

GL119 Folk Arts Survey of Waukegan & Zion, Illinois

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PT: Where did you learn, learn most of these songs?

RP: Well most of them are just, uh, the older ones are just melodies that are with us, you know, since infancy. We've heard them, folks singing them, the old-timers playing them when we were kids. And then uh we got together; as, as our group evolved, we were just kind of helping one another and getting certain ones perfected....

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PT: So you do get some of them, then, from records and tapes?

RP: Yea, mm-mm.

PT: Of performers from this country or of performers from?

RP: Both, yea. Mostly from over there because it's authentic. I mean here, here they've uh, they've changed it so dramatically they call it the so-called 'Cleveland style,' which I'm not particularly crazy about. I like a song, a melody that's played the way it was intended to be played originally. Because, by the time they got it here, it's been so Americanized that you barely recognize the original Slovenian flavor. But when you hear it over there, whether it's a recording that was made fifty years ago, or if it's made now. Because I have to rely on a lot of the old 78s too; especially like when we had disputes. Most of these folk songs only have one part. Well then, it would be too short to just play that song, so you have to have a second part. So what they usually do here is they'll take one song and record it as, or you know, play it as such; then have a second song to play as the chorus or the refrain; go back to the first one and play it again, and play the second part again.... Two songs to make up one....

So a lot of these numbers uh, now, as we get into it more and more, within the last say, well, maybe ten years or so, I've been going over old, I've got music that was hand-written, you know that was put down may[be ?], way back in the seventeen, eighteen hundreds, and I go over that, and that's the way they still sing it over there and play it over there. Who am I to argue with the original, uh, author. And it's the most beautiful...Here we've gotten to the point where [compares it to Ray Charles singing the national anthem]...it just has taken away from the authenticity...This I don't want to do. I like to maintain authenticity, unless it's for a particular purpose you want to change it. So many of these songs now, we've had to; we play them, well, we used to play them the way we learned them, which was wrong. And now we're discarding that and playing them the right way, and using the second part that they use over there, because if anybody has a right to make a different second part it's them, not us.

PT: So you mean that some of the songs that you learned as, when you were young, that you remembered were different from?

RP: No, no, those I learned right. It's some of the songs we learned when we started playing the accordions, you know, well somebody got a version from Cleveland, they got it from Pittsburg or something. Well, somebody concocted something, and like some of these that you hear uh, like all the old folk songs that Yankovic recorded. He's got American names and he's made different arrangements. Well, this is, you know, this is; my God, the people over there they just shudder when

they, when they hear these things over there that somebody has changed...[compares to inappropriate changes to the "Star Spangled Banner."]....

I realized...we're the ones that have to change, because we've been playing it, not that far wrong the average person would know the difference; but its better to know that you're playing it the way it was originally written, and the way they've been practicing it all these years, rather than us playing it the so-called 'Cleveland style.'

PT: I was wondering where Frankie Yankovic came in. He's, he's made a lot of changes then?

RP: Oh yea, yea. See, in fact, if you look on some of the books, when he had these four, five, six books...for piano accordion, uh, he would have the title, like maybe "Margie's Polka" or something, and then below it would be in parentheses, in smaller letters, what the original title was in Slovenian. Then he added some other part for the second part, to add a little bit of jazz and pizazz...to the number. But this is, you know, as a youngster you don't realize this, and later you figure how these things have been mutilated, raped. Uh, it's really a, it's really a disgrace. If you're going to play it, uh, I feel it should be the way that it was, the way it was all these years, because, you know, you're almost like uh changing our culture, and we don't want to change; we want to preserve our heritage and culture. And for that reason we want to maintain authenticity. So as I said before, we have taken a lot of these numbers and relearned them after a little research, and taking trips over there and talking to people over there, the singers and the musicians and the people in the musical fields.

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...to play, not to get that American touch in there. It should be; well I feel, I like to play them; like someone says, 'Ray, you're a purist.' Well, I like it; it sounds better when it's pure. It just sounds like the real McCoy. Because, you, you got guys who do jazz and everything else on the button accordion that can be done. But fine, if you want to participate in showmanship and so forth. But if you like to portray a genuine Slovenian or Germanic music, then I like to play it the way it's supposed to be.

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PT: Tell how you, how you got started playing.

RP: You mean from the beginning?

PT: Yea.

RP: From the beginning. Well, as youngsters uh, I don't think there was anything as, I don't recall ever hearing the word babysitter until we had, until I was married and we had children and we got babysitters when we had to go someplace, and it was usually my mom and dad. But when I was a youngster, wherever the folks went, I went. And uh whether it was a twentyfifth or fiftieth anniversary party at the Slovenian Hall, or somebody's wedding, or a party, or just visiting at a home, the children went along. Of course, about ten o'clock at night you doze off in either your mother's or father's lap or they put you on the couch or one of the bedrooms or so if they were, you know, having activities elsewhere. But at most of the doings, when I was a youngster, this is the kind of accordion they played, the button accordion....They'd know several old-timers that were my father's and mother's age that were musicians, and they were at most of these. So I usually parked myself right next to the musician. I was running around with the other kids too, to some extent. But when the music started, I was right there. This fascinated me even as far back as I can remember.

And one of our friends, who was maybe four or five years older...this fellow graduated to a piano accordion, and the button accordion was given to my dad for me. And I learned to play it, on my own. You know, I'd watched these old time musicians, I guess to some extent just hearing the

melody, not necessarily watching the fingers, but hearing it, and then going home and fooling around until I found the key and then evolving from there. But I learned to play wrong; I learned to play one row at a time to start with...[plays]...Sometime later, as I was sitting with these, you know, old-time musicians, that, he was getting these beautiful melodies, and I couldn't get on one row. Then I saw that he went across, and I came home and I tried this, and oh! You know, a whole new sphere opened up...I tried that several times and I noticed even then, you know, I was improving.

And by then uh--I was probably about ten or so--and it seemed that everyone was going to piano accordions. At least the interest was going to piano accordions. And a gentleman, who is now deceased, at that time told me, 'Raymond, when you're twenty years old, there will be no more piano accordions. They'll be all buttons.' And in Europe it went that way. Because all the Europeans play chromatics....You don't see hardly any piano accordion players over there....So over there they went to chromatics, and over here we went to piano accordions.

Then I took lessons on the piano accordion, oh, for about two, two, three years....And of course, there the situation was that you learned all theory, and all the classical first; the classics, and then go. I wanted to play popular music, that was popular at that time, and the instructor couldn't see it. He said, 'you got to get your basics first. You got to learn to crawl before you can learn to walk.' And uh, I just decided to rebel a little bit, to drop it for a while. He said, 'if you drop it, you'll never go back.' Well, I did drop it...maybe around high school age or so.

Then thereafter...I went into service...[asked for his accordion to be sent to Maryland; by the time the message was received he was transferred to San Francisco. Made a friend from Ohio with a button accordion; he arranged to borrow a piano accordion for Ray so they could play together.]

...So we would uh, on our weekends and anytime we had time off we would go to the Slovenian neighborhoods and, of course, their young people were off in service, just like we were gone from here, at home. And we were lonesome for others of our nationality, and they were lonesome also, because they had their young people gone, so we were like their substitutes. So when we came there to their, well, there were several boarding houses that we frequented, a bunch of bachelors living there...So we were taken in by them, and this was like our haven. So every weekend we went there and played. We had a good time. They had a good time. People were vying to see whose going to have us uh that night, because everybody wanted us to spend the night with them....

So then when I came back from service...we formed first a duo, I guess....Later on I got in with two brothers who, one with a chromatic accordion and the brother played a banjo and the other fellow played a bass. And we were together for many years. And then, of course, when we married and the family started growing, I felt that my place belonged rather than being on, on Saturday nights and Sundays. It just didn't seem right. And as they got a little older, we started playing again.

By that time the urge to get into one of these started, so I think about early seventies I got the old one out, but that was like a Model T compared to a Rolls Royce of today. It was very, very inexpensive three-row accordion. But it served a purpose at that time. And when you don't have anything else, anything better, why you've got a Rolls Royce. At least you feel that way....and we got other people into the fold, so before you know we got a group started. And we were playing, and uh, gaining an expertise, and having fun. And as I mentioned, we were continuing a tradition and upholding our heritage and preserving it, and also bringing others into the fold that otherwise would never know, uh, what their true heritage and culture was.