

TAPE INDEX

Leah Bensman McHenry
Mequon, Wisconsin
January 8, 1991

Interviewed by J.P. Leary
Ampex 632 tape
Nagra (mono) recorder

1. Announcement.

2. David A. Bensman, b. Two Rivers, WI. In high school became interested in all forms of communication. Business manager of school newspaper, worked with school plays and did announcing for events. Also started a newspaper in his community, The Free Press. Was interested in advertising. Bought a sound system for dances, school plays, and fairgrounds. Provided equipment to local bands so they could be heard over the midway. Became more sophisticated with technology.

3. At end of WWII became a printing teacher in Sheboygan, had become married by this time. Moved to Sheboygan in late 1940s. Could not continue to teach because he did not have state certification. Had already opened an appliance store by this time. Wanted to buy electrical/recording/sound equipment wholesale and the store was a way to do this and make a living.

4. Bands would come in to fix their equipment and to have him record demos. That was the beginning of Polkaland.

5. Fairs were close to home. Fireman fairs in Manitowoc County. Sheboygan County Fair, Ozaukee County Fair in Cedarburg. Other little festivals around Sheboygan, Two Rivers, Manitowoc. With brother and uncle, Leah (b. ca. 1943) would travel to fairs, put sound trumpets up on the grandstands. Would sell ads over the midway.

6. While working the fairs, Bensman opened a record store sideline in his appliance store. Used the records for soundtracks at the fair. Leah would be an announcer, read ads, mother did sound effects. Bensman would do the evening shifts.

7. Polkaland began around 1951 or 1952. Bensman realized there was a local market for polka music. Didn't realize this until the bands began to come in wanting to buy records. Built a studio in the back of the record store. Abandoned the sound system work about this time. Leah and her brother and family built the studio themselves. Went to Chicago to look at RCA studio and then ordered the equipment.

8. Glass window and upright reel-to-reel Magnavox recorder, microphones, piano, fluorescent lights, rocking chair, some tables. About 23' x 23'. Recording sessions usually on weekday nights. "When we recorded, he would do it after hours . . . he'd set up about three mikes. And away we went." [DHD?] Three mikes. Would test each instrument and then have everyone play together.

9. Bensman would monitor the levels. Acoustic tiles put up.

10. For Gosz: "Romy would get in front with the other horns behind him . . ." Would change the lyrics or make them up on the spot. Atmosphere was very casual. Sometimes they would come up with a good solo. They would also have to figure out how to adapt the length of the songs to make it fit on a record.

11. Leah and her brother would sometimes come into the studio to create a feeling of encouragement as if at a dance. Sometimes Bensman would do this and Leah would watch the needle. The players were casual and might move out of range or take a drink in the midst of a tune. Sometimes a tune was recorded seven or eight times.

12. Gosz was the most popular. People would ask for her records the most. Leah remembers him playing with his young sons, like Tony Gosz, who would play with the band when the other musicians got tired. Romy seemed shy and nervous when you first saw him. Would become more outgoing when drinking, but sometimes would quit playing or play what he wanted to and go off on his own.

13. Cousin Fuzzy was Leah's favorite. Played in dances around the community and did a little show with costumes and two act plays. "Cute shows." Fuzzy would talk like a hillbilly. Then they would have the dance. All the way from babies to 70-80 year old people. Very exciting. [Excerpts might be good for DHD.]

14. When more sophisticated recording equipment came in, Bensman would go to Chicago to have his tapes enhanced into hi-fi. Sometimes he also taped solos to see if they could be fit with what the band was playing together. But it was hard to match this, because bands never played tunes twice the same way. He would also do a lot of recording right at the dances.

15. Leah was the go-fer at recording sessions at dances, but would also dance to. Bensman liked to match a waltz with a polka on a record.

16. When B decided to make Polkaland Records, he went around to MN, MI, and IL to stop at radio stations to try to get his records played. He knew that just because you have a record, it won't get played. B wanted his records played in his hometown, but the only radio station was owned by a competing radio station. B started his own station, tested the station with polka music. Had a Sunday polka show as "Papa Dave." Leah would cue up the records and people would call up and make requests. Different musicians would stop in and do interviews with him. Started about 1954 on radio. WSHE (Sheboygan).

17. Right near WOKY on the dial. Bensman would listen to the competition, would have all the radios in the store on to different stations. Decided then to have more popular music on his station.

18. Bensman felt it was important to stop at every tavern and restaurant to put his stuff on jukeboxes. Also worked with a jukebox jobber in Sheboygan, Tony Zore.

19. David Bensman died the day before his 50th birthday. Had his first heart attack at 22, had several thereafter.

END OF SESSION

Some of
this for
DHD, edit
down?