Canada’s Mr. Polka

Olaf Sveen

Gaby Haas and Olaf Sveen are perhaps the most prominent of many fine prairie accordionists who should not be forgotten. We featured an interview with Sveen in 28.4. At the time of the interview, I requested Olaf’s portrait of his good friend for the Bulletin, and we are pleased to present it now. Sveen has written articles for publication in Norway in his native language. His English is expressive, and we offer his work with a minimum of editorial modifications, primarily re-ordering. The photographs are from his personal collection, and we are very grateful for the opportunity to use them.

—GW

Gaby Haas was born at Frantiskowy, Czechoslovakia, November 7, 1920. His father was German, an officer in the first World War, and had a job in forestry after the war was over. His mother was Jewish; she was an artist—we still have one of her framed pictures of a mountain scene. Gaby had a brother, Herb, a few years younger. By the time Gaby was about 18 years old, it was scary to live in Europe because of Hitler and the build-up to the second World War, so the family moved to Canada. Later, Gaby told my boy Paul how he got away from the Nazis twice, so Paul asked, “What happened the third time?” I think the answer to that question is that they settled at Loon Lake, Saskatchewan.

I understand that the loon is a bird that likes to be by himself with his mate, and when you hear the loon calling, you know you are in the wilderness. Gaby’s mom told me he was very popular with the girls around Loon Lake, but even so he became restless, and so one day he decided he wanted to move to Vancouver. By that time the big war had broken out. But the story goes that when he came to Edmonton he decided to settle down, for there was plenty to do for a young accordion player. So he joined a band.

They used to play at three different radio stations daily, but they had to change the band’s name every time they got to a new station. Everything was going just fine, the rest of the family moved to Edmonton, and his Dad got a job in the lumber industry. Gaby became a Canadian citizen in 1943. When he came to Canada, he brought a bunch of 78 RPM records with him, and that turned out to be the start of his record shop in Edmonton. He started a couple of radio shows on which he played records, and from 1955 on he was on television: the Noon Show on CFRN was on five days a week. He had one radio show that lasted for a very long time, so he thought maybe he could be in the Guinness Book of Records, but I believe somebody else won.

Gaby was good at languages, he used to read off of record jackets, and to me he could sound like an Italian or even a Scandinavian. He probably was good in French, too; I believe he used to live in France for a while. He had a vast knowledge about music. He had a good memory and knew a lot of music by memory. People used to say “Gaby Haas and his polkas,” like that was all he knew, but that was not true.

He was busy, but when it came to music he was a workaholic. He was always fiddling around, doing something. My daughter Marilyn used to work part-time in his record shop; sometimes she and his mom (who also worked there) could not find a record a customer was asking for, but as soon as Gaby came in the store, he would go and pick out that record immediately. There was no index; everything was in his head. And he had a lot of records; he claimed he had 50,000 78 RPM records, not counting the 45s and Long Playing records. He had everything from polka records to Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos.

He had a wide selection of recordings by our great Norwegian accordionist Toralf Tolløfsehn; as a matter of fact, Gaby was one of his biggest fans. Gaby was also a fan of Art van Damme, the great jazz accordionist, or I should say “accordionist”—there is less cubby-holing of accordion players in the Norwegian language than in English! Nobody plays only one kind of music. Gaby had very little knowledge of Frosini and Deiro, the great Italian-American accordion virtuosos and composers, but that must be because there was little or no demand for their music, though we all tried to play something by those great players in Scandinavia; they even have Frosini fan clubs, despite the fact that he died in the Fifties.\(^2\) The well known accordion player Myron Floren has been on Gaby’s radio show. Floren’s forefathers came from Stjordal, Norway, but he was born in America, so he hardly has any Norwegian accent in his accordion playing.

We cannot forget the fact that Gaby was married and had three kids. The oldest was Pepi, an excellent drummer for the kind of music his Dad played; he is also on some of my records. Gaby’s son Tiger is an electronics man. And then we have lovely Shari, a beautiful girl with a beautiful name. I still have a photo of Shari and my four girls standing on the front lawn; it is not only a nice picture, it also shows how much the trees have grown in twenty years. I have something more to say about Pepi’s drumming. I got the impression that he did not study the drums, he was a natural, so he just played, and he played good.

Much the same can be said about Gaby’s accordion playing. I have heard people say, “Gaby Haas doesn’t know how to play the accordion,” and I have also heard people say
about the great Swedish accordion star, Roland Cedermark, that he can't play the accordion, either. One should not listen to such nonsense. Gaby had his own style when he played, and that is important. The question is, Do all accordion players have their own style?

Gaby played the so-called piano accordion; he called his accordion his "Stomach Steinway" and sometimes his "Belly Baldwin," using the names of famous piano manufacturers. (I have also heard Swedes say, when they talk about the accordion, "the pull and push together instrument.") The reason I say "so-called piano accordion" is that it is only the right hand keyboard that resembles the piano; the accordion also has bellows and bass buttons, and I think it is especially the bellows that often make the pianist have trouble playing the accordion. The bellows are the soul of the accordion.

Few musical instruments come in as many varieties as the accordion. First of all we have the chromatic accordion, where you press a key and the sound is the same whether you push or pull the bellows. Diatonic accordions have a different sound when you pull or push the bellows. On chromatic button accordions you use three rows when you play. In Scandinavia we call accordions with the note C on the first row the "Swedish system," the ones with B on the first row the "Norwegian system," although this is not a very complete explanation. There are also accordions with melody notes on both ends of the bellows, and accordions with free bass and with Stradella bass. One kind of accordion has a right hand keyboard that looks like the keyboard on a piano, but is in reality a button accordion! And now we have electronic accordions and musette accordions.

Gaby was called "Mr. Polka." One time when I was in Calgary promoting my own records, a lady came to me and asked me, "Where do polkas come from?" I told her it was a lively dance that came from central Europe in the beginning of the 1800s. She explained to me that it says in the Bible that there is nothing new under the sun, so they must have danced the polka in the early days in the jungle. But we must also remember that there are many ways to dance the polka!

Gaby died in 1987. I came back from Norway in July and was asked to come and see him in the hospital. He always was a romantic person, and his life story for some reason always reminds me of Edgar Allan Poe's poem about Annabel Lee.

Photographs courtesy of Olaf Sven
Notes

1 Edmonton radio station CKUA felt that Haas did indeed preside over "The Longest-Running Radio Program in the World," a phrase used by N. Breuer and J. Rollans to title their profile of the accordionist in A Sound For All Seasons, published by the station to commemorate its 60th anniversary in 1987. In 1946, the same year he began Continental Musica, which lasted until his death, Haas also performed on Alberta Ranch House, a CKUA program, carried over much of the nation by CBC, in the company of King Ganam. When Ganam left, Alberta Ranch House became Barn Dance Gang and featured Haas.

Another Alberta candidate for the title would be Calgary's CFCN Old Timers, who also broadcast for several decades in the middle of the century. However, although the Old Timers name was retained from the late Twenties until 1981, the personnel of the band changed radically during those years, and there were two, arguably three, leaders, each with unique personalities. See George W. Lyon, "The CFCN Old Timers: Part One" Old Time Country 8.4 (Winter 1993) and "The CFCN Old Timers: Part Two" Old Time Country 9.1&2 (Spring/Summer 1993).

2 Pietro Frosini & Pietro Deiro were international masters of the accordion whose names have been lost to the general public during the accordion's Dark Ages (see Ian Wallace's lament upon this in "The Accordion—The People's Instrument," Bulletin (1992) 26.3). Frosini, born in Italy in 1885, died in New York in 1951, was the composer of numerous light classical and vaudeville pieces, with such titles as "The Sunkissed Waltz" and "Sicilian Shore." Deiro is credited by Joseph Macerollo, Canadian accordionist and teacher, with introducing the piano accordion into the United States in 1900 (Accordion Resource Manual [Toronto]: Avondale, 1980).

During my first interview with Tony Neidermayer of the CFCN Old Timers, I lost a great deal of credibility when I failed to recognize a reference to another composer for the accordion, Anthony Galla-Rini. "Don't know Galla-Rini? You must not be too up on your music." Galla-Rini (best known for his impersonation of a harmonica on the sound track to High Noon) was the first to conduct master classes in the instrument and to give formal accordion recitals. His compositions include two concertos for accordion and orchestra. Born in Connecticut in 1904, Galla-Rini is still alive and has been a featured performer at the Kimberley International Old Time Accordion Championships in July. (For more information about this annual event, write Box 473, Kimberley, BC, V1A 3B9).

None of these composer/instrumentalists are given space in the 20-volume New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (London: Macmillan, 1980). In the small space parsimoniously given to the instrument, a number of highbrow composers are cited as having composed "suites, concertos, and other concert works" for the accordion, including Robert Russell Bennett, Roy Harris, Alan Hovhaness, William Grant Still, Virgil Thomson, and one of the authors of the article itself. None of these are accordionists.

3 Olaf is careful to note that Haas played the piano accordion because he himself plays the chromatic button accordion. For many people, of course, "accordion" simply means "piano accordion."

4 The Stradella bass system, referred to also as a "fixed bass," offers the player's left hand a set of bass notes and chords in fixed (and necessarily limited) patterns; the free bass accordion offers only single notes, from which the player may construct his own chords. There are accordions which combine the two concepts.

5 The Encyclopedia of Music in Canada credits Haas with 50 albums and 60 singles. As far as I can find, these have not been reissued on CD and are not available except in flea markets. (Do I still hear the echo of a Society project in the distance?) I believe that there are one or two compilations of his old time accordion compositions still in print. Breuer and Rollans claimed that he'd produced 57 LPs as of 1986. Not only was he prolific in the studio, Haas produced albums of considerable variety, some on European themes, some featuring a potpourri of old time waltzes, polkas, and breakdowns (one LP, recorded with his CFRN Chuckwagon Gang, opens with a creditable "Black Mountain Rag"), and at least one of prairie Ukrainian music. His records are still listenable and deserve to be reissued.

6 Horst A. Schmid, a prominent Alberta MLA and cabinet member during the Lougheed and Ghetty years, wrote liner notes to at least one Sveen LP, which was entitled Olaf Sveen at the Hofbrauhaus, and featured a photo of Sveen onstage at the restaurant on the cover (as well as a photo of Sveen and Haas on the back). The album was not recorded on location.