

Chapter 39

Small Labels, Big Music

Program 39 Performances

1. Bernie Roberts, "Flying Saucer Polka." 2. Fritz Bechtel and the Jolly Ramblers, "When the Sun Comes over the Brewery." 3. Marvin Brouchoud, "Raise the Window Down." 4. Syl Liebl and the Jolly Swiss Boys, "Baby Waltz." 5. Cavaliers, "Chubby Mama's Oberek." 6. Fendermen, "Heartbreak Special." 7. Zakons, "Wasted." 8. Royal Lancers, "Badger." 9. Earl Hooker, "Two Bugs in a Rug." 10. Singing Souls, "When I'm Gone." 11. Independence Gospels, "She's Gone (Will the Circle Be Unbroken?)."

The Foreign Market

Commercial recording companies never set out to document traditional music. Like other businesses, they sought to make a profit. Yet they made and marketed thousands of remarkable sound recordings by traditional musicians, a feat unmatched by scholars. By the second decade of the twentieth century, commercial giants like Victor and Columbia began to discover there were substantial regional and "foreign" markets for rural and ethnic music. People wanted to hear performers from their own ethnic group. Since the companies were based in the greater New York City area, their initial attempts to reach new customers depended upon either immigrant musicians dwelling in New York City or those from the hinterlands who were willing to travel to the eastern metropolis.

The Big Apple was undaunting to the Upper Midwest's Scandinavian performers. Some were recent immigrants who had passed through Ellis Island. Others were veteran ethnic vaudeville performers working a circuit that stretched from Brooklyn's Scandinavian enclaves to Seattle. Hjalmer Peterson, a Swedish singer and comedian based in Minneapolis, made a trial recording for Victor in March 1914. Apparently the company showed little interest, but two years later Peterson recorded four sides for Columbia in New York City. Using the stage name Olle i Skratthult (Ole from Laughtersville), Peterson would, between 1916 and 1929, record more than seventy sides for Victor and Columbia. Ethel and Eleanora Olson, Norwegian singers and dialect comedians from Minneapolis, likewise traveled to New York City in 1918 to make records for Victor (Spottswood 1990:2627–2631, 2713–2718).

Perhaps because bringing their own band was prohibitively expensive, perhaps because of the recording company's or the musicians' union's insistence, both Peterson and the Olsons were accompanied by a house or studio orchestra on their Victor recordings. The orchestra leader, Nathaniel Shilkret, was one of the fledgling industry's most active "session men," backing up countless ethnic performers, whether Dutch, French, German, Italian, Jewish, or Swedish. While a

fine musician, Shilkret nonetheless provided a polished generic sound that differed considerably from the saltier musical dialect of the performers back home.

By the mid-1920s, improvements in recording technology and continued demand prompted the major labels to send out field recording teams to regional centers, including upper midwestern cities. Meanwhile new record companies with national ambitions began to attract the region's traditional and ethnic musicians. Jozef Sosnowski, for example, took his Polish trio from Milwaukee to Chicago to make records for Columbia, Mermaid, and Okeh between 1925 and 1929. Minnesota's Whoopee John Wilfahrt first recorded for Okeh in Minneapolis in 1927. Louis Alder and His Swiss Yodelers journeyed from Monroe, Wisconsin, to the Gennett studio in Richmond, Indiana, in 1929.

The tide of regional ethnic recordings that marked the 1920s was effectively stemmed by the Depression. Except for a few uncommon performers—like Whoopee John, Romy Gosz, and the Viking Accordion Band—the Upper Midwest's ethnic musicians all but disappeared from major labels for most of the 1930s. A resurgence toward the decade's end by Heinie and His Grenadiers (Milwaukee) and Ted Johnson and His Scandinavian Orchestra (Minneapolis) was interrupted by World War II, restrictions on the shellac from which records were made, and labor disputes.

Electronic Entrepreneurs

Major record labels showed very little interest in pursuing regional and ethnic markets in the postwar era. Neither the musicians nor their audiences had diminished, however, and small entrepreneurs saw their chance. Many were tinkerers with electronic equipment who relied on contacts with local musicians; others were musicians themselves who wanted to get their sound heard on radio, jukeboxes, and home turntables. All demonstrated a willingness to learn-as-you-go. Between the mid-1940s and the mid-1950s, companies producing ethnic 78 rpm recordings in Wisconsin included Broadcast, Kittenger, Pageant, Pfau, Pointer, Polka Dot, Polkaland, Potter, Tell, and probably many others.

Only Polkaland has survived the ensuing decades and the technological shifts from 78s to 45 rpm "singles" to 33 1/3 rpm "long play" recordings to cassettes. Dave Bensman began Polkaland in Sheboygan in the early 1950s. His entrepreneurial odyssey began when he bought a system to provide amplified sound and advertisements for dances, fairs, and other public events. A fascination with electronic equipment led him to open an appliance store. Soon polka bands in the heavily German and Bohemian locale approached him to fix their equipment and record demos. Bensman built a makeshift studio, began making records, then worked with a jobber and established his own radio station (WSHE) to promote his product. After Bensman's death in the 1960s the label was sold to Greg Leider of Fredonia, Wisconsin, who has continued to issue new recordings, while transferring older Polkaland titles to cassette (McHenry 1991 I).

While Polkaland's efforts have been confined to a regional market and a stable of polka bands, the Cuca label of Sauk City, Wisconsin, registered a few national hits (notably the Fendermen's "Muleskinner Blues" in 1960), while expanding its mostly polka-oriented catalog to include rockabilly, blues, and gospel sounds. Another youthful tinkerer, Cuca founder Jim Kirchstein, eventually earned an acoustic engineering degree from the University of Wisconsin, with coursework in electronics. His recording studio included a three-layered ceiling of original design, and he ran a pressing plant that could produce several thousand albums daily and a like number of 45s (Kirchstein 1992 I).

Since Cuca's demise in 1972, however, the economics of the small companies that produce the Upper Midwest's ethnic recordings have altered radically.



German or "Dutchman" albums issued between the 1950s and the 1980s by small record companies in Minnesota and Wisconsin Photo: Jim Leary

Whereas Polkaland and Cuca once underwrote the cost of records that they would subsequently promote and sell, today's labels are essentially recording services. Bands put up their own money for studio time and they purchase a stock of recordings which they market themselves. The recording company (often a one-person operation) provides the sound engineering and production for a master tape, offers cover design services, acts as a liaison with the pressing plant (often somewhere outside the region), and lends its label name.

While this latter-day arrangement might seem a simple exchange of cash for expertise, the most successful ethnic labels in the Upper Midwest are run by working musicians who—by virtue of their personal tastes, skills, and ongoing relationships with other musicians—have attracted particular clienteles and produced distinctive sounds. Roger Bright's Bright Productions of New Glarus lures Swiss performers. The sax-accordion Slovenian flash of greater Milwaukee emanates from Don Hunjadi's HG studio in Franksville, while a button box and chordovox Slovenian sound characterizes many titles issued by Richie Yurkovich's RY records of Willard. "Polka Joe" Wojkiewicz of Green Bay has issued many recordings by northern Wisconsin's Polish bands on North Star Appli. Followers of the concertina-tuba-dominated Dutchman style generally cross the border to New Prague, Minnesota, where Jerry Minar runs JBM Productions.

The studios run by these musicians and engineers are all sidelines. There will probably never be big money in recording the old-time ethnic sounds that persist in the Upper Midwest. But while the labels are small, the music is big.