

Chapter 27

The Hartmann-Meisner Polka Dynasty

Program 27 Performances

1. Verne and Steve Meisner, "Meisner Magic."
2. Gordon Hartmann, "Dorf Music."
3. Steve Meisner, "Burgettstown Polka."
4. Gordon Hartmann, "Happy Polka."
5. Gordon Hartmann, "Polkaholic."
6. Steve Meisner, "Blue Island."
7. Gordon Hartmann, "Friends Forever."
8. Steve Meisner, "Jammin' Polkas."
9. Gordon Hartmann, "Finger Rapids Polka."

True to Frankie

"In Wisconsin we've been more true to Frankie's sound than anywhere else, even more than in Ohio, where he's from. We appreciate him more here" (Meisner 1991 I). Steve Meisner is referring to Cleveland's Frankie Yankovic, whose modern polka style rooted in traditional Slovenian music has been especially strong in Milwaukee and the surrounding area of southeastern Wisconsin. In the 1980s and 1990s Steve, a young polka band leader, and his cousin Gordon Hartmann, also a band leader, have been among the most important promoters of Yankovic's style of Slovenian polka music.

Since the European-American population of Milwaukee and vicinity is predominantly of Germanic and Slavic origin, the Slovenian music had a particular resonance there. The striking but simple melodies have Slavic soul, and the chord progressions have a tight symmetrical structure, similar to the music of the Bavarians, Austrians, and Swiss, the Germanic peoples with whom the Slavic Slovenians share the Alpine region.

From his musical cultural base in the large Slovenian community of Cleveland, Yankovic emerged in the late 1940s as a nationally known recording artist with a modern, popular polka style that has been widely emulated by other bands. In the Milwaukee area these included the bands of fellow Slovenians like Frank Bevsek, Spike Micale, and Hank Magayne, but Yankovic also had devotees of other nationalities. Barbara Kaszubowski Flanum-Lane, Al Roberts Gostomski, Bill Savatski, Louie Byk, and Don Gralak are but a few of the leaders of Milwaukee area Slovenian-style bands who are of Polish extraction, while Verne Meisner, Normie Dogs, Joey Klass, Tony Rademacher, Gary Frank, and Norbie Baker are a few of their counterparts of German descent.

The polka bands led by Slovenians and those led by others differ in some ways, but they also have a lot in common. In the Slovenian-led bands, one notices a stronger ethnic grounding: they usually draw upon a broader base of musical sources, give greater prominence to those Slovenian tunes best known by

Slovenians, and preserve more original song lyrics. However, the similarities between the repertoires and styles of the polka bands led by Slovenes and those led by non-Slovenes now outweigh the differences. The recordings of Yankovic and other Clevelanders, like Johnny Pecon and Kenny Bass, and the folios of sheet music—especially those of the Yankovic recordings—soon became the authoritative source from which all of the “Yankovic style” bands forged a core repertoire and helped define the modern Slovenian-style polka scene.

Accordion Prodigies

Having been crowned America's Polka King at a “battle of the bands” in the Milwaukee Civic Auditorium in 1948, Yankovic was wildly popular throughout southeastern Wisconsin in 1949 when the Austrian-German parents of eleven-year-old Verne Meisner bought their son a piano accordion. Verne had been born in Milwaukee, but spent a good part of his early childhood in North Dakota, where his father had worked on farms. The family moved around a lot, eventually returning to southeastern Wisconsin, settling in their forebears' home town, Whitewater. The twelve lessons included with that purchase of the accordion proved to be all the instruction Verne required to launch an influential musical career that is still going strong.

Musically talented, Verne was taking professional playing jobs as soon as 1950 with his group Verne Meisner and the Polka Boys. He swiftly became well known around southern Wisconsin as an accordion prodigy. By fifteen, he was already touring regionally and in 1957, at nineteen, he made his first of many recordings, a 45 rpm single featuring two original tunes. One of them, “Memories of Vienna,” was the first of numerous original Meisner tunes to have an impact on the polka scene. Others, such as “El Rio Drive” and “Ukrainia,” have entered the polka tradition and are now performed by many bands.

A professional musical career is often difficult to combine with a stable personal life. Verne has had to fight and has recently overcome the alcoholism which nearly derailed his career, and his first marriage did not withstand the strains of a musician's lifestyle. Nonetheless, Verne's musical career has now lasted more than forty years, a significant contribution to the polka tradition. His band's style of play continues to be influential: the clean melodic lines and Verne's renewal of emphasis on the saxophone as a second voice in the Yankovic style have become widespread in Milwaukee area polka bands.

About the time Verne was taking up the accordion, his cousin Ron Hartmann, also of Whitewater, was showing his own musical talents. As teenagers in the 1950s Ron and Verne kept southeastern Wisconsin dance halls hopping to a Yankovic style Slovenian sound, but in later years, Ron's band adopted a German-flavored sound, using brass and a less frenetic tempo than the Slovenian style. Until his early death in the 1980s, Ron continued to provide music, primarily in the surroundings of Whitewater.

Steve Meisner, the son of Verne, and Gordon Hartmann, the son of Ron, are continuing their family tradition as polka band leaders. Steve still resides in Whitewater, while Gordon has relocated a few miles to the northwest in Madison. They were both born at the beginning of the 1960s and, like their fathers, were musical prodigies. Both of their bands play in the same modern Slovenian style, both play a lot of original material. Hearing only a few bars, it is possible to mistake one band for the other. Yet the underlying emotional expression in the music of the two bands is markedly different, reflecting the differing life experiences of the two young men.

Steve, whose relationship with his father was complicated by divorce, received an ambivalent message from Verne when he first showed an early interest in



Verne and Steve Meisner with their Baldoni accordions, Whitewater, 1985 Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection

music. As a seven-year-old, Steve's entreaties to his father to teach him to play were at first rebuffed, and then Verne thrust a momentous decision upon his young son: "If you begin to play, you have to promise that you'll never quit." Steve leapt to the challenge without a safety net and made it. Only a year later his father began to bring Steve along to play some jobs with the Meisner band, often placing the diminutive kid on a box so he could reach the microphone.

Gordon seems to have had more security in his move to take part in his family's music making. Gordon recalls that his father and mother approvingly eavesdropped through the heating ducts on his efforts at age seven to find his way around on a little 50-bass piano accordion. Moreover, Gordon recounts that everyone in his extended family seemed to make music in some way—to play an instrument or sing well. It just seemed natural to him to give it a try. Gordon also had opportunities to play gigs with his father's band and became the leader of his own band shortly before his father's death. Gordon's first recording is dedicated to his father's memory and includes a Ron Hartmann original tune which Gordon had to plumb from the depths of his memory.

While the Gordon Hartmann band plays a jazzy, technically demanding, modern polka style that seems to be fully imbued with the *joie de vivre* polka enthusi-

asts regularly cite as the essence of the music, Steve Meisner's compositions range between polka joy and the sort of melancholy brooding usually associated with country music. Songs like "Sincerely We're Through" and "Don't Sweetheart Me" ironically combine a perky polka sound with a less than joyful theme.

Cousin Gordon's compositions extol his band's efforts to "whip this party into a polka friendzy" (the misspelling is deliberate), and he makes light of his own particular "polkaholic" addiction—"I need a polka to get me through the day." Steve escapes into fantasies of a romantic "Blue Island" "where the women always smile . . ." or sings the polka blues about less than ideal intimate relationships.

I always thought the only man to light your fire was me.
But then I hear when word gets round, it's burning constantly.

Steve Meisner and Gordon Hartmann, the second-generation polka prodigies, are now mature performers creating sounds which will likely prove to be some of their most significant music. Let us hope they can sustain their innovative approach to the tradition, maintain their virtuoso performance standards, and, especially, continue to create original material which uses the polka idiom to express their thoughts and feelings.