

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



Thursday, June 18, 1987 O&E

(OJSC)

Polka Virginia

Radio show host brightens day with ethnic melodies

By Louisa Okrutsky
staff writer

MENTION POLKAS to most people and they'll think of the parodies like the Schmenge Brothers.

Mention polkas to Virginia Janek and she'll reel off names like Big Daddy Lackowski and Eddie Blazonyk.

For Janek, host of WCAR-AM's 6-8 a.m. program, "Good Time Polkas," early morning is as good a time as

any for the sprightly music with homey themes. "If you wake up on a happy note, it makes your whole day happy," said Marylou Janek, WCAR producer/account executive.

For Janek the program has grown into an avocation. Three years ago,

the Canton Township resident had taken a disability retirement from Sears and was finding it difficult to adjust to her new life.

"I went from an active life to a dormant one," she said.

Cajoled by Janek to try out for

the polka program, a nervous Janek auditioned for WCAR program director David Johnson. "I was home about an hour and they called me and asked, 'How about tomorrow morning?'"

THE CRACK of dawn the Tuesday after Memorial Day 1984 found Janek sitting in the station's Garden City parking lot for about 20 minutes wondering, "Oh, my God, what am I doing here?" Figuring she had gone too far to retreat, she walked into the studio and with shaking hands picked out that morning's records. Randy Carr, then the program's engineer, tried to make things easier by making her laugh. "It worked. I even came back the next day."

Since then, she's been answering the phones, talking to regular callers and newcomers, offering on-the-air congratulations for every occasion from births to selling the most Knights of Columbus raffle tickets.

Her on-the-air style has more in common with an old-fashioned talk over the backyard fence than with the glib chatter of pop music DJs.

Almost a family feeling has grown up among her coterie of regular listeners, many of them older women. If a regular hasn't called in a while, Janek dedicates a polka to them, wishing them well. Fans give her small homemade presents.

"For instance, there's Rita. I

talked to her for two years and never met her. Then I met her at a polka party."

She keeps in touch with the music and its fans by attending events, from church fund-raising festivals to elaborate programs such as three days of concerts in Boyne. Her dedication has paid off in ways she couldn't have foreseen. Janek's unpaid position as polka DJ has been a small homecoming in itself.

WHEN SHE grew up in the predominantly Polish neighborhood surrounding St. Hedwig Roman Catholic Church in Detroit during the Depression, English was a second language and polkas were the dance of choice.

"It's inborn," said Janek of her unabashed love for polkas. "I was dancing when I was a tot. My Aunt Helen taught me to dance."

But by the time she was working her way through St. Hedwig's high school as a waitress in a Stouffer's restaurant on Woodward, the wider world was already beckoning.

During the last years of high school, teachers exhorted the students to concentrate on their English language skills to make it easier to enter the working world. As they worked on assimilating, they put behind themselves appreciably portions of their ethnic upbringing.

"I walked away, and you forget. And when you return to it, you realize what you've forgot."



ART EMANUELE/Staff photographer

Virginia Janek of Canton spins polka discs in the early morning, weekdays on WCAR's "Good Time Polkas." Another host, Tom Kopec, appears on the show's "Weekend Edition." The radio station, licensed in Livonia, has its studios in Garden City.

Festival offerings are tuneful

The upcoming Ann Arbor Summer Festival will present musical entertainment ranging from jazz to classical, from folk/pop to contemporary.

In jazz, the festival opens at 8 p.m. Saturday, offering "An Evening With Dave Brubeck." Members of Brubeck's quartet are Randy Jones on drums, Chris Brubeck (Dave's son) on electric bass and trombone and Bill Smith on clarinet.

Brubeck's piano style, his use of odd-metered time signatures and an emphasis on improvisation and harmonic experimentation first captivated jazz audiences more than 40 years ago in San Francisco.

The World Saxophone Quartet makes its first Ann Arbor appearance

at 8 p.m. Friday, July 3. The foursome — Oliver Lake, Julius Hemphill, Hamiet Bluiett and David Murray — began performing as a unit in 1976.

Two pianists with Michigan roots will perform solo recitals of mostly light classical music during the festival. Young pianist Michael Gurt returns to Ann Arbor at 4 p.m. Sunday, June 28, at the Power Center Rehearsal Hall. International artist Louis Nagel, who teaches on the faculty of the University of Michigan, will perform at 4 p.m. Sunday, July 12, in the Power Center Rehearsal Hall.

A Buxtehude Organ Series will feature the works of Danish compos-

er Dietrich Buxtehude played by organists in eight recitals. Performances run daily at 5:15 p.m. from Wednesday-Wednesday, July 8-15, at the First Congregational Church of Ann Arbor.

In pop/folk, singer-songwriter Don McLean comes to the festival at 8 p.m. Tuesday, July 7, in the Power Center. Computer music includes the M.I.D.I. Music Festival, featuring recording artist Bob James and guest performers David Borden and the New Mother Mailed Band. David Gregory and David Swalm, at 8 p.m. Saturday, July 11, in the Power Center.

Tickets for all festival events are on sale at the Michigan Union Ticket

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