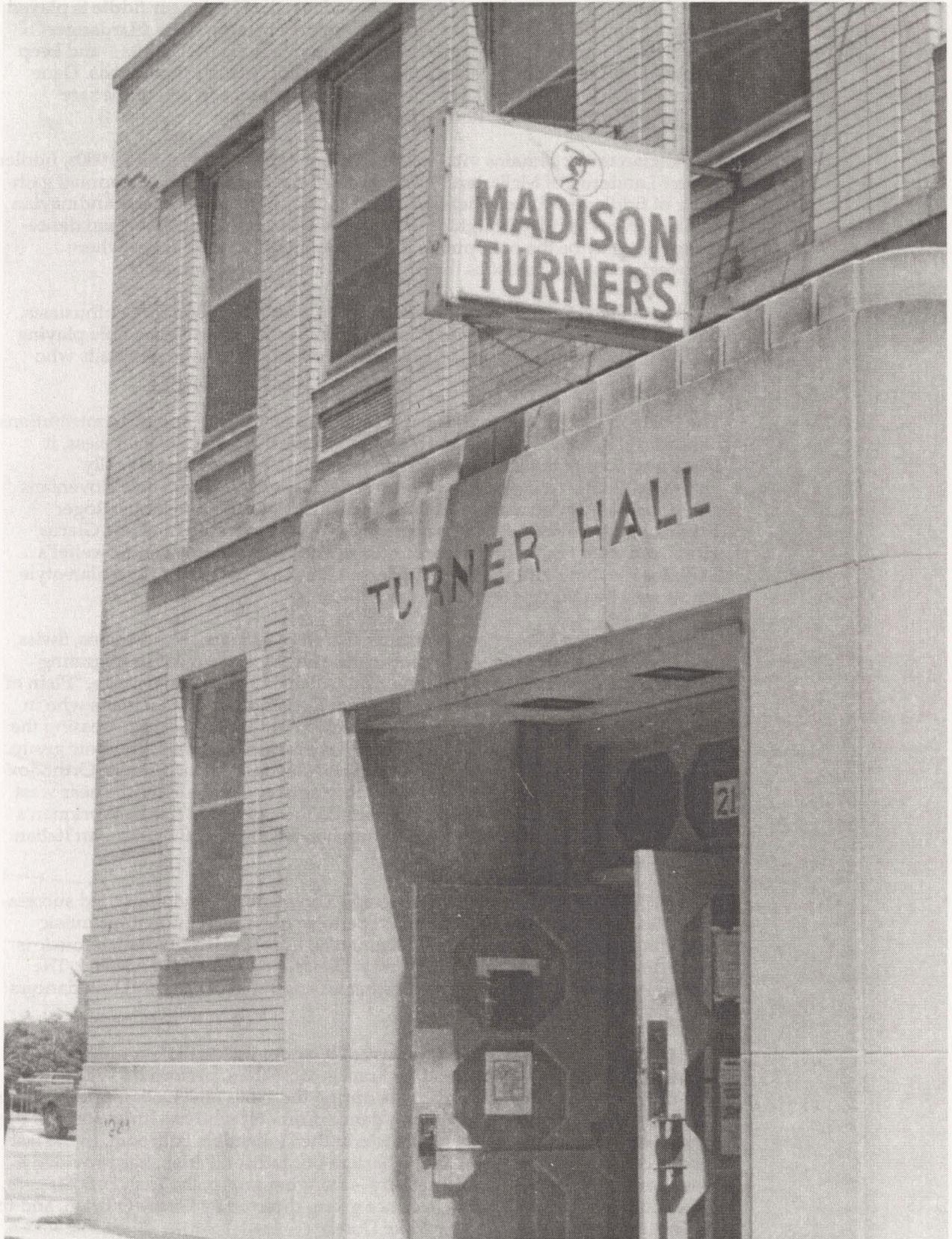
Except for the Italians, each of these Madison ethnic groups interacts with a sizable southern Wisconsin rural community of their compatriots or cousins, most of whom came to the United States on the same nineteenth-century wave of migration. The Germans have ties to Waunakee, Jefferson, Waterloo, Roxbury, and Sauk City; the Norwegians to Stoughton, Mount Horeb, and Hollandale; the Swiss to Monroe, New Glarus, Honey Creek, and Monticello; and the Irish to Pine Bluff, Ridgeway, and Darlington in southwestern Wisconsin—to name only a few. These interactions have stimulated both townsfolk and farmers. Madison Germans happily hop to polka bands at Waunakee's Volksfest and Jefferson's Gemütlichkeit Days, and Madison Norwegians flock to Stoughton's Syttende Mai and Mount Horeb's Song of Norway. The Green County Swiss may be the best-organized rural ethnic group in southern Wisconsin: numerous large annual events—like New Glarus's Heidi and William Tell festivals and Monroe's Cheese Days festival—feature heavy doses of Swiss music.

The city cousins join the efforts to set up ethnic events by taking part in Madison's single- or multiethnic fests like Festa Italiana, the Holiday Folk Fair, and the Triangle Ethnic Fest. Through his accordion school and the annual Accordion Jamboree, Madison's Rudy Burkhalter, a cultural leader of Swiss Americans, helped perpetuate his own and a host of other central and northern European musical traditions in Wisconsin. Moreover, some of the Madison-based ethnics host performers from the old country: the Shamrock Club has brought from Ireland Wexford's Gertrude Walsh dancers and Dublin's Barley Bree.

The Madison Maennerchor is the oldest continuously functioning musical organization in Madison. Singing mainly arrangements of German folk songs, this German-American men's choir began in 1854 as an affiliate of the local *Turnverein*, or gymnastics society. Serving the mind, body, and spirit, the Turners, as they are called in English, combine exercise and gymnastics with educational and cultural activities like the choir. The instrumental side of the German musical heritage is maintained by the Max Drexler Band, a brass band or *Kapelle* of twelve to eighteen members who perform marches, polkas, and waltzes and occasionally sing in German. The Uncle Julius Orchestra, a fine German dance band with Dutchman-style leanings, played all the big dance halls in the 1940s and 1950s; and Madison still has a fair number of German-American polka bands such as the Steve Franzen and Gordon Hartmann orchestras, though they play nowadays in the Slovenian polka style popularized by Frankie Yankovic.

The Norwegians also have a long-established men's chorus, the Grieg Choir, named for the famed composer. Like the Maennerchor, they sing arranged folk songs. The Norwegian instrument of choice has tended to be the fiddle—either the conventional four-string violin or the elaborate and ornate Hardanger fiddle, whose five additional strings are never bowed but sound only in sympathetic vibration. Rural Dane County, especially its southeastern section, has been known as a hotbed of Norwegian fiddling. One of the most influential of old-timers was Henry Everson. A second noted fiddler was Hans Fykerud of Stoughton, whose brother Lars was a legendary fiddler in Norway.

Dane County was a major center of Hardanger fiddling, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, when its sheriff, Harald Smedal, was a leader of the local Hardanger fiddlers' club. The members included both male and female musicians. Dagny Quisling, whose family established a well-known Madison medical clinic, was



Madison's Turner Hall, site of many old-time dances, 1994 **Photo: Richard March**

one of the most outstanding players. Nowadays, the Hardanger fiddle is played by Scandinavian-American enthusiasts, who may belong to the Hardanger Fiddle Association of America—based in Sioux Falls, South Dakota—and keep in touch through the newsletter *Sound Post*—published in Minneapolis. Dane County still has the important distinction of being home to one of the rare Hardanger fiddle makers, Ron Poast of Black Earth.

Norwegian music remains vital in the Madison area. Since the mid-1980s, fiddler Walter Landerud of McFarland has organized the Spelmanslag, an annual gathering of fiddlers and accordionists. Blue Mounds likewise hosts a Scandinavian fiddlers' event in July. Stoughton High School boasts a fine Norwegian dance troupe—it may be the only public high school in the United States where Norwegian dancing satisfies the physical education requirement.

Folklore Village Farm in Dodgeville has been a hub for folk dance enthusiasts, including many from Madison. Wiscandia, an accomplished ensemble playing traditional Scandinavian music, comprises Folklore Village participants who learned to play at folk dances.

The lively Swiss-American musical scene in Green County and the contributions of Madison's Rudy Burkhalter are covered in another essay. Nonetheless, it bears mentioning that modern Swiss polka bands have enthusiastically embraced Frank Yankovic's Slovenian style. Indeed, the Swiss and Slovenians share similar Alpine music traditions in their European homelands. Roger Bright, who for over a decade has played every weekend in the New Glarus Hotel, did a stint as second accordionist in Yankovic's band. Keith Zweifel's Stateline Playboys and the Greg Anderson Band are two more Slovenian-style bands lead by younger Swiss ethnics.

The Italians came to Madison a bit later than the Germans, Norwegians, Swiss, and Irish, in the early twentieth century, the largest contingent immigrating from the Calabrian village of Pianna degli Albanesi. The village name, "Plain of the Albanians," refers to its ethnic makeup. Descendants of Albanians who in the fifteenth century fled the Ottoman invasion of their homeland, crossing the Adriatic Sea to southern Italy and Sicily, have remained a distinct ethnic group in Italy, retaining the Albanian language and devotion to the Eastern Orthodox church. Those Albanian Italians settled in Madison, especially in the near west side Greenbush neighborhood. They formed the still active Italian Workmen's Club and—not finding an Orthodox church in Madison at the time—an Italian Methodist church.

Italians Joey Tantillo, an accordionist, and Tony Salerno, a violinist, led successful polka bands that played a mixed repertoire of popular and ethnic music reflecting Madison in general. Unfortunately, little specifically Italian music is performed in public by this community. Dance, however, has persisted. The Italian Workmen's Club has put together an ensemble of youthful folk dancers who perform to recorded music.

The Irish likewise tended to enthusiastically adopt the region's multiethnic music. The Shamrock Band, lead by Francis McMahan, performed Wisconsin old-time dance music for many years during the 1950s and 1960s, appearing regularly on television. Jim Kilkelly is a dance promoter who has hired some of the finest Dutchman-style bands for dances in the Hollandale Ballroom. In the last two decades, the Shamrock Club, a bastion of Madison's Irish, has provided a basis for Irish-specific cultural activity—a singing group, the Irish Folk Singers, directed by Francis McMahan, a dance group directed by Ginny O'Brien, and the Emerald Isle Ceili Band, led by Mike Doran.

Irish musicians like the Chieftains and the Clancy Brothers instigated a revival of traditional Irish instrumental music and singing. The ethnic community-based Emerald Isle Ceili Band, and Irish music enthusiasts connected to the university like Boxy and the Irish Brigade, have created an active Irish music scene in Madison.