

A Passion for Polka: Old-Time Ethnic Music in America, by Victor Greene. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. 355 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$28.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY LA VERN J. RIPPLEY, ST. OLAF COLLEGE

Extending from eastern Pennsylvania to the Rocky Mountains and from southern Texas to the Canadian border, the American polka belt is outlined by its overlap with the settlements of central and eastern European immigrants. Victor Greene attempts to offer encyclopedic coverage of the various American polka producers and promoters. It was probably an impossible task. The broad sweep of the coverage is both the book's greatest strength and its most serious weakness. Despite thousands of footnotes that chart his interviews, private letters to the author, and the consultation of hundreds of obscure publications, the overview he wants to offer eludes the reader. Greene has thoroughly investigated his material and demonstrates his talent best when dealing with his home town of Milwaukee, in his words, *the* American capital of ethnic music. His knowledge is superb, too, when he covers what is likely his favorite band leader, Slovenian-American Frankie Yankovic, a homespun Cleveland artist who was crowned Polka King of the nation in 1948.

That was during the heyday of polka. Its popularity began sporadically in the early twentieth century and picked up until 1916; it languished during World War I as "not quite American," only to zoom ahead in the 1920s on the heels of radio and recording technology. In the 1930s polka survived if it did not thrive, then waned during World War II, reaching its all-time climax in the 1950s. For reasons not offered by Greene or others, polka music faded in the early 1960s.

Greene ranges helter-skelter from coast to coast, but he deals with Iowa only rarely—when describing the likes of Skipper Berg from Albert Lea, and especially the New Ulm, Minnesota, bands of Whoopee John Wilfahrt, Harold Loeffelmacher, Victor "Fezz" Fritsche, Emil Domeier, and Babe Wagner, who traveled the Iowa ballroom circuit vastly more than did Yankovic and the many Scandinavian, Italian, or Yiddish groups Greene features, and much more than such nationally recognized figures as North Dakota's Lawrence Welk. Iowa radio stations in places such as Ames and Oelwein no doubt did more to popularize the Minnesota old-time bands in the Corn State than did anything else, but surely the uncommonly German population in Iowa more readily identified with the "Dutchman" style of Minnesota than with the Slavic (Polish, Slovenian, Czech) styles out of Ohio or Pennsylvania. Of course, plenty of Czech old-time bands from eastern

Nebraska ventured far and wide across the western half of Iowa even though Greene makes hardly a mention of their success.

Sometimes Greene seems to overrate the Scandinavian role in making the polka popular. Many bands readily adapted to their audiences. Skipper Berg, for example, styled his group the Viking Accordion Band even though his music was more often German and Bohemian. Whoopee John Wilfahrt, on the other hand, though clad in Bavarian duds, always managed to offer in addition to German medleys Norwegian, Swedish, or Finnish numbers when he was lucky enough to be booked into those ethnic locales. In fact, Wilfahrt's success came largely from promotion by recording companies and his remarkable combining of a German-American style with a rural and "blue-collar" attraction to his particular brand of entertainment.

Greene is expansive about other ethnic musicians as well, including especially Italian and Jewish (Yiddish) groups, who succeeded in comic skits as well as in musical settings in the large cities on both coasts. His superb index lets readers interested in only individual items enjoy this "encyclopedia" for specific information, for even the footnotes are indexed. An annotated bibliography guides the novice. If there is a deficiency—wholly excusable because of Greene's already distracting plethora of inclusions under the heading "ethnic music"—it is his lack of information about the American dance hall. Along with the recording studios and the radio shows that Greene credits, the "hand-in-glove" building of dance halls offered that critical advance from summer "empty hayloft" barn dances to professional entertainment centers, without which polka music would not have triumphed.

Writing Illinois: The Prairie, Lincoln, and Chicago, by James Hurt. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992. vii, 154 pp. Bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY RONALD WEBER, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

"The idea of making something out of nothing," James Hurt writes, is the "exemplary Illinois gesture" (5). By this he means that Illinois writers have confronted a literary world decidedly thin as material—or, to put a better face on it, one strikingly new. In either case the creative life in the Land of Lincoln has been an uneasy one, leading to a good deal of cultural uncertainty on the part of writers—"the tendency to give with one hand and take away with the other when we describe our home country" (6).

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