
Chapter 25

Echoes of Slovenia

Program 25 Performances

1. Hank Magayne with Rick March, "Slovenian Waltz Medley."
2. Frankie Yankovic, "Dance, Dance, Dance." 3. Louie Bashell, "Won't You All Come Dance with Me?" 4. Frank Pakiz, "The Clap Dance." 5. Richie Yurkovich, "Top of the Hill." 6. Barich Brothers, "Pod mojim okincem." 7. Mike Rydeski and the Polka Jacks, "Treba ne." 8. Lojze Slak, "Veseli kletar." 9. Chicago Button Box Club, "Na mostu." 10. Barbara and the Karousels, "El Rio Drive."

Squeezebox City

A recent Friday night in Milwaukee offers a glimpse at the full range of the city's Slovenian-style polka scene. Lojze Slak, the Earl Scruggs of the Slovenian button accordion, was in town, on tour from Slovenia. At the Schwabenhof picnic grounds on the outskirts of the city, couples danced to the polkas and waltzes delivered by the ten accordions of the Chicago Slovene Button Box Club. In the West Allis neighborhood, in a bar across from the Allis Chalmers tractor plant, Gary Frank played piano accordion, while at the Blue Canary Ballroom, concertina player Don Gralak, a Polish American, swung through tunes ranging from "Under the Double Eagle" to "The Theme from Benny Hill," all in the Slovenian polka style.

Today, Slovenian polka includes two musical styles: a multiethnic contemporary music typified by Frankie Yankovic and the assertively ethnic music of the Slovenian button box clubs. The roots of both styles can be traced to the small nation in the eastern Alps that in 1991 became independent from Yugoslavia. Slovenian villages organized religious and secular choirs as well as marching and dance bands (March 1985[1989]).

Music was a part of everyday life for the Slovenian immigrants who came to North America around the turn of the century. The corner tavern and the home—the two centers of immigrant social life—were filled with music, and the button accordion was the instrument that Slovenians preferred. Frankie Yankovic, the accordionist who revolutionized American polka music, described in his autobiography his home in the Collingwood section of Cleveland in the 1920s:

[Max] Zelodec, who worked as a mechanic, would invariably pick up his squeezebox after supper and the boarders would start singing. My father

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would always join in. I'd sit there as quiet as a churchmouse and listen to them. They all had good voices. The more they drank, the better they sang.
(Yankovic and Dolgan 1977)

Button boxes were treasured. They were brought over by immigrants, purchased eagerly from instrument makers like Cleveland's Anton Mervar or Milwaukee's George Karpek, or ordered from Europe by mail. A good new accordion could cost as much as two hundred dollars in the 1920s, a big investment in those days. Yet many Slovenian families clearly felt it was worth the money. Accordionists had status in the ethnic community.

Contact with other ethnic groups and their music, with American popular music, and with school music classes broadened the horizons of many young Slovenian-American musicians. They felt the urge to create a music reflecting their own experience, much as the immigrant music reflected that of their parents. The button box suited the style of music played by Slovenian immigrants. But their children wanted a different, more versatile sound.

The melodic reed blocks of the button accordion produce only a diatonic scale while the left hand chords and bass notes are set up to accompany tunes with two or three basic chords. It is nearly impossible on the button box to play satisfying renditions of the jazz-influenced popular music of the 1930s and 1940s. In contrast, the piano accordion offers a full chromatic scale to get those "blue notes" and a more than adequate array of chord buttons and basses. By the 1930s, younger ethnic musicians turned in great numbers to the piano keyboard accordion. A new musical idiom was taking shape.

A One-Man Crusade

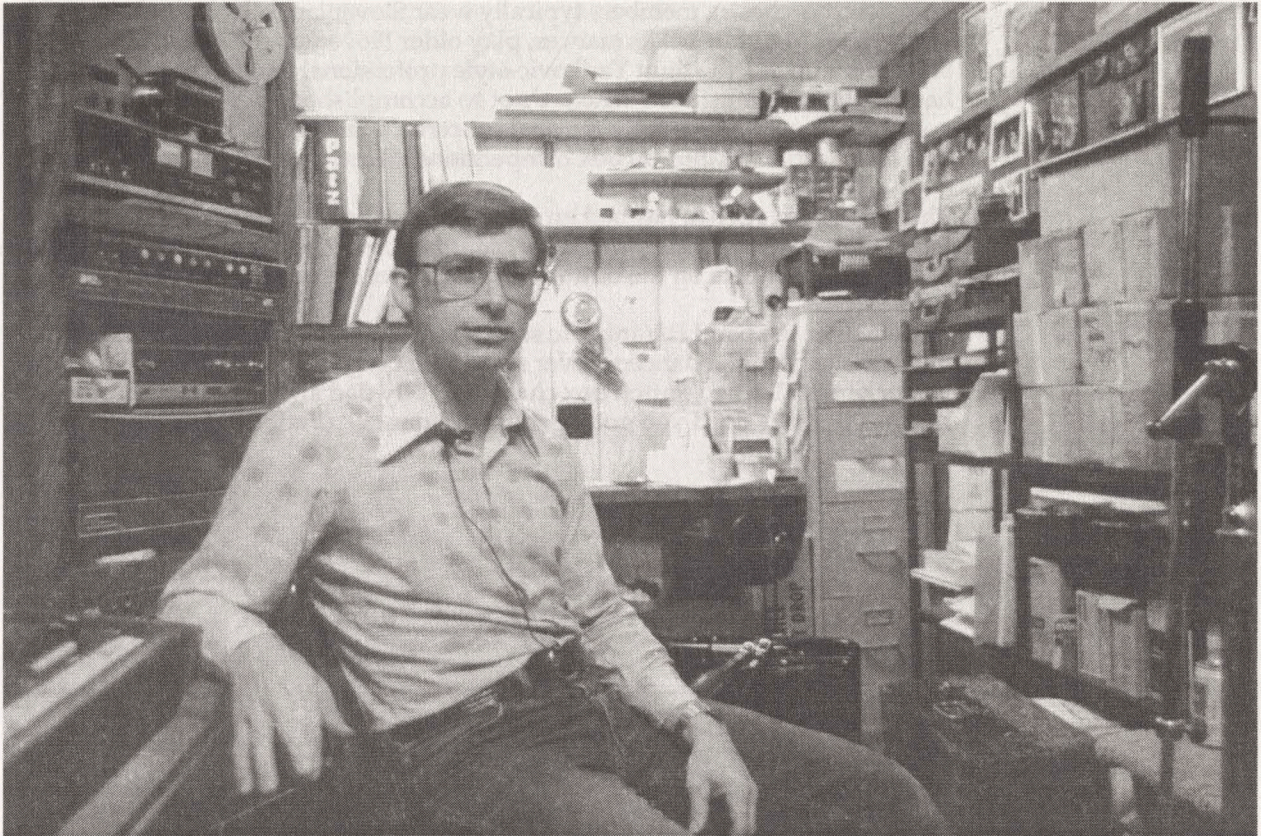
Frankie Yankovic was the key figure. Much as his contemporary Bill Monroe codified a distinctive bluegrass style out of traditional roots, Yankovic created a lively, modern music rooted in Slovenian traditions. And like Monroe, Yankovic has unceasingly barnstormed bars and dance halls across the country—a one-man crusade for the musical style that carries his strong imprint.

Yankovic's basic band included a piano accordion—solovox or cordovox (electronic accordions)—playing melody, a second accordion, and a four-string banjo playing rhythm. Piano, bass, or drums might be added for more rhythm, and in some bands (although not in Yankovic's) a clarinet or sax might be used for more melody.

Although Slovenian, Yankovic and his fellow musicians were not greatly interested in promoting their ethnicity. Rather they sought to be accepted as contemporary musicians. Yankovic led the way. His band tended to wear suits or tuxedos—not ethnic costumes—and played modern instruments—not the ethnic button box. They also sang newly devised English lyrics to Slovenian tunes as well as to melodies borrowed from such other cultures as Italian or Czech.

English lyrics set to a Slovenian tune were not usually translations but whole new sets of words. The Slovenian *Bod' moja, bod' moja, bom lesnikov dal* (Be mine, be mine and I'll give you a hazelnut) in English is sung, "She told me she loved me but oh how she lied."

Although the innovators of the Yankovic style were primarily Slovenians, their music soon found an enthusiastic following especially among the first American-born generation of central and east European ethnic groups. Like the bluegrass or urban blues of the period, Slovenian-style polka attracted largely working-class people who were enjoying unprecedented economic well-being in the years following World War II. With more leisure time and disposable income, they



Richie Yurkovich in his basement recording studio, Willard, 1988 Photo: Jim Leary

were eager for a music that mediated between their parents' roots and their contemporary experience.

"I'd like to think of myself as the blue collar worker's musician," Yankovic has said. "I'm proud of that. After all, this country was built on the blood and sweat and guts of the blue collar man" (Yankovic and Dolgan 1977). In some areas, such as the south side of Milwaukee or the east side of Cleveland, Yankovic's sound became the local music of blue collar bars and dances. And though it was played and enjoyed by people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, the name—"Slovenian style"—stuck.

Within the Slovenian-American community, too, the Yankovic style enjoyed wide acceptance. The piano accordion became the most popular instrument, overshadowing the button box.

In the 1960s and 1970s, as American society became more accepting of symbols of ethnic diversity, communities renewed interest in their traditional arts. In the early 1970s, Slovenian Americans began to revive the more "traditional" button box as an important ethnic symbol. Button box orchestras with ten to thirty members began to form in many communities around the country. The recordings of button box virtuoso Lojze Slak, imported from Slovenia, stimulated interest. Older players who had set aside button boxes since their youth took up the instrument again, and ethnic teenagers began to learn it as well.

Button box orchestra members typically wear Slovenian folk costumes or at least ethnic vests at public performances, play older Slovenian folk tunes, and sing in Slovenian. Unlike the tight Yankovic-style professional bands, the clubs also have a place for musicians who are not so accomplished. Here the ethnic involvement outweighs purely musical concerns. Nonetheless there is incentive to strive for virtuosity. Button box competitions award trophies and cash prizes.

The button box revival has had an influence also on the Yankovic-style bands. Recognizing the growing popularity of button boxes, many of them now include a couple of numbers on the button box in a dance set or on an album.

But whether the band is Yankovic style or a button box group, the music is dance music and the dancers never seem to get enough. As Raymond Podboy, leader of the Chicago button box club says, "My dad always said about this music, 'If you're dead you gotta get up and dance'" (Podboy 1985 I).