

Keeping the beat *alive*



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Above: Richie Zebrowski of the Richie Zebrowski Freestyle band plays the accordion at the Yukon Slovenian Hall in Yukon. **Top:** Concertinas played by Zebrowski sit on display.

Western Pennsylvania musicians strive to preserve polka tradition

BY PATRICK VARINE
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Chris Bogdon was in first grade in his native Carnegie when he started taking accordion lessons. Steve Novosel, while growing up in Murrysburg, took up the instrument at 9 years old.

Both were raised in families where polka music was a regular part of the family soundtrack, and both are part of the effort to keep the ethnic musical tradition alive today.

"I grew up with my parents listening to it on the radio," said Novosel, 60, who today lives in Bell Township and is the DJ host for three different polka radio shows in the region. "After starting the accordion, I took lessons on the button box and became state champion in Pennsylvania and Ohio as a teenager."

Back then, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was no



Couples dance to Richie Zebrowski Freestyle band Jan. 12 at the Yukon Slovenian Hall in Yukon.

shortage of places for a two-state button-box champ to land a gig.

Immigrants from primarily southern and eastern Europe settled all over Western Pennsylvania between 1870 and 1920, including large numbers from Poland, the Balkans and the former Austro-Hungarian empire. In America, they founded ethnic clubs, built churches and threw cultural festivals, many with polka bands as a frequent form of entertainment. And across the Midwest, from Ohio to Minnesota, similar immigrant communities did likewise.

"I'm originally from Cleveland and grew up in a family that was 'polka-oriented,'" said Richie Zebrowski, 64, of Monongahela.

His father, A.W. Zebrowski, was a polka DJ and has been inducted into the International Polka Association's Hall of Fame.

Polka bands with young musicians help keep tradition alive

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Zebrowski has been playing polka music since the mid-'70s. Not only that, but he is a multi-instrumentalist — able to play accordion, concertina, keyboard and bass. He brought his band, Richie Zebrowski's Freestyle, to the Yukon Slovenian Hall on Jan. 12.

From the outside, the white panel and cement building looked unassuming, tucked into a maze of quiet Yukon streets.

But the second the band resumed its performance, the muffled sounds of trumpets and accordions filled the parking lot outside the hall and filtered into the backyards of nearby residents.

"It's just happy music," said Masontown, Fayette County, resident Bernadette Gordon, who — hand-in-hand with her husband, John — swayed across the hall's wooden dance floor.

"It just gets your blood going."

Gordon can't remember a holiday without the lively beat of polka music.

A native of the Mon Valley, Gordon grew up listening to polka music during holidays on her grandfather's farm in Coal Center, Washington County. Her mother's family is Polish and her father's is Ukrainian.

Polka is a sonic and cultural tradition she has passed along to her three children. Though her now adult children don't typically play polka music on their own, it's still a part of the family.

"When they come home or I see them, we play polkas," she said. "We do that kind of stuff, but not like it used to be."

Gordon started going to polka dances when she was



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Richie Zebrowski of the Richie Zebrowski Freestyle band plays the concertina.

in high school, particularly at the now-closed Theodore's Grove pavilion in Mt. Pleasant.

"That was the place to be in the summertime on Sundays," she said. "They'd have dances go all day long."

But today, the turnout to polka dances at local community buildings isn't what it used to be, Gordon said.

"I mean, it's dying — back in the day, this place would be packed right now," she said, glancing around at the couple dozen dancers resting in folding chairs throughout the Yukon hall.

Zebrowski has noticed a similar trend.

"The smaller local church and club dances are definitely disappearing," he said. "I'm playing with a national touring band, Lenny Gormulka & Chicago Push, but I put this (Freestyle) band together as an easy way to try and keep those smaller shows going. We're not charging the rates that I get when Lenny Gor-

mulka goes to play venues in Connecticut or Massachusetts. But it's a way to try and keep it going locally."

Polka bands with young musicians help keep the tradition alive, Gordon said — particularly during multi-day festivals like the Polka Fireworks Festival at Somerset County's Seven Springs Mountain Resort and the Wheeling Polka Festival in West Virginia.

"Depending on the band, you'd be amazed how many young kids pack the place because the young musicians are fabulous," she said, citing the work of New Jersey's The Beat and Washington County-based Blue Magic.

Like Gordon, Bogdon, 53, of Cranberry grew up immersed in local polka music. His father fronted the Jimmy Bogdon Orchestra in the 1960s and '70s, and Jimmy always wanted his sons to play the accordion.

"We started in first grade," Bogdon said. "And I got the opportunity to play with

Upcoming events

- **Feb. 16:** Ray Jay and the Carousels, Connellsville Polish Club, 141 W. South St., Connellsville
- **March 16:** Lenny Gormulka & the Chicago Push, 2 to 6 p.m., American Legion Post 344, 109 S. Fifth St., Jeannette
- **March 23:** DynaBrass, 2 to 6 p.m., Kinloch Fire Hall, 915 New York Ave., New Kensington
- **March 28:** Polka Family and Blue Magic, Oglebay Resort, 465 Lodge Drive, Wheeling, W.Va.
- **March 29:** John Gora and Gorale, Seven, the NuTones, Oglebay
- **March 30:** Blue Magic and Crusade, Oglebay

some pretty big polka bands across the country, like Matt Wasielewski, Energy Rhythm and Sound, John Stevens and Doubleshot, Li'l John and the ATM Band and Henny and the Versa J's."

Since 2012, Bogdon has played with the Connecticut-based Polka Country Musicians and works to keep the local scene alive through his website, WesternPAPolkas.com.

"I wanted to get into the promotion game, but the problem we always had was promoters didn't know where the dances were happening, so they were booking events on top of one another," he said. "We're all in this for the same reason — we love polka music and want people to come out and enjoy it. So I reached out to people and told them, 'I'll run the website and you just tell me where the polka things are.'"

The current website calendar lists 34 polka dances happening across the region so far in 2025, including events in Lower Burrell, Connellsville, Jeannette, Yukon, Wheeling and more.

These days, Bogdon books about eight dances per year at the Kinloch Fire Hall in Lower Burrell. He is also the current president of the International Polka Association, the first

association member outside of its home base in Chicago to hold the title. The association's annual convention was held in Cranberry in 2022 and will be held this year in Mars on the last weekend in August.

"Pittsburgh is great for polka because we have so many European nationalities here," he said. "A lot of people think it's just old songs that your grandparents listen to, but there are a lot of bands pushing the envelope and trying to get a younger crowd."

They include groups like the Garrett Tatano Band, whose front man was voted 2021 Polka Star of Tomorrow by the National Cleveland-Style Polka Hall of Fame and Museum.

Novosel plays a mix of older and more contemporary polka musicians in his radio shows on WEDO (810 AM) and WKHB (620 AM).

"There's a lot of good newer music coming out, but the foundational stuff is also something I use a lot," he said.

And even within a niche genre like polka, there are sub-genres to be found. In the Pittsburgh area, the Polish style of polka music is predominant.

"The Polish bands usually have trumpets," Novosel said. "There's also the Slovenian style that I normally

play throughout my shows, where the bands don't have a trumpet. It's not as popular as it used to be, although a regional organization called the Penn Ohio Polka Pals recently put out a (compilation) record of songs in that style."

If it weren't for the bands and festivals in cities like Pittsburgh and Buffalo, N.Y., Helga Leonard is not confident the polka scene would still be alive.

Born in Germany, Leonard discovered polka music in 1979 after her family moved to the United States — living in North Carolina and Colorado before landing in California. Nearly 20 years old, she was invited to a polka dance through friends she made in a folk dance group.

"I met some people down there and just started hanging out," said Leonard of Saxonburg, Butler County.

Now, she attends polka dances and festivals across the country.

"There will rarely be a place I go to where I don't know someone. And by the end of the night, I'll know someone," she said. "It doesn't take long. You just go up to the bar and start talking to people. You'll make friends. It's that good."

Zebrowski said his favorite part about polka music is that the musicians are not separate from those who attend their shows.

"We're not in a green room someplace until we go out and perform," he said. "We go and socialize with the folks who come out, and it's great to see the look on their faces when you start a song that's one of their favorites."

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