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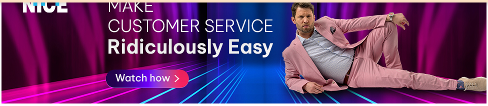

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Someone Else's Chicago

Punk polka. Mexican polka. A Polka Hall of Fame. Though the Windy City will always be known for its blues guitar, certain pockets of the city still echo with the sound of the accordion

March 6, 2004

By Carlo Rotella

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As I drive a rental car toward the Loop on the expressway from O'Hare Airport, every hometown instinct is telling me that in half an hour I can be sitting on a bar stool at Legends, the club in the South Loop owned by Chicago's premier virtuoso of the blues guitar, Buddy Guy. I know exactly how it will be: peaceful in the indoor twilight, the dwindling change from my first twenty growing damp on the bar, bent notes from a guitar playing slow blues getting me right there under the heart. Later on I will call people I grew up with, and we'll go south or north to another blues club and so on into the night. The routine has not changed much since my high school years, significant portions of which I misspent at Guy's old place on the South Side, the Checkerboard Lounge. When I come back to Chicago I usually end up in a blues club.

I am, of course, not alone in this habit. The blues business, having gradually relocated in the last 40 years from the working-class neighborhoods of the South Side and West Side to the redeveloped North Side and downtown, has become part of Chicago's official culture, especially its tourist industry. The city increasingly seems like a giant theme park designed to shunt visiting fun-seekers along a path of least resistance from airport to hotel to blues club, guided every step of the way by brand managers reminding them that they're in the Home of the Blues. Many locals feel that Chicago blues lost its way and its heart, collapsing into an unending series of blazing guitar solos that never fail to wow the non-cognoscenti, when it made a devil's bargain to capture the tourist audience that now largely supports live blues in the city. Some of this criticism amounts to no more than bluesier-than-thou snobbery supercharged by the usual foolishness about music and race, but it's also undeniably true that, on the whole, Chicago blues has grown more predictable and less musically vital as it has settled into its role as the city's official theme music.

In the blues clubs, they're playing "Sweet Home Chicago" yet again, the guitar player's taking yet another extended grimacing solo, the snugly seated audience is congratulating itself on having found its way to a real Chicago blues experience -- it's all enough to make even the most devoted blues fan wonder what else may be out there in his home town, enough to inspire me to remove myself with a painful jerk from the path of least resistance and deny myself a visit to Legends. There has to be more to Chicago than Chicago blues.

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I figure there is nothing unbluesier than polka, the primal 2/4 chug that came out of Eastern Europe to take the 19th century by storm (one-two-three and, one-two-three and, as Anna explains to the King of Siam). Seeking out polka will take me into Polish and Mexican music scenes and neighborhoods that I do not know at all, turning me into a tourist in my own city. In the Chicago in which I grew up, the South Side in the 1970s, the tavern musicians played blues on the electric guitar, and the jukeboxes were flush with the voices of Z.Z. Hill, Lou Rawls and Teddy Pendergrass. Nobody in my Chicago would ever get into a barroom fight over, say, the relative merits of Li'l Wally Jagiello and Frankie Yankovic. But there are Chicagos other than mine out there, resonant with the sound of the accordion, the anti-guitar, instrument of taverns with sawdust on the floors and atmospheres ripe with the cooking, accents and music of faraway places. I assume that in exploring these other Chicagos I can take a break from guitar heroes and guitar solos, too, since somewhere I have imbibed the notion that polka is usually played on an accordion and never on a guitar. This conventional wisdom is not always accurate, it turns out, but that's part of what I stand to learn.

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Which all explains why, as Friday afternoon fades into evening, I find myself dancing strenuously with a woman many years my senior named Irene.

I am at the Baby Doll Polka Club, almost as far out on the Southwest Side as you can go and still be in Chicago proper. Across the street from the club looms the forbidding wall that encloses Midway Airport -- the city's mom-and-pop airport, dwarfed by O'Hare. Planes take off and land with a swelling roar, leaving a tang of jet fuel in the air. A traveler could plausibly stop over at the Baby Doll for a drink and a polka on the way to and from the airport, which would make for happy travelers. The Baby Doll has a reputation as a welcoming party place where hard-core polka types and curious first-timers can both have fun.

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There is no live music this early on a Friday. Inside, it is calm and dim; the decor is Early Midwestern Chalet, the jukebox well stocked with tunes by Frankie Yankovic, Eddie Korosa, Eddie Korosa Jr. and his Boys From Illinois, Brave Combo, and the Polkaholics. Irene Korosa -- former wife of the late Eddie Sr., mother of Eddie Jr., proprietor of the Baby Doll, and at the moment bartender as well -- offers only general advice to first-time dancers of the polka. She says, "It's peppy, happy music," and refuses to get much more specific than that. Don Hedeker, leader of the Polkaholics and my guide for this afternoon's tour of polka joints, leans in to volunteer some additional detail: "Follow the drum, change your feet with each beat, watch other people, and remember: Polka people are not gonna have any bad feelings if you don't do it right. There are no wrong steps."

I get to test out the efficacy of their advice when Irene gives me a lesson. We have the Baby Doll's small but fabulously lit dance floor to ourselves. A few bemused patrons look on from their bar stools; they have to wait until she's done with me before they can have another drink. Light on her feet, surprisingly strong, Irene back-leads me with great kindness and firmness. I can fox-trot and waltz a little, but I have never tried to polka, and I am not doing very well until I remember that I always did best in French class when I consciously tried to talk like Pepe Le Pew. When I start performing what feels to me like a broad parody of what she wants, politely manhandling her in half-circles and throwing in a periodic lurching hop, she beams and says, "Better!"

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Back at the bar, we fall to talking about the lost golden age of polka in Chicago. "This place is nice," Irene says, "but you should have seen the original Baby Doll. We opened it in 1954, at 73rd and Western. It held 500, we had music six nights a week, we had a hundred tables, the bar sat a hundred -- it was the longest bar in Chicago. Eight waitresses, six bartenders, two bouncers, we had a radio show, a TV show. Everybody played there. Li'l Wally, Frankie Yankovic, Marion Lush, my husband. Yankovic was the king" -- of the Slovenian-rooted, accordion-centered Cleveland style of polka -- "and my husband was the prince." But the age of kings and princes did not last. Tastes changed, and younger people fell away from their parents' and grandparents' traditions, the crowds abated, the neighborhood changed. "I sold it in 1980," she says. "Already it was a slow time for polkas. I bought this place in 1981." People come in here all the time, she says, and tell her that their parents or grandparents met at the old Baby Doll.

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I have been hearing versions of Irene's story all afternoon. The Baby Doll is my last stop on a swing through the West Side. Don Hedeker has already taken me to a senior citizens' polka dance at the Polish Highlanders banquet hall on Archer Avenue; the International Polka Hall of Fame (where one dusty framed document proclaims, "Whereas the people of Minnesota enjoy polka music all seasons of the year . . .") at Polonia Banquets, another hall on Archer; and the combination liquor store/music store/recording studio of Eddie Blazonczyk Jr., scion of one of Chicago's leading polka families. At each stop, everybody has been talking about a shrinking and aging fan base, reduced circumstances, failed attempts at crossover into the mainstream, golden age and decline.

Everybody, that is, except Hedeker, a devoted student of Chicago polka and the lead singer and guitar player of the city's only self-avowed punk polka band. (See? You go in search of something new and you learn that there's such a thing as punk polka.) The Polkaholics' feedback-rich power-trio sound can shock traditional sensibilities, but their self-evident respect for polka usually wins over even the most skeptical crowds. Hedeker, an optimistic visionary, aspires to bring together the participatory vigor of the polka scene and the novelty-seeking energy of the rock scene. If the blues can become tourist music, and if lounge music can become cool again, why can't polka -- aerobic, nonjudgmental, beery -- find a new audience as well? "We play rock clubs," he says, "but we also play gigs with regular polka bands at polka clubs, and people like it."

Hedeker's band explicitly shuns the accordion, but he may be the perfect guide for my purposes. A gently fanatical fellow in his mid-forties with extensive sideburns and impeccable taste in thrift-shop clothing, he presents a ripe combination of local elements. The son of immigrants from Czechoslovakia and the Crimea, he grew up in Gladstone Park on the Northwest Side, made his way through the public schools to the University of Chicago on the South Side, and is now a professor of statistics specializing in longitudinal data analysis at the University of Illinois-Chicago, which lies just southwest of the Loop. He did not grow up on polka -- "a little oompah music and Lawrence Welk on TV, that was my knowledge of it" -- and he took up the guitar rather than the accordion, but after many years of playing in rock bands he started coming across polka records during his visits to thrift shops.

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He became curious, then hooked. "Polka opened up the city for me," he says. "I found some of my best stuff in thrift shops in Mexican neighborhoods. Because when the older Polish people who still lived there, when they died, their stuff goes to the thrift shop, and nobody in the neighborhood wants it." Why did he want it? "Partly it was a childhood ethnic connection, but partly it was something else." Rock was beginning to feel like a rut, and he wanted to find a roots music in which he could immerse himself. "Iggy Pop once said something like, 'I gotta find my own blues,' and I felt the same way. I couldn't see myself doing it with blues or jazz, and I had this Eastern European background, so I got into polka. And then I discovered that it was good. I said, 'This is my blues.'"

Chicago is not only a big city but a long one. The three-stop itinerary for Saturday night calls for 62 miles of driving. Hedeker has a gig tonight, so I have no guide. After dinner, I head southeast on the interstate almost all the way to Indiana. Down there on the East Side, Chicago's starkest quarter, truncated slices of neighborhood are wedged between wide stretches of industrial landscape, much of it going back to prairie. I am on my way to the Club 505, which faces train tracks and a vast Ford assembly plant. Inside the club, there is a largish rectangular room for bands and dancing, also a darker barroom featuring a jukebox stocked with Al Martino, Santo and Johnny, and the Ampol Aires' "Hot Pants Polka." This is Hegewisch, a neighborhood named for a 19th-century industrialist whose company built rolling stock for the railroads. It lies 20 miles southeast of the Loop, but still within the city limits. Rarely if ever has any booster urged visitors to the city to make their way to Hegewisch, but if you want to hear accordion music in its native habitat, try the Club 505 on a live polka night.

The Ampol Aires are playing tonight. The band has been around for half a century (as its pitch-perfectly '50s name will attest), and with fewer personnel changes than you might expect. Uniformed in dark blue pants and blue-and-white checked short-sleeve shirts, the six band members overspill the narrow raised stage as they crank out a pleasingly rattletrap sound. They lope and clunk with easy precision, doubled horn lines weaving confidently over and under the melody of "Honky Tonk Polka," "Stevens Point Oberek," "Sparkling Eyes," one brisk tune after the next. Tom Kula, a founding member of the band, serves as frontman. His concertina playing, like his singing and his teasing between-song patter, balances just enough roughness against just enough lilt.

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The Saturday night crowd is thin. Where is everybody? Home with a video, out doing something more up to date, at the casinos in nearby Gary and Hammond -- or maybe they are just resting up for Sunday, the big day for polka exertions in banquet halls and Elks lodges. Some idlers trickle in from the bar, and a few dedicated polka people do show up. Most are old-timers: a trim, straight-backed lady named Janina; a codger in an outdated suit who gets up to push Janina around the dance floor with boozy courtliness; a guy with a face straight from the old country who waits his turn and then takes Janina for a jolting, stamping spin on a fast number.

But not everyone is an old-timer. Dan and Jen, a young married couple from the southwest suburbs whose on-the-beat timing and precise moves suggest that they have taken lessons, swing around the floor with long-stepping formality on an oberek (an up-tempo waltz) while an older couple provides counterpoint with a loose, busy shuffle that manages to be in time without ever being anywhere near the beat. Two little boys, one white and one black, run around and have a terrific time, interrupting a game of Little Pig to briefly polka together. Their flashing-lights sneakers seem to wink on and off in 2/4 time.

The band knows its business, the Club 505 feels extra-cozy when you picture the dark acreage of overgrown rail spurs and silent industrial buildings that begins across the street, and American currency will get you a beer -- so all seems good here. But those few in attendance cannot bring the room fully to life. As one of the Ampol Aires puts it during a break from the bandstand, "This is basically a paid practice for us." Tomorrow they will play a banquet hall packed with a sizable crowd; tonight, the huff and grind of Tom Kula's concertina sounds a little forlorn, bouncing off the walls of the half-empty club.

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I get in the car and head back toward the heart of the city. Exiting the expressway, I roll past the big turreted prison at 26th and California and pass under a banner that says "Welcome to Little Village." This is one of the neighborhoods where Hedeker shopped for records in thrift stores. Formerly Polish and Czech, it has been almost entirely Mexican for more than a generation. Bungalows and walkups, immigrants and aspiration -- it hasn't changed much. Neither has its music. Polkas and waltzes suffuse Mexican music, descending in part from 19th-century musical styles brought by the French to their one-time colonial possession and to what is now Texas by Germans and Czechs who settled there.

At Los Globos, a rambling no-frills barn of a dance hall in Little Village, I walk past the impassive tough guys minding the door and into a blast of Mexican polka. Onstage, wreathed in smoke-machine smoke, a band called Pensamiento Negro is working hard. Its music, and that of other local bands playing tonight, sounds like a blend of traditional ranchera genres -- norteno, banda, mariachi -- but punchier, giddier, like the buzz from drinking too much champagne too quickly. The hoarse, harmonizing singers race one another to the end of the chorus, keyboards do most of the work of a horn section, and drummers define the beat with bass drum, cowbell, and a high-hat played caveman fashion by holding the detached top cymbal in one hand and bashing it down on the lower one, which is fixed to the bass drum's frame. Nobody is playing accordion at the moment, but an accordion would fit right in, and I have hopes.

People in the United States know this music as Durango-style; back in Durango, in northern Mexico, it is known as Chicago-style. More urban-cowboy disco than folk music, it has lately been winning an ever-larger following. Grupo Montez de Durango, a Chicago-based band with roots in Durango, has led the way to nationwide prominence with hits on the Latin music charts, and local bands in Chicago seek to follow it to the big time.

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There is no celebrated out-of-town band to pack the house at Los Globos tonight, but even so a good turnout of perhaps 300 is on hand, mostly young and Mexican. The men, like the bands, wear cowboy hats, dress shirts, new jeans and boots; the women wear dresses or tight pants, heels, plenty of makeup. The dance of the moment is an appealingly frantic, hip-swaying, ultra-close partner dance called the "Pasito Duranguense," the Durango Step. It seems a little goofy at first, but it looks like fun, and even the most initially skeptical people discover that once you start you can't stop. It has been catching on across the United States, thanks in great part to the success of Grupo Montez.

I have been keeping an eye on a hatless fellow in a white suit whose recently shaven head makes him easy to spot in the crowd. He came in alone and has been hanging on the sidelines among minky-mustached young men, many of them not much more than 5 feet tall if you subtract boots and headgear, who drink beer and scan the room under their hat brims. I lose sight of White Suit for a while and then he reappears, doing a do-si-do step with a game-looking young woman with long blond hair. During the next tune, a smeary waltz, the dancers all do a jerk-leg hesitation step. White Suit and his partner perform a hitch so pronounced that they appear to be playing freeze tag on the crowded floor. Other dancers, impressed, clear away from them and they find themselves at center stage: a "Saturday Night Fever" moment, white suit and all.

I become aware that while I've been watching the dancers I have been hearing a squeezebox. Turning back to the band, I see that one of the keyboard players has produced a white, red and green button accordion, which he manipulates enthusiastically while singing harmony, now and then dropping one hand to add a blast from his keyboard. At least to my ear, the accordion cuts through the clamor like a soulful singer; all the other sound seems to coalesce around it. People often compare a band playing in the Chicago-Durango style to a calliope, but to me it sounds like an outsize accordion played by a tireless, many-handed, bibulous giant. After a couple more tunes, Pensamiento Negro's accordion goes back into its case, but the ghost of the instrument's voice stays in the air.

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Los Globos looks like it will be going strong straight through to closing time, but the Polkaholics are playing a gig at a North Side rock club, the Bottom Lounge. When I arrive, the band is holding forth in front of an enthusiastic crowd of 100 or so, most of them at least semi-hip, younger than the Club 505 crowd, and older than the dancers at Los Globos. Some polka expertly, some inexpertly; others just do your basic rock-club nod-and-bop; most of them are smiling. Hedeker produces an impressive roar from his guitar by rubbing the strings on the head of a fan who has approached the stage for that purpose. A lot of beer has been spilled on the floor.

The Polkaholics, sweating like stevedores, are in fine ironic form, decked out in white shoes, black pants, white ruffled shirts and stunning leopard-print vests with matching oversize bow ties. All wear thick-framed glasses, and anyone standing anywhere near the stage can smell the torrent of Old Spice with which they douse themselves, Method actor-style, before a show. They do not play polka versions of rock tunes, an ill-advised crossover strategy that has produced far too many bizarre novelty songs by polka bands. Rather, they play original songs and well-chosen polka covers that make use of rock sensibilities, winkingly sampled classic-rock phrases, and bursts of the jet-engine guitar whine common to certain forms of punk and heavy metal -- all undergirded by drums and bass playing straight-ahead, hurry-up polka rhythms. Hedeker handles the vocals with cheerful inattention to niceties of pitch; the other Polkaholics occasionally join in for a chorus in heroic beer hall unison. The hits keep coming: "Wild and Crazy Polka Fans," "She's Too Smart for Me," the thunderous "Kiss My Polka" ("I wanna polka all night and eat kishka e-ver-y day!"), "Stopped for a Beer," "Cleveland, the Polka Town." The finale, "Polka Can't Die," is both a heartfelt plea and a sendup of a formula especially widespread in country music and rap: the anthem in defense of its own genre.

At one point Hedeker harangues the crowd about guitars and accordions. He explains that Frankie Yankovic popularized the notion that polka means accordions. "The Cleveland style often requires two accordions," he says, a gigantic mock sneer spreading across his face and voice, "and that's two too many. You don't need an accordion to polka!" Then he throws a fist in the air and launches into the signature riff of Blue Oyster Cult's "Godzilla," which serves as the opening of a catchy little polka titled "Gamera of Gladstone Park."

I am back in guitar-land. My night on the town, my accordion-seeking weekend in somebody else's Chicago, has ended in a no-accordion zone. And I have returned lakeward, toward the circuit of neighborhoods and music venues that constitute the path of least resistance within Chicago's musical nightlife. But coming the long way around to get here, through parts of the city and musical scenes utterly new to me, seems to have refreshingly reversed my musical polarity: The Polkaholics' hokiest blues-rock riffs and guitar-hero moves now strike me as beguilingly strange in this context, while my 36 hours in polka-land have made their Frankie Yankovic covers and waltzes feel reassuringly familiar. In the city's thrift shops and its inland neighborhoods, where Eastern European and Mexican traditions sustain old forms and produce new ones, Hedeker found his blues. He believes that polka can be flexible and fertile roots music in the way that Chicago blues used to be, generating new styles and not just preserving familiar formulas. There may be no accordion onstage at the Bottom Lounge, but Hedeker and his bandmates had to make a long journey through multiple Chicagos echoing with accordion music in order to get here. Me, too, and that's a weekend well spent.

Sunday morning, driving out to O'Hare just as polka people are waking up and beginning to ready themselves for their big day of partying, I pick out the Eastern European-language stations and Spanish-language stations on the AM dial, crowded among the usual news, talk and sports stations. I have to depart from the radio's preset buttons and fiddle with the tuner to find voices speaking Polish or Spanish, and often I can't tell what they are talking about, but every once in a while I hear an accordion in 2/4 time making the music of somebody else's Chicago.

If You Go

* It's not always easy to find out about polka events in Chicago. There is no complete, reliable listing (although one is in the works: www.chicagopolka.com). Your best bet is to call likely venues. Start with the Baby Doll Polka Club (6102 S. Central Ave., 773-582-9706); nearby is Club 505 (13505 S. Brainard Ave., 773-646-9819). Los Globos (3059 S. Central Park Ave., 773-277-4141) features a variety of Mexican genres, including norteno and duranguense, in which polka rhythms figure prominently. Unless the Polkaholics are playing there, you probably won't find polka bands at the Bottom Lounge (3206 N. Wilton Ave., 773-975-0505), which is more of a rock club. For partial listings of polka events, including those held at banquet halls, Elks lodges and the like, try www.poloniatoday.com or www.polkajammer.com, but your best bet may well be to listen on the Internet to polka radio shows that air on Saturday and Sunday, in the late afternoon and early evening, on WPNA-AM (1490), WCEV-AM (1450) and WNWI-AM (1080). See the listing of radio shows at www.radio4polkas.com/polkaradio_files/state/IL.html.

-- C.R.

Carlo Rotella last wrote for the Magazine about Linwood Taylor and the Year of the Blues. His most recent book is Cut Time: An Education at the Fights.

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