Chapter 30

Women Polka Band Leaders

Program 30 Performances

1. Aunt Sharlene and Cousin Eleanor, "Dick's Polka." 2. Lenore Berg and the Rhythm Badgers, "Oskar Carlson's Waltz." 3. Concertina Millie, "Broom Dance." 4. Concertina Millie, "Red Raven Polka." 5. Renata and Girls, Girls, Girls, "Honky Time Medley." 6. Marge Ford and the Alaska Polka Chips, "Two Sisters Polka." 7. Joanne Hawkins, "Joanne's Polka." 8. Barbara and the Karousels, "Growling Mickey's Polka." 9. Lenore Berg and the Rhythm Badgers, "Finska Waltz."

Domestic Players

Women have always been an integral part of the Upper Midwest's polka scene. Indeed the very term *polka* may derive from the Czech word for a Polish woman. Yet polka women have been generally less recognized than men. They have been constrained by roles that determined where, in what company, and even what instrument they would play. While most women have worked within these boundaries, a few, like Viola Turpeinen (see chapter 15), have pushed beyond them.

In keeping with the German proverbial phrase *kinder, kuche, kirche* (children, kitchen, church), women have been most prominent as domestic players—confining their music to evenings at home, Sunday afternoons, or the occasional house party. Besides entertaining in these contexts, women have often transmitted their musical knowledge to the next generation. When Stan Stangle, an eventual stalwart in Ashland, Wisconsin's Bohemian Brass Band, was a boy in the 1920s, his mother, Ludmila, "played one of these button accordions. And, of course, a mouth organ came later" (Stangle 1980 I). Similarly, Barbara Portner Wilfahrt's singing of old German songs did as much as her husband's concertina playing to influence the eventual bandleader "Whoopee John" Wilfahrt (Rippley 1992:12). Many sons and grandsons of such women went on to form bands.

When women have "played out" for polka dances, however, it has typically been as part of a family band—a veritable extension of domestic music into a public milieu. Rosemary Korger Menard (1916–1987) was one of seven children born to Anton Korger and Rose Rada Korger in the Eau Claire area. The elder Korgers loved to sing and play, and all their children followed suit. In the 1930s Rosemary played violin in a band that featured her father on button accordion, her paternal uncle Herman on clarinet, and Herman's daughter Gertie on piano. Known simply as the Korgers, the band played "all around the countryside" at Farmers Union halls and rural get-togethers (Menard 1985 I). When the group dissolved after a few years, Rosemary resumed her role as a domestic player, performing for her own children, for school programs and "home talent" nights.

Lenore Greenwald Berg (b. 1929) likewise grew up in a musical family. Of seven sisters and brothers, "all but one is musical." Although her siblings favored country music, Lenore was attracted to the Scandinavian old-time dance tunes of her parents' generation. She was also influenced by a local trio of accordion-playing Swedish brothers, Gust, Carl, and Erik Berg. Lenore eventually married Carl Berg and began playing piano and accordion with Erik's band in the early 1950s. When Erik Berg died in 1960, Lenore formed the Rhythm Badgers and kept right on playing. "The two guys played what I wanted. We never had problems" (Berg 1989 I).

Lenore Berg's musical skill, her long tenure with a family band, and, perhaps, her chosen instruments contributed to her success. Polka fans will always dance to good players, male or female, but polka culture is conservative. Although public polka dances have always involved drinking and courting, they have also been places where moderate behavior prevailed and where entire families might gather. Women who lead bands which are clearly not family bands have often stressed family connections in ways both subtle and obvious. Lenore Berg's surname echoed the old Erik Berg Band, and her husband, Carl, often traveled with her to dance jobs. Concertina Millie, Concertina Tillie, Concertina Patty, Aunt Sharlene, and Cousin Eleanor have likewise assumed stage names that suggest girlishness and kinship.

I Held My Own

Girlish innocence and domestic images, not surprisingly, have been the trademarks of a number of all-female dance bands in the Upper Midwest. In the 1920s Betty's Melody Makers, a Sheboygan band, posed for publicity postcards in a parlor outfitted with a baby grand piano. The Schmitz Sisters Orchestra, meanwhile, draped the top of their upright piano with lace doilies (Corenthal 1991:218, 221). In the 1970s, the Swiss Girls shared billing with Rodney Ristow, bandleader and patriarch. And in the 1980s, Renata and Girls, Girls, Girls (*not* women, women, women) traveled with Renata Romanek's father as manager and chaperone.

Instruments too convey messages. While women at home have, like Ludmila Stangle, played "simple" instruments like the button accordion and harmonica by ear, others, like Rosemary Menard, have been encouraged to take lessons on the violin and, especially, the piano. Expensive, associated with classical music, and appropriate to a well-off family's spacious parlor, the piano was and continues to be a sign of status. Familiarity with its intricacies, morever, has been acquired typically through schooling. Even in the late twentieth century, and certainly in the recent past, a young lady who was able to cook, sew, and master a parlor instrument might be considered well bred indeed. The portable, only slightly less pricey, piano accordion, with its similar keyboard, likewise bore genteel connotations. In the 1990s, women polka musicians still generally play some kind of keyboard or squeezebox.

Those who played outside of family bands and who favored horns have had a more difficult time. Born into a Montgomery, Minnesota, Czech community in 1922, Blanche Havel Zellmer was attracted to the saxophone. The grain seeder on the Havel farm had rubber tubes, and young Blanche would pretend that they were the mouthpieces of saxophones. Her dad played "the old Czech tunes" on violin and trumpet. Blanche began to play trumpet by ear as an eight year old, then learned to read notes while in high school. While the trumpet or cornet is her main instrument, she soon became competent on the saxophone, the clarinet, and the rotary valve flügelhorn.

Despite her skill, she was to discover that "music is still a man's world." Her band director told her at fifteen that she ought to "march with the *kolačky* girls"

Lenore Berg in her music room, Barron, 1989 **Photo: Jim Leary**

in the community's annual Kolacky Days parade instead of playing with the concert band. But she stood her ground. Once out of school, she found that "a woman piano player was always welcome," but it was difficult for a woman horn player to gain acceptance: "I was always very self-conscious about playing with the men because it wasn't a woman's place to do these things." Eventually she discovered that if she really wanted to play she had to organize her own band. As the leader of Blanche and the Waltz Kings, she could say, "I held my own" (Zellmer 1990 I).

The difficulties that Blanche Zellmer encountered still confront women who approach polka music in an unorthodox manner. But women continue to do just that and, like Blanche Zellmer, they hold their own. In the 1990s, upper midwestern polka bands led by women—Barbara and the Karousels, Becky and the Ivanhoe Dutchmen, and LaVerne and the Starlights—are no longer a novelty but a norm.