

*Forewords by Willie Nelson, Bobby Vinton, and Bill Anderson*

# POLKA KING

The Life and Times of Polka Music's Living Legend



18-Time Grammy Winner

**JIMMY  
STURR**



# 12

## Polish Hall Madness



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**B**eing an entrepreneurial spirit—and being the kind of guy who gets antsy if I have too much free time on my hands—I took almost every musical job that came my way: outdoor festivals, fairs, weddings, bar mitzvahs, and anything else. If somebody wanted polka, I'd happily supply it. The type of affair meant nothing to me because as far as I was concerned, if people wanted to hear polka music, who was I to refuse them? That said, one of my favorite things to do was to create jobs that hadn't previously existed, to have people hire me when they didn't even know they wanted or needed a band.

For instance, a friend of mine, Gussie Zygmunt, owned a bar just outside of Florida called the Crystal Inn. The Crystal was busy almost every day of the year, except the evenings you wouldn't expect a bar to be busy, like late on Christmas night, or the evening of New Year's Day, or Easter Sunday night. It dawned on me that somewhere out in Florida and points beyond, there might be some people looking to cap off their holiday celebration with some polka, so one Thanksgiving night, I asked Gussie if he'd be interested in having a scaled-down version of my band—a trio rather than the full octet—play for a few hours.

Once word got out around town, polka fans were waiting outside for hours until they could squeeze into the restaurant. We'd start playing at 10 p.m. and go until 2 a.m. or beyond, just me, an accordion player, and a drummer. We'd blow through

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medley after medley, taking on such polka classics as “Ballroom Polka,” “Jasui,” “Oh Dana,” “Apples, Peaches, Pumpkin Pie,” “Clarinet Polka,” “Violins Play For Me,” “Caroline Polka,” “Tic-Tock Polka,” “Siwy Kon,” “Saxo Polka,” “Pennsylvania Polka,” “My-T-Peppy Polka,” “Our Mary,” “Tam Pod Krakowem,” “Our Gang,” “Hosa Horasa,” “Wish I Were Single Again,” “Red Lantern,” “Hu-La-La Polka,” “Apples Polka,” “Rising Sun Polka,” “Domino Polka,” “Zlonczki Na Lacze,” “Happy Birthday Polka,” “Fire Polka,” and “Na Zdrowie/Lovers Polka.” The crowds drank and danced and drank and sang along and drank some more. A ripping good time was had by all.

And those were some big money gigs! I paid my sidemen twenty dollars each, and since I was the leader, I gave myself twenty-five dollars.

But bar jobs were far from the norm. Before I started winning Grammy Awards, the majority of my gigs were dances, and the majority of the dances were wedding receptions that were held at dance halls, or as they were referred to around our area, Polish halls. These Polish halls were generally big, empty spaces that held about three hundred people. Most of them weren’t particularly fancy or ornate—they didn’t have chandeliers or bay windows or gold leaf on the ceiling, but rather they were simple, no-frills places where you could host a raucous party.

As Jimmy Sturr and his Orchestra grew in popularity, we played fewer and fewer Polish hall gigs, which was bittersweet. On one hand, it was wonderful to take the next step up the ladder of the music world, to perform for three, or four, or ten, or a hundred times as many listeners. On the other hand, there was something special about the intimacy of helping a bridal party celebrate its magical day.

(A brief digression for you audiophiles out there. Very, very few of those Polish clubs came equipped with a sound system,

so we had to haul our own P.A. from show to show. That was an arduous task, but at least we knew that the shows would be well mixed. Today, even though the majority of our performances are at venues that feature their own sound systems, we still always take that unwieldy P.A. system with us, just in case the one waiting for us isn't satisfactory. I'll always take that route because I *never* want anybody to come up to me after a show and say, "You guys sure looked good up there, but I couldn't hear a thing.")

There were things that happened at Polish clubs that could never happen at, say, the Grand Ole Opry. One night, while this then twenty-one-year-old was still living at home with my parents, I was playing a show at an armory not too far from the house. It was a special evening for me because one of my close friends from New Jersey—a friend whom I didn't see nearly enough—had made the drive up. I put a little something extra into my performance that night because I wanted to make sure he felt the trip had been worthwhile.

After the show, a beautiful young woman sidled up to me, put her hand on my arm, and, in a breathy voice, told me, "I really loved your band. *Really* loved it."

We spoke for about ten minutes, then, being young and brazen, I gave her my parents' address and phone number—my parents were out of town that week—and said, "Come on over in a couple of hours. The back door is unlocked. Come in, go up the stairs, and my bedroom is the first door to the left."

Her eyes lit up. She said, "Okay. I'll see you soon." Then she gave me a kiss on the cheek and skipped off.

A minute later, my Jersey friend wandered over and said, "She was cute. Listen, I'm starved. Let's go grab some grub."

"Sounds good to me," I said, and off we went to a nearby diner. After a two-plus-hour meal filled with bad jokes, great laughter, and a couple of drinks, I looked at my watch and said, "You know

what? It's after midnight. It'd be ridiculous for you to drive all the way back up to Jersey. My parents are out of town, and I have the place to myself. How about you come on back to the house and stay the night. You can have my room. I'll take my parents' bed."

"Jimmy," my pal slurred, "you're a prince among men."

By the time we got home, it was well after 2 a.m. I set up my friend in my bedroom, then, exhausted and possibly a tad inebriated, I staggered into my parents' bed. I was asleep before my head hit the pillow. About two hours later, the phone rang. *Who the hell's calling at this hour*, I wondered, then picked up the handset and grumbled, "H'lo."

"Where were you?!" It was a female voice, and that voice wasn't the least bit happy.

I rubbed my eyes and asked, "Whozis?"

"I'm the girl you met at the dance, dummy. Where were you? I went to your house, just like you said, and I went up to your room, just like you said, and I got undressed, and got into your bed, and it wasn't you!"

I sat up as if I'd been stabbed in the backside with a knitting needle. "What happened when you got into the bed?"

"Nothing! He didn't even wake up!" She hung up on me, hard. Unsurprisingly, I never heard from her again.

And then there was a dance we played in Brooklyn, New York.

It was Halloween night, and our drummer was sick as could be, but, as would be the case with pretty much anyone in the band, he sucked it up and made the gig. Not only did he show up ready to play but he had enough energy to put on a Halloween costume. (For some reason, he decided to dress as a colonial aristocrat, complete with a three-pointed hat and knickers. I still have no idea why.)

When he got onto the bus, the rest of the guys gave him a long, sarcastic round of applause. Coughing, he said, "Thank

you, thank you, thank you. So listen, guys, I have this killer cold and just got these new covers for my drums, so be careful.”

When we got to the club, our revolutionary war hero set up his drum set, and, with the help of a couple of band members, neatly piled his cases behind his kit. Much to his credit—and much to my pleasure and relief—he rose to the occasion and played wonderfully.

During the show, in between songs, one of my instrumentalists, who shall remain nameless, tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Jimmy, give me a few minutes before the next song. I’ve gotta take a leak.”

I said, “Why didn’t you go before we went on stage?” (Sometimes being a bandleader is like being a kindergarten teacher.)

One look into his bloodshot, watery eyes and it was quite apparent that he’d downed a drink or five. Great. “I dunno,” he mumbled. “I just didn’t. It’ll take, like, one minute.”

“We have to keep playing. Take your seat,” I said, then I counted off the next tune.

He glared at me, then stomped behind the band, unzipped his fly, and began to urinate . . . all over the drummer’s new cases. The drummer left the covers on the stage. I can’t say I blamed him, because who wants to walk around with urine-soaked drum covers?

We had some great times at those Polish halls and tiny clubs of the Northeast; while some of those shows could be frustrating, I wouldn’t trade the experiences for anything. But after the Grammys started coming in, that sort of monkey business mostly went right out the window.

