

# South Texas POLKA PARTY

## 16 Polka Instrumentals



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2. **Narciso Martínez:** LA CHICHARONERA (Narciso Martínez) (2:33)
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Edited and produced by Chris Strachwitz.  
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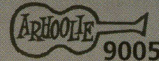
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# SOUTH TEXAS POLKA PARTY

## 16 POLKA INSTRUMENTALS

**with:** Narciso Martínez  
Conjunto Bernal  
Tony De La Rosa  
Ricardo Guzman  
Juan López  
Beto Villa  
Valerio Longoria  
Fred Zimmerle  
Pedro Ayala  
Agapito Zúñiga  
and others



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## 16 Polka Instrumentals

**Polka** is simply the Polish word for a Polish woman, and according to Webster's dictionary it is also "a vivacious hopping dance of Bohemian origin performed by two persons." Up north they still do considerable hopping at Polish dances but in the heat of south Texas, polka dancing has evolved to be very smooth, with couples gliding effortlessly counterclockwise around the dance floor, much like the two-steppers at Cajun dances over in Louisiana before the yuppie dance instructors told them how to dance! However, out in the country or in less elegant cantinas and dancehalls you can still often observe and enjoy vigorous footwork. The recent *banda* craze has put a more lambada influenced ath-

letic twist to polka dancing throughout Mexican America. The polka has certainly come a long way since its origins with a Bohemian girl's personal interpretation of a Polish *krakowiak* in the 19th century.

Over a hundred and fifty years ago, working class people throughout Europe felt frustrated and shackled by the horrid working conditions thrust upon them by the developing industrial-capitalist factory system and the related sweat shops. Nor did farm work under feudalism offer any more personal liberty. Revolution was in the air, but was seldom successful on a political level. However, social dancing, especially the polka, became a revolutionary expression. The exuberant dance steps and

the rhythm of the polka seemed just the right spark to set off the polka revolution in the 1830s. It started in Bohemia where the above mentioned unknown girl gave her interpretation of a Polish woman dancing a *krakowiak*. From Bohemia the polka quickly hopped over to Vienna and by March of 1844 it had arrived in Paris, France. There, like everywhere else, the elite introduced the craze, but soon abandoned it to the working class.

Only a few decades earlier the waltz had appeared in Austria with couples dancing daringly close together, holding and looking at each other intimately. The church called the waltz scandalous and indecent and their views about the polka were even less flattering. Fortunately the freedom and joy of humanity prevailed, and social dancing with all its extroversion and sexuality was here to stay. Subsequent dance crazes have come and gone from

the Cuban Danzón, the American Charleston, the Argentinian Tango, to rock and roll with all sorts of variants along the way. Over the years however, the waltz and the polka have continued to be remarkably popular and vigorous, especially in the United States, due perhaps to their taking deep roots among working class communities. Some folks suggest that as the upper classes or fashionable society, belittle or frown upon certain dances or musical genres, the more those traditions become dear to the lower and working classes.

The polka came to Texas from western and central Europe in the middle of the 19th century and danced its way throughout North America and into Mexico. According to the introduction to the delightful book "Polka Happiness" about the Polka in Polish America by Charles & Angeliki Keil and Dick Blau (Temple University Press — Phila-

delphia) the polka had no specific peasant dance as its antecedent—it was an urban style from the start. The authors feel that it probably began as a simplified and stereotyped Czech version of how Polish women danced a regional style called the *krakowiak*.

By March of 1844 polka mania had hit Paris and everyone who wasn't totally stuffy was dancing the polka in the streets. Polka madness spread to Bordeaux and other French cities and a few weeks later hit London. From those two western fashion centers the polka soon spread all over the world. Industrial capitalism and monarchical rule were making life miserable for the average working stiff and many felt burdened and oppressed. Revolution was in the air, and many men refused to be conscripted into the various rivalrous and feuding royal armies. Hundreds of thousands, especially from central Europe, the Austro-Hungarian Empire in-

cluding Bohemia, various German kingdoms, Italy, Poland, and the Ukraine, emigrated to the United States. Many of them found their way to Texas which still belonged to Mexico and was welcoming Europeans to settle in the area. Maximilian was declared emperor of Mexico in 1864 and the Mexican elite soon fell in love with European culture — including the polka!

By the second half of the 19th century Monterrey, in the northern Mexican state of Nuevo León, had acquired a substantial German community which was especially active in developing industry, including the art of brewing beer! Several older musicians have told me that accordions were widely and cheaply available at the commissary store of one of the major breweries in Monterrey. I have also been told that the Hohner accordion company, with headquarters in the

German state of Saxony, had very active and aggressive distributors and sales agents not only in Mexico but also in San Antonio and other parts of the United States. I believe the polka and the accordion arrived about the same time in the Texas-Mexican border region and came from three main directions: from Mexico City and Monterrey, N.L., where the latest European fashions and crazes were joyfully received; from Texas, where Germans, Czechs, Italians and other Europeans were welcomed as settlers; and direct from Europe, where the accordion industry, especially at the Hohner plant, was extremely well organized and actively pursuing expanding overseas markets.

Society folks soon tried to smooth out the polka, as did Lawrence Welk, a hundred years later here in the US, but wherever the polka sank roots, it did so primarily as a working class music. In Mexico the polka probably was just

one of many fashionable and popular dances among the urban sophisticates who loved to keep up with the latest trends from Europe and the USA. After the demise of poor Maximilian, the Díaz regime actively promoted Mexican music and the repertoire of the *orquestas típicas* included many polkas, especially by Mexican composers. While most of the orchestras which supplied the music at dances and balls in the urban centers were large, utilizing strings, horns, reeds, brass, percussion and intricate arrangements, the poor ranch hands and field workers out in the vast countryside soon took to the cheap, sturdy and loud button accordion! Although many a lone fiddler probably played many a country dance by himself, the new kid on the block with his accordion had more volume and could play melody and rhythm at the same time. The accordion was also cheap, easy to carry, and

sturdy as a rock!

Although the accordion was at first almost exclusively used to provide dance music, by the early 1930s it began to take hold as an accompanying instrument for the popular duet singers who could now be heard clearly over the radio and on the phonograph. Although the button accordion seemed perfectly designed for the polka, it was also quite adequate for most other regional dances popular in the Mexican-American border region, like the mazurka, schottish, redova, huapango, danzón, march, waltz and more recently even the bolero and cumbia. Because of the polka's popularity, many new songs were composed in that rhythm which along with the waltz, became the basis for most rancheras. The film and music industry generated country songs which even today dominate Mexican popular music. The polka and the accordion were indeed revo-

lutionary. They challenged and almost wiped out all other dances and instruments which preceded them.

The polka's continuing 20th century popularity can in part be attributed to the release of one specific record, the "Beer Barrel Polka," which was recorded in the mid-1930s by the German/Ukrainian accordionist and orchestra leader, Will Glahe. Widely distributed by the Victor company throughout the world, the record sold millions of copies. In many juke box operator's opinions this hit record revitalized the entire music business during the Great Depression. Almost every polka band and even many popular orchestras recorded their own versions, some even with lyrics, like the Andrew Sisters', and helped to bring the polka into the mainstream of American popular music. In the 1940s and 50s names like Frankie Yankovic, "Whoopie John" Wilfahrt, the Six Fat

Dutchmen, and Lawrence Duchow along with the corny but immensely popular Lawrence Welk, became household names and their records were heard over major radio stations even in San Francisco and Los Angeles, far from their home bases in Wisconsin, Illinois, or Michigan.

Simultaneously the polka was stirring up a storm down in south Texas and soon all over Mexican America. Between the late 1940s and the early 60s, most of the musicians on this collection had become household names along the border. They were heard at dances in small cantinas, at fiestas, and in big ballrooms, and their records

were heard on thousands of juke boxes and radio stations and could be found in just about every Spanish-speaking household. Names like Narciso Martínez, Conjunto Bernal, Beto Villa, Tony De La Rosa, and Valerio Longoria were as well known in south Texas as Frankie Yankovic and Whoopie John up in Minnesota. Although most of the groups heard on this collection are accordion *conjuntos*, I have included a few examples of *orquestas tejanas* as well as *mariachi*, which are generally more favored by the middle class. If you enjoy certain artists in particular, you will find that many are represented with full CDs in the Arhoolie catalog.

(Chris Strachwitz - 1997)

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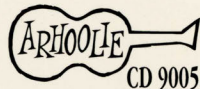
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