

# Polka Heartland: Why The Midwest Loves to Polka

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to surmount challenges in Argentina, Guatemala, and Peru. The firm remained committed to social awareness, sometimes through philanthropy, but the ventures were not always financially rewarding. Similarly, chapter four examines RDC's management of a railroad connecting Malawi and Mozambique in 1990s Africa and another in post-Soviet Estonia. Notwithstanding exasperating political instability, those projects were profitable although they did not fulfil their promise. The closing chapter examines "New Involvements," featuring investments in Colombia, Germany, France, and (surprisingly) Pennsylvania. The last, a bus service, collapsed; the jury is still out on the other three as regards their profitability. Yet Grant justly concludes that RDC has experienced overall success while remaining attentive to Posner's goal of social responsibility.

Grant obviously admires Posner and the RDC's goals, business practices, and achievements. He nonetheless exhibits a fair-minded assessment of the outcomes in each chapter. This book will undoubtedly appeal to readers interested in railroads but also to anyone intrigued by the study of business. Outstanding photographs and maps add visual interest. Overall, the author's wide-ranging research, extensive command of railroad history, and clear expression make this volume a pleasure to recommend.

*Polka Heartland: Why The Midwest Loves to Polka*, text by Rick March, photos by Dick Blau. Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2015. 200 pp. Illustrations (mostly color), bibliography and discography, notes, index. \$29.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Kenneth J. Bindas is professor of history at Kent State University. He is the author of *Swing, That Modern Sound: The Cultural Context of Swing Music in America, 1935-1947* (2001) and *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society, 1935-1939* (1996).

Rick March takes us through the small towns of Wisconsin to outline the continuing attraction polka music still holds for many people. Supplemented by excellent photographs by Dick Blau, *Polka Heartland* is a personal and heartfelt look at this interesting and unique popular music. March is a longtime folklorist, polka enthusiast, and musician, so his analysis is not very critical, but that is not the point of the book. What he and Blau set out to do with words and pictures is to detail how this music remains an active part of many people's lives and, with that, the historical factors that led to it coming to the Midwest and why it still remains a part of many small-town celebrations.

Jazz is generally seen as America's unique contribution to music, not simply for its longevity, innovation, or even popularity, but because

it came from the bottom up, blended a variety of musical genres, and eventually came to include every race, gender, and ethnicity. But well into the first third of the last century it was not certain that this African American contribution would hold the mantle of America's music as there were many other ethnic and regional competitors. As March makes plain, polka was favored by a large number of people throughout the Midwest, in urban areas like Cleveland, Chicago, and Milwaukee as well as in rural areas stretching from Mexico to Canada. Polka shared with jazz the blending of various sounds, working-class roots, and an upbeat performance aesthetic.

This book is about community and the integral role polka plays in maintaining a midwestern sense of identity. March and Blau guide readers through the various polka styles played throughout Wisconsin. German, Slovene, Bohemian, Polish, and Slavic immigrants who came to the upper Midwest made this music a "symbol . . . denoting regional identity" (53). Traveling to small-town polka festivals and clubs, March introduces us to the people and music of those who favor the concertina over the accordion, Bohemian over Dutchman, and the definitional characteristics of Slovenian and Mexican polka music. March also introduces some of the key innovators of the music, like Romy Gosz, Barefoot Becky Livermore, Eddie Blazonczyk, and of course the king of polka, Frankie Yankovic, who played the Slovene style. Even though Yankovic grew up in Cleveland (making it one of the leading polka centers), his national popularity beginning in 1947 and carrying over until his death in 1998 resonated with the people of Wisconsin, making him a Badger by association. He influenced several generations of Wisconsin polka musicians and was a wonderful ambassador for the music.

March and Blau guide readers on a tour of polka music in Wisconsin. By doing so, they provide an entrance into communities. Whether it be the Pulaski Polka Days or the Las Vegas Latin Night Club, one gets a sense from reading this book that polka plays a vital role in the lives and identity of these communities. The photos, except for a few, reveal that many of the patrons are elderly, and often the crowds are sparse. However, the enthusiasm for the music, and the recent attraction by a younger audience, suggest that the music is evolving yet again. Marion Jacobson's history of the accordion, *Squeeze This* (2012), outlines a similar trajectory, suggesting that polka and its instrumentation are attracting newer and younger fans and musicians. As a music that seems to define the Midwest, this is welcome news as its resurgence will allow the region to retain a connection to its ethnic and class identity while at the same time basking in the nostalgic glow of a time when polka ruled.