

Polka underground



Theresa Lodge hosts occasional Saturday night Polka dances. On this night, Andy Hembel, 23, of Germantown and Amanda Raflik, 18, of Palmyra dance to Chicago band Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones. Photo By Peter DiAntoni

It's not the same
old beat to them.
It could be the
next big thing.

BY NICOLE SWEENEY

Don't let the word "polka" fool you.

There will be no lederhosen in this story. There will be no "Chicken Dance," no "Roll Out the Barrel," no "She's Too Fat for Me."

In their place:

Late-night carousing, polka-related injuries, groupies, even polka romance.

And no shortage of passion. To wit:

The bubbly Beth Ann Birno, the 20-year-old Miss Wisconsin Polka Booster Queen from Germantown, who signs every e-mail "peace, love and polkas!"

Missy Thull, a 25-year-old musician and promoter from St. Michaels, who declares, "I breathe polkas."

Mike Schneider, a 25-year-old accordion player

and polka DJ from Brown Deer, who still gets "tingles" when he remembers the first time he heard that irresistible polka beat.

It'd be a stretch to say tons of young people are into polka. Still, Wisconsin is home to a core group of twenty- and thirtysomethings who love polka with a ferocity that's almost overwhelming. They've become untraditional by embracing a tradition. They're determined to topple polka stereotypes.

"They're like small, disorganized rebel armies battling a world superpower," said Tom Brusky, a 35-year-old West Allis polka musician and founder of www.wisconsinpolkamusic.com.

But there just aren't that many places to polka dance these days. So young polka addicts spend their time cruising the underground polka circuit, from rural dance halls and corner taverns to polka festivals across the country to polka house parties where they jam all night.

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"The thing about polka music is it's everywhere. It's in your back yard," said Whitewater musician Steve Meisner, 43, who comes from a highly respected polka-playing family. "But it is so underground. And the people who are in polka music, the fans, are very protective of it."

To find any good underground scene, you have to know where to look and who to ask. The polka queen is a good place to start.

Wearing knee-high boots and a pink sequin top, Beth Ann Birno was a blur on the dance floor of the packed Theresa Lodge, about 50 minutes north of Milwaukee. As Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones played "Suicide," Birno whirled around with her fiance until she was flushed and breathless.

When it comes to dancing, Birno stops only to chug water and change outfits. She brings a mini suitcase filled with five or six outfit changes and three to four pairs of shoes to every dance, shedding each outfit once it gets too sweat-soaked.

Her love affair with polka started when she was 8. Her parents had just divorced, and her mother thought that polka dance lessons would lift her spirits. Soon, Birno, her mother and her grandmother were hitting polka dances regularly. The older people cooed over the young Birno, and she reveled in the attention.

As a teen, she started hanging out with the band members, even downing Jell-O shots with them before a performance. She says she body surfed at one polka festival.

"I was a polka groupie," she said, laughing. "I was a 'fence girl.' Down at Polish Fest there's that little fence in front of the stage area, and I'd be screaming and cheering for the band and just kind of shimmying and dancing and stuff. I've been a fence girl all my life."

She didn't listen to her teasing classmates at Slinger High School, who nicknamed her "Gothic Pollak" (she was also in a metal-loving goth stage at the time) and "Polish Princess."

She got the last laugh when the head of the Wisconsin Polka Boosters organization gave her this year's tiara.

"They actually filled one of my lifelong dreams," Birno said. "When I was 12, there was nothing I wanted more than to be queen. I wanted to be polka queen so bad."

But the life of a queen can be hard work.

At summer festivals, she'll dance for 10, 12 hours straight. Her polka-related injuries are numerous: gouged feet from pointed heels; broken toes; knees that give out; hips that pop out of place.

It never stops her for long.

"If I don't get my polkas, I'm cranky."



"If I don't get my polkas, I'm cranky," says Beth Ann Birno, the 20-year-old Miss Wisconsin Polka Booster Queen. At Theresa Lodge, her dance partner is fiance Lucas Marthaler of Germantown. Photo by Peter DiAntoni

Next stop: A polka house party. It was the weekend before the "Steve Meisner Jammin' Polka Blitz," a big Slovenian-style polka festival in Pewaukee, and John and Karrie Gostomski, a couple in their early 30s, were hosting a pre-festival bash for all their polka friends.

The Gostomskis' basement in West Allis is party central for a reason: It includes a bar and a jukebox filled with polka tunes. A PBS special on polka played on the TV in the background.

Soon, a polka session was under way. Brusky rocked away on his accordion, with Nashville musician Ed Klancnik on banjo and John Gostomski on the drums. Later, Meisner and others jumped in.

Get a bunch of polka musicians together, and sooner or later (sooner, if beverages are involved), they'll start philosophizing about the future of polka.

The theories on why young

people are not — yet — storming the polka scene: They don't get that polka isn't just for senior citizens. They hear too many lousy polka bands instead of the really good ones. The media just make polka out to be a joke.

The theories on what it will take for polka's popularity to rebound: Better music. More experimentation. One lucky big break, maybe a movie like "O Brother, Where Art Thou," done polka style.

They figure, it happened for bluegrass. It happened for swing. Who's to say polka music isn't the next big thing?

Listen to the impassioned polka sales pitches, and you'll almost believe it. Polka's staying power might be uncertain, but these young polka people aren't going anywhere.

The party raged until nearly sunrise.

On the underground

"I think there are a lot more young people involved with polka in Wisconsin than people think."

— polka musician and promoter **Missy Thull**, 25, St. Michaels

On the future

"We almost have to support each other because after our parents are gone, there's no one to keep the legacy going."

— polka musician **John Gostomski**, 33, West Allis

On the music

"It's a little bit more laid-back. You can actually listen to it loud and not wake up with a headache the next day."

— polka musician **John Gostomski**, 33, West Allis

On the Web

- www.wisconsinpolkamusic.com The most comprehensive site about the state's polka scene, it averages 3,000 hits a day and features links, band schedules and articles. Run by Tom Brusky, 35, of West Allis.
- www.internationalpolka.com Home of the Chicago-based International Polka Association.
- www.polkamaniac.com Run by a young woman from Stevens Point, this Web site includes event listings, lyrics and MP3s.
- The New York-based Stun Productions is filming a documentary about Wisconsin's polka scene. They expect to wrap up filming by this fall. Go to www.polkamovie.com to get updates.

More online

Today's polka music still embraces its traditional roots, but every once in awhile, young musicians throw out the rule book. Go to www.mkeonline.com to listen to Tom Brusky's original "Lesbian polka" and Alanis Morissette spoof "Polkalanis," along with a sampling of more traditional songs by other local musicians. Also on the Web: Watch video of the polka booster queen breaking down the dance steps at Theresa Lodge, and learn about the different music styles prevalent in Wisconsin's polka scene.

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f John and Karrie Gostomski's love story had a soundtrack, it'd be polka.

But it was a love story that almost didn't happen.

Both grew up the children of prominent polka musicians. Karrie was hooked early: She loved the way the music made her feel.

"Because I was one of the youngest, all the older people took me in. And that's what everyone really wants, is to feel special," said Karrie, 31. "When I was with my friends, I felt like a nobody."

But her first husband didn't get that. He hated polkas, and after they got married, he told her he didn't want her going to dances anymore. "I said, 'this is my life, this is who I am'," Karrie recounted.

After her marriage ended, she noticed a cute guy at the polka bars. She kept seeing him and asked her mom, "Who is that guy?"

It was John Gostomski.

One night, they were all at Ray's Nob Hill Bar and Hall, and a song came on that reminded everyone of John's late father. Suddenly, John, Karrie and Karrie's mother started crying. Later, outside the bar, John and Karrie shared their first kiss.

Now the couple are expecting their first baby (conceived, appropriately enough, during a weekend polka festival). If it's a girl, Karrie hopes to name her Emily, after one of her favorite polka songs.

On the scene

"When all the young ones get together, we drink, party all night, dance on tables. I mean, we get nuts, we get crazy. But I wouldn't do that at a normal bar. Never in a million years."

— Polka fan

Karrie Gostomski,
31, West Allis

On 'happy music'

"You can't be unhappy and listen to polka. It's just impossible."

— Miss Wisconsin
Polka Booster Queen
Beth Ann Birno,
20, Germantown

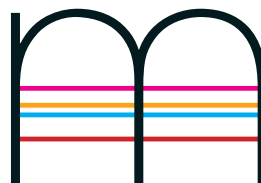


The basement of John and Karrie Gostomski's West Allis home is a makeshift dance hall, with polkas on the jukebox.

Photo by Peter DiAntoni



Accordion player Mike Schneider, at Baldoni Accordions in Menomonee Falls, was hesitant to tell his high school classmates that he was a polka fanatic. Photo by C. Taylor



ike Schneider was just 6 years old when he heard legendary polka king Frank Yankovic play at a parish on Milwaukee's south side.

"I still get tingles when I think about that," he said. "There was something about it that pulled me in, and it hasn't really let me go."

He begged his parents for an accordion and started taking lessons. By high school, he had his own polka band.

But although his weekends were spent on the professional polka circuit, he didn't exactly advertise it to his Dominican High School classmates. Then, at his senior class retreat, he announced he had been nominated for the Wisconsin Polka Hall of Fame, the youngest musician to ever win the honor. To his relief, his classmates applauded.

"That's when I really came out, if you will, of the polka closet."

It felt good. But his accomplishments also remind him that he's one of just a few young professional accordion players in the area.

"It's kind of lonely," he said, "being in an industry where there are not more than a handful of people that are your own age."

But Schneider, like others, doesn't see that as a reason to hang up his accordion. What they lack in numbers, they make

up in passion. They have to: There's no one else to carry on the traditions of their parents and grandparents.

"I'll never give it up," Schneider said. "You just never know when something's going to take off."

tune in

Check out the local polka offerings

Art's Concertina Bar

1920 S. 37th St. (414) 384-2570

Polka music: Starts at 7:30 p.m. Thursday; 9 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Diamond Jim's

4740 W. Bradley Road, (414) 354-4700

Polka music: 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday

Pulaski Inn

3900 E. Pulaski Ave., Cudahy (414) 481-3068

Polka music: 1 to 4 p.m. Wednesday

Hiawatha Bar and Grill

9809 Durand Ave., Sturtevant (262) 886-4855

Polka music: 2 to 6 p.m. Sunday

Theresa Lodge

114 S. Milwaukee St., Theresa (about 50 minutes north of Milwaukee) (920) 488-2141

Polka music: 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday (call to find out about occasional Saturday night dances).

WJYI-AM (1340)

"Polka Parade" airs 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday

WTKM (104.9 FM / 1540 AM)

Primarily polka format; go to www.wtkm.com for complete schedule.