

DIALECT SONGS AMONG THE DUTCH

Oh, I am bound for Wisconsin, that's right among the Dutch,
And as for conversation, it won't be very much,
But by signs and by signals I'll make them understand
That the spirit of good nature lies in this Irishman.

So went Michael Cassius Dean's version of "The Roving Irishman" (Dean 1922 :124-125). The Dutch invoked do not hail from the Netherlands, but from German-speaking realms, with "dutch" deriving from "deutsch." As an Irish American, Dean likely learned this traditional song during his stint as an Upper Midwestern lumberjack and Great Lakes sailor. Perhaps he docked a time or two in Sheboygan where, according to a poem from that Wisconsin city, St. Patrick not only visited Irish Americans but also encountered Germans aplenty. Before returning to Ireland, the good saint "took some bratwurst and kuchen to eat along the way" (Hachten 1981:106).

Growing up in an Irish American family in northern Wisconsin, I too ate my share of "bratwurst and kuchen," while going to school with assorted Birkenmeiers, Schaubslagers, Schieffers, Schneiders, and Tschernachs. We kids all spoke the same "up north" English, but our grandparents in many cases might've resorted to "signs and signals," perhaps when passing a dish at a church picnic, a threshing dinner, or a country school social. And just as roving Irishmen cast songs about such experiences in an immigrant's brogue, so also did "dutch" or German men and women perform dialect songs about their inter-cultural encounters. Dialect songs concerning the nation's newcomers are widespread and long-lived in American life, yet the scholarly conversation on them is scant and scattered. In hopes of stimulating further inquiry, my remarks will outline the genre's features, sketch its nineteenth century emergence "among the Dutch" or Germans of eastern urban America, and demonstrate its persistence to the present in America's Upper Midwest.

The Nature of Dialect Songs

"Dialect Songs" are common in pluralistic or multi-cultural societies throughout the world and have been particularly evident in the United States where they exhibit recurring, overlapping features.

1) Although they are sung chiefly in English they depart from Standard American English to communicate in what is popularly recognized as a distinctive dialect. To be sure, all speech is fundamentally dialect and the dialect of any speaker typically combines regional, class, and ethnic elements, but from a mainstream perspective certain dialects are perceived to be "dialects," while others are regarded as "proper" or "normal" or "regular" speech. The dialects common in American dialect songs are on the "colored" side of the racial divide, the "country" side of rural/urban demarcations, or the "foreign" side of ethnic/American boundaries. Dialect songs by and about African Americans have had the greatest scrutiny, especially as performed by blackfaced white men on the minstrel stage (e.g. Toll 1974, Lott 1993, Mahar 1999), but also as enjoyed by black men and women from the rural South (Wolfe 1991). Songs rendered in and calling attention to the speech of rustic, mostly Southern Anglo-Americans have also received considerable attention (e.g. Green 1965, Malone 2002:173-175). The relatively neglected Dutch songs considered here are in a creolized English that, to invoke vernacular characterizations, has

been “broken,” “fractured,” and “mangled” through collisions with an immigrant’s native tongue.

In Dutch dialect songs, to cite prominent examples of pronunciation only, certain English sounds are invariably rendered in their German equivalent: “w” becomes “v” (e.g. “ve,” “vell,” “vas”), “th” becomes “d” (“dat,” “dose,” “dere”), “s” becomes “sch” (“schtyle,” “schmelt,” “schtick”), and “j” becomes “ch” or “sh” (“chust,” “chumped,” “cholly”).

2) The English of “foreign”-inflected dialect songs is often infused with residual words and phrases from the old country. In Dutch dialect songs, the predominant holdovers from the German language are words that nearly match their English equivalents in meaning, sound, and spelling: “mein” (mine), “bin” (been), “alt” (old), “mit” (with), “du” (you), “und” (and), “bier” (beer), and so on. Such exclamations or intensifiers as “Ach!” and “Ja!” (rendered “Ya!” or “Yah!”) often carry over, as do loan words like “sauerkraut” and “wurst.” Occasionally, in areas where non-German speakers have frequently encountered the native tongue of their German neighbors, phrases entirely in German are interspersed with English, as in this field recording of Noble Brown performing “My Fadder Was A Dutchman,” Millville, Wisconsin, 1946.

My fadder was a Dutchman,
Das sprechen verstehst du?
My fadder was a Dutchman,
Verstehst du? Yah! Yah!
(Peters 1975:46)

3) While the speech in dialect songs often closely resembles the creolized everyday speech of bilingual immigrants, it is nonetheless heightened, theatricalized, exaggerated, put-on. Typical singers of and audiences for dialect songs are not only adept at broken speech, but fluent in English or nearly so. Indeed the excessive dialect in dialect songs is seldom, sometimes never, used by the singer in everyday life, rather it has been assumed for the performance. In some dialect songs, like “Jump Fritz, I Feed You Liver,” the ability to shift effortlessly between mainstream and marginal speech is especially emphasized by singers who impersonate both American-born and immigrant characters.

4) Because dialect songs require command of broken and standard English alike, they have often been performed, consumed, and otherwise embraced by seasoned first generation immigrants, with their appeal frequently extending to the second generation and beyond within an immigrant/ethnic group. As such, they are signs of cultural experiences and identity, past and present. Among German Americans, their duration is especially extended in areas where peoples of German descent settled in sufficient numbers to establish and sustain an evolving ethnic American way of life.

5) Although ethnic insiders often constitute their core audience, dialect songs, like dialect jokes, have also been fostered by ethnic outsiders for reasons that may range from friendliness to hostility, from attraction and identification to the desire to create social distance. In urban and rural areas marked by cultural diversity, the Anglo, Irish, and Jewish American neighbors of German Americans have been particularly active in performing and otherwise embracing “Dutch” dialect songs.

6) Dialect songs draw upon longstanding stereotypes which exist in an array of other genres (e.g. jokes, proverbs, taunts, cartoons) and, in the case of European immigrants, are derivative from ethnic stereotypes persisting before a particular group’s American experience. For the most part, the Dutch of dialect songs are neither rapacious Prussians, nor pietistic Lutherans. Rather they are stout, good-natured, musical, hard-working, slow-witted, and frumpy folk, fond of beer,

pretzels, sauerkraut, sausages, and small elongated dogs (Allen 1983:57, Roback 1944:161-177). [See Figure 1.]



Figure 1: Touring in Milwaukee, postcard, ca. 1900

with aforementioned stereotypes, the Dutch of dialect songs try to keep in “schtyle” while courting in beer gardens and swirling to oompah bands. More than a few are sausage makers whose dogs are mysteriously rendered into wurst.

8) As musical performances, many dialect songs rely on the folk tunes and old time instrumentation of the featured cultural group. Perhaps as many, however, rely on the popular music of the day. From their widespread proliferation in nineteenth century America to their lesser but nonetheless steadfast presence in the twenty-first century, dialect songs have embodied the contemporary sounds of succeeding eras. Their distinctive language and content aside, Dutch dialect songs in American life are predictably clothed in polka and waltz tempos rendered by brass bands or squeezebox players, yet their sonic wardrobe also includes genteel parlor ditties, rag time, rock, and rap.

10) Situated commonly at the margin of mainstream American popular culture—in ethnic enclaves and in localities where diverse peoples contend and cooperate—dialect songs occasionally move to the national culture’s center either for seasonal reasons or, more often, because of some larger event or movement. In 1948 the Scandinavian American dialect singer Yogi Yorgeson (the stage name of Harry Stewart) sold more than a million copies of “I Yust Go Nuts at Christmas” (Gronow 1982:25). The Christmas holiday invariably stirs recognition of German musical contributions to American life through such songs as “Stille Nacht” and “O Tannenbaum.” These songs, however, are almost invariably sung in English as “Silent Night” and “O Christmas Tree” without a hint of stagey dialect and comic feeling.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, the highly visible and distinctive participation of Germanic peoples in American life contributed to the widespread popularity of “The Dutch Warbler” and “Dunderbeck.” The former, penned by Septimus Winner to the tune of the old German folksong “Im Lauterbach hab’ ich mein Strumpf verloren,” is still known by its first line, “Oh Where, Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone?” The unfortunate hound’s fate is predictable.

Un sausage is goot, bolonie of course,
Oh where, oh where can he be?
Dey makes um mit dog, und dey makes um mit horse,

7) The characters in dialect songs are cast as eccentrics and strangers in a strange land. Their blundering behavior generally involves love and romance within the context of ethnic and class divisions, as well as encounters with unfamiliar technology and customs. The stress on difficulties with the new often implies that old ways are backwards, indicative of isolation, lesser intelligence, and either a stubborn resistance to modernity or an innate inability to adapt however willing one might be. Occasionally harsh and condemnatory, the prevailing tone of dialect songs is gently indulgent and comic. In keeping

I guess dey makes um mit he. (Loesser 1942:149)

Nor do Dutch and their dogs fare much better in “Dunderbeck,” involving a German sausage maker who invented a steam-powered meat-grinder. He ground up “kitten cats and long-tailed rats” or, in the version called “Johnny Verbeck” that I learned as a Boy Scout in the early 1960s, “all the neighbors cats and dogs.” One night the machine broke down and, after he crawled in to make repairs, his sleep-walking wife “grabbed the crank and gave it a yank, and Dunderbeck was meat” (Spaeth 1927:90; see also Randolph 1980:253).

During World War II Walt Disney commissioned Oliver Wallace to compose “Der Fuehrer’s Face” as the soundtrack for film originally imagined as “Donald Duck in Nutziland.” Recorded by Spike Jones and the City Slickers, “Der Fuehrer’s Face” became a national hit emanating from radios and jukeboxes. Disney’s 1943 film was sensibly issued with the same title as the song.

A German “oom-pah” band parades through town extolling the “virtues” of the Fuehrer with the title song. They awaken Donald Duck who has to go to work in a Nazi munitions factory, much to his regret. Luckily in the end, after a frantic workday trying to alternate between making bombs and saluting Hitler, he finds that it has all been a nightmare and that he is still living in the good old U.S

(<http://www.geocities.com/derfuehrerspage>).

Set mostly in Germany, not German America, the song would appear to lie outside the realm of Dutch dialect songs. Yet Donald Duck’s old country nightmare and his relief upon waking in America likely conveyed the perspective and sentiments of many German Americans. Indeed the singer on Jones’ recording, Carl Grayson, was the son of Swiss and German immigrants. The Jones band also included trumpeter George Rock, an Upper Midwesterner and veteran of that region’s Freddie “Schnickelfritz” Fisher band, as well as violinist Carl Grayson, the son of Swiss and German immigrants. It was Grayson who put on his best Dutch dialect to deliver raucous anti-fascist lyrics, complete with flatulent raspberries.

We bring the world to order.

Heil Hitler’s new world order . . .

When der Fuehrer says “We ist der master race,”

We HEIL! (phhht!) HEIL (phhht!) right in der Fuehrer’s face.

More recently, the foregoing “new world order” phrase, promoted in the early 1990s by George Herbert Walker Bush, has inspired a Dutch dialect about George W. Bush, “Der Dubya’s Face,” with twenty-first century lyrics by Lee Templeton:

We bring der New World Order.

Heil Poppy’s New World Order! . . .

When der Dubya says “I von the President’s Race.”

We HEIL (Phht) HEIL! (Phht) right in der Dubya’s Face . . .

(<http://bootnewt.tripod.com/derdubyasface.htm>)

The Emergence of Dutch Dialect Songs

Dutch dialect songs, like other dialect songs with which they share aforementioned features, have been transmitted in print through sheet music and songsters, via stage performances, by means of commercial sound recordings, through occasional films like *Der Fuehrer’s Face*, and

by word-of-mouth amidst social events. They have also coexisted and intertwined with a broader continuum of Dutch American humor cast in such forms as joke books; jocular phrases, jokes, and recitations in oral tradition; the exaggerated costumes, actions, and expressions of stage performers; and an array of photographs, sketches, and cartoons.

Carl Wittke's classic 1952 essay, "The Immigrant Theme on the American Stage," devotes some 5½ pages to German or Dutch figures in American humor in what, unfortunately, is the most comprehensive prior work on the subject. From Wittke, from a handful of lesser sources, and from the holdings of assorted research collections, we know that Colonial and early Republic jokebooks and comic almanacs featured a smattering of Dutch characters, chiefly Hollanders from New York and Pennsylvania Germans (Wittke 1952:223; see also Dodge 1987:76-78). Subsequent waves of immigration by German speaking peoples from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century spawned such publications devoted to Dutch dialect humor as William J. Crossley's *The Jolly Dutchman: A Potpourri of Humor and Pathos* (Trenton, New Jersey: 1887); *Dutch Jokes and Funny Yarns* (Philadelphia: Royal, 1902); and *Dutch Dialect Recitations, Readings, and Jokes* (Chicago: Drake, 1903).

While a handful of songs were lodged amidst the jokes, yarns, and recitations of these pamphlets, they filled the pages of a far larger spate of songsters. Dutch dialect songs and related forms of humor

portrayed Germans as hard-working, practical people. Usually played for good-natured comedy, robust German women and burly men, speaking "Dutch" dialect, indulged their immense appetite for sauerkraut, sausage, cheese, pretzels, and beer (Toll 1974:173; see also Loesser 1942:145).

Cheaply printed in small press runs, ephemeral, and seldom collected by libraries, songsters have much to tell us about vernacular American song. The Library of Congress, fortunately, has gathered a considerable trove and, while no formal listing of Dutch songsters exists, a fair indication of their ubiquity can be gauged from scholars like Guthrie T. Meade who drew from the Library's holdings to create a biblio-discography of recorded traditional music (2002).

Meade lists twenty-nine songsters, published from 1870-1906 that have obvious or probable "Dutch" content and emphasis. From Henry Taylor and Company, NYC: *The Jolly Dutchman Songster* (1870). [See Figure 2.] From Robert M. DeWitt Publishing, #33 Rose Street, NYC (1861-1886): *Gus Williams' Love Among Big Nozes Songster* (1870); *Gus Williams' Still I Don't Vas Habby Songster* (1872); *Gus Williams' My Gel Snyder Songster* (1872); *Gus Williams' German Band Songster* (1873); *Gus Williams' Jakey Woolfenstein Songster* (1876); and *Charles Konollman's Popular Dutch Comique Songster* (1881). From the A.J. Fisher Company, no place given: *C.L. Davis' Dutch Song and Dance Book* (1875); *Jakey Wolfingstein Songster* (1876); *Robert McKay's Since Der Band Vas Broken Up*



The Jolly Dutchman Songster: Containing A Variety Of Comic, Dutch Comic And Serio Comic Songs As Sung By Charlie Kimic And The Most Popular Vocalists Of New York. New York, 1870.

Figure 2: The Jolly Dutchman Songster

Songster (1878); *Murphy and Shannon's [The Original German Team] Klum Songster* (1879); *Charles A. Loder's Such An Appetite Has Got My Caterine Songster* (1879); *Murphy and Shannon's Kiss De Baby Songster* (1879); *Bonnie Runnel's Great Dutch Burlesque Songster* (1880); *Morris & Field's Burlesque German Songster* (1882); and *Virginia Trio's Dutch Niggers Songster* (1883). From *The Desirable Dime Song Book* (1880-1882), Mrs. Pauline Lieder, #60 Chatham Street, NYC (succeeded by her son, William J.A. Lieder, in 1881): *Dutch Mendel's [Harry and Leonie] Going to Germany Songster* (1881); *The Sheehan's America, Ireland & Germany Songster* (1882); and *Billy Mendel & Bertha Trent's Ireland Vs. Germany Songster* (1882). From New York Popular Publishing Company, 32 Beekman Street, NYC, A.J. Dick, Manager "The Favorite Dime Song Book": *Charles Konollman's Bound for Germany Songster* (1878); *Watson & Ellis' Dutchy in a Fix Songster* (1878); *Charles Konollman's German Fun at Union Hill Songster* (1879); *Charles Konollman's LardyDar Songster* (1880); *John Allen's Haus Un De Rhine Songster* (1881); *Harris & Wood's Mr. & Mrs. Grousemier Songster* (188?); *The Dutch Mendel's Bewildered Dutchman Songster* (188?); *Howard and Sandford's German Candidate's Songster* (1882); and *J.W. Heitinger's The German Prince Songster* (188?). And from W.W. Delaney, NYC, *My Little Dutch Colleen Songster* (1906). Meanwhile Kelly Wilson's listing of titles found in singing clown songsters published between the 1860s and 1890s—"Kaiser, Don't You Want to Buy A Dog," "Limburger Jack," "Dat Deitch Gal Winked at Me," "I'm Going to Fight Mit Sigel," "Dot Stupporn Pony," and "I'm Dutch, So Are You"—indicate that Dutch dialect songs were well scattered through songsters not overtly Dutch (Wilson 2001:134-135,140,147; see also Toll 1974:190-191). Dutch dialect songs were also published in sheet music editions that included from one to as many as ten songs. *Favorite Comic Songs Written & Sung By Gus Williams* (Boston: Louis P. Goullaud, 1877), for example, included ten songs, six of which were overtly Dutch: "German Band," "Dutch Policeman," "My Wife Is So Awfully Stout," "Mygal Snyder's Party," "Ven My Band Begins to Play," and "The Dutch Boarding House."

As was the case with Williams' collection, nineteenth century songsters and sheet music editions of Dutch dialect songs were overwhelmingly published in eastern cities, principally New York, and were most commonly associated with specific singers who were active on the vaudeville stage. A quick glance at titles yields a handful of German surnames: Heitinger, Konollman, Loder, Mendel, and Runnel. Carl Wittke mentions "Lewis Mann, a master of several German dialects" (1952:224), while Robert Toll refers to "Sam Devere, a German minstrel who, like Luke Schoolcraft and other Germans, performed a good deal of German material" (1974: 174). Yet the majority of "German comedians" to promulgate Dutch dialect songs through stage performances and publications were of British, Irish, and Jewish descent. Among them is Anglo-Irishman Gus Williams (1845-1915).

Sometimes billing himself as "The American Star Comique," Williams wrote and produced plays like "Captain Mishler" for the Broadway stage. He also tried his hand at sentimental and parlor songs, patriotic anthems like the "Banner Song," and such "Negro Comic" pieces as "Cleanin' Silber in De Kitchen" (for additional titles, search "Gus Williams" on the Library of Congress's American Memory site, <http://memory.loc.gov>). His Dutch dialect compositions began appearing as early as 1870 with the publication of "Vat's De Brice of Beans Jake?" and "Kully! Vere's Your Cat," and he "is credited with introducing the first German dialect song, 'Kaiser, Don't You Want to Buy a Dog,'" to the stage (Wittke 1952:224). While the covers of his non-Dutch sheet music are graced with photographs of a smiling, fashionably dressed,

urbane, and clean-shaven fellow with a head of wavy hair, Williams' dialect publications present another image entirely. Clothed in a crudely-tailored frock coat, the Dutch Williams, grinning and glowering in side-by-side photos, sports chin whiskers but no moustache and a pudding-bowl haircut topped off with an ill-fitting brimless cap: the epitome of a rustic frump either just off the boat or hailing from the wilds of Pennsylvania. Clearly blessed with a dramatic flair, a good ear, a talent for mimicry, an awareness of a burgeoning immigrant community, and the wit to recognize a show business niche, Williams was a self-described "German Comedian" for more than four decades. By the 1880s, he garbled English and German in a celebrated skit entitled "The German Senator" (Wittke 1952:225), and a vaudeville program from Chicago's Kedzie Avenue Theater—"Devoted to High-Class Vaudeville and Motion Pictures"—reveals that as late as April 11, 1910, Williams was headlining vaudeville events under the billing "Dean of German Comedians."

That Irish should play German parts in late nineteenth century New York City is hardly surprising, since they were often contending new immigrants living cheek-by-jowl. In the 1870s Irishman Edward Harrigan teamed with Tony Hart to produce a long-running series of skits, plays, and songs featuring Irish interactions with their lower East Side tenement neighbors.

"McNally's Row of Flats" (1882) described a scene wherein peoples and tongues mingled incessantly.

The great conglomeration of men of every nation,
 A Babylonian tower O, it could not equal this
 Peculiar institution where Brogues without dilation,
 Were rattled off together at McNally's Row of Flats.

CHORUS:

It's Ireland and Italy, Jerusalem and Germany,
 O Chinamen and Nagers and a paradise for cats,
 All jumbled up together in snow and raging weather,
 They represent the tenants of McNally's Row of Flats.

(Reprinted in Williams 1996:168-169.)



Figure 3: The short fellow in this Irishman and Dutchman sketch is based on the theatrical persona of Joe Weber. (From Loesser 1942:141)

At the same time that Edward Harrigan's largely Irish casts assumed occasional singing German personas, a pair Jewish Americans, Joe Weber and Lew Fields, launched a career that would make them the era's most popular Dutch dialect comedians. [See Figure 3.] The children of Polish Jews, Weber (1867-1942) and Fields (1867-1941) met on the Bowery's sidewalks, debuting as nine year olds to entertain German audiences in the New York Turner Hall. While their initial performance was as a "blackface acrobatic song and dance team," and they also tried their hand at Irish comedy, the duo soon drew upon their Yiddish-speaking upbringing to make the transition to German dialect comedy. Like Gus Williams, they acted and looked their parts. Clad in ill-fitting short-brimmed derbies and outlandish checked suits undergirded by substantial padded

stomachs, the short dumpy and gangly Fields “mangled the English language with German words and accents” (Wittke 1952:225-226). By the time Weber and Fields retired from vaudeville in 1930, however, they were not only the lone proponents of Dutch dialect comedy and song in eastern urban theaters, but had also been show business anachronisms for several decades. The vaudeville stage had been steadily displaced by motion pictures, while successful singers had made the transition to commercial recordings and radio. One looks almost in vain for Dutch dialect songs on 78 rpm recordings. In the early 1920s, the vaudevillian Arthur Hall went into the Bell Records studio in Orange, New Jersey, to record “Jump Fritz, I Feed You Liver,” concerning an Anglo-American tenement dweller who overhears his German neighbor teaching his dachshund tricks, but I have not been able to locate comparable 78s. To be sure, the German catalogs of American record companies include a scattering of comic performances, but with very few exceptions they are neither songs nor cast in Dutch renderings of English. Rather they are skits in German—“Deutsches-Amerikanisches Picnick,” “Das Greenhorn,” “Bummel Petrus in Amerika”—with only an occasional German-inflected English phrase like “Hey Heinz, what’s da matter mit you?” in which an immigrant replicates his rude treatment by some Yankee (Spottswood 1991:110,152,176).

Were we to rely on the printed record, the stage, and commercial sound recordings by major labels catering to mass audiences and “foreign” niche markets, we might stop with Carl Wittke’s 1952 assessment—most of it made with reliance on an eastern, urban scene, and New York City especially—to conclude that, excepting Spike Jones WWII hit “Der Fuhrer’s Face,” Dutch dialect songs had run their course in American life. A part of the nation’s cultural expansion in the nineteenth century, they had diminished steadily in the twentieth century as, for a variety of reasons, peoples of German descent assimilated into an Anglo-American mainstream and, correspondingly, vanished from the public eye and ear.

Dutch Dialect Songs in the Upper Midwest

The suggestion that we might look beyond Carl Wittke’s 1952 essay for evidence of the persistence, indeed the evolution, of Dutch dialect songs comes nearly half a century later from an unlikely source. In notes to the compact disk *History in 3 Chords: Milwaukee Alternative Bands, 1973-1982* (Splunge CD 014-015), Dave Lührssen contends that:

Although Milwaukee blanched under the full-scale homogenization of the US that occurred after World War II, it once ranked with New Orleans and New York as one of America’s least American cities. Vestiges and memories of the past inspired the local punk scene to take pride in local peculiarity . . . The Haskels called themselves “Workers Rock ‘n’ Roll,” a tribute not to Karl Marx but to Frank Zeidler, Milwaukee’s [German] socialist mayor until 1960 . . . And when the Blackholes sang “Nazis from Outer Space,” their inspiration wasn’t old movies. The Nazis [i.e. the German-American Bund] rallied in the Milwaukee auditorium until Pearl Harbor was bombed, and ran a youth camp from the banks of the Milwaukee River” (2001).

Lührssen might have added that Milwaukee’s has been known as both “The German Athens” and “The Beer City,” in connection with its formerly flourishing Blatz, Miller, Pabst, and Schlitz breweries. His compilation also includes songs by the punk band Die Kreuzen whose choice of

what was a locally well-understood German Upper Midwestern appellation parallels the Norwegian invocation of Twin Cities alt-punk-indy rockers Husker Du. Had Lührssen extended his temporal reach to 1987, he might have included “Aina Hey,” featured on Sigmund Snopek III’s *WisconsInsane* album on his Dali label, with a cheddar colored state of Wisconsin logo. “Aina” or “Enna,” from the English “ain’t” and the German “ne” (a dialect rendering of “nicht”), is a venerable “Milwaukeeism” meaning roughly “isn’t that so” (The Grenadiers 1951). Snopek chants the phrase over and over, creating a musical and verbal icon of Upper Midwestern Anglo-Germanic fusion—an abstract, modernist dialect song.

The continuing presence of Dutch dialect songs in Milwaukee and the surrounding region long after the genre had vanished from the eastern urban show business scene should hardly be surprising considering that in the 1990 US census more than half of Wisconsin’s population acknowledged German heritage, rendering it America’s most German state in per capita population and cultural institutions. Nor do adjacent states lack significant rural and urban German American communities with lively, evolving traditions. Indeed at the dawn of the twenty-first century the Upper Midwest’s Dutch dialect songs manifest extraordinary variety and complexity. They include: 1) the continuous presence of familiar minstrel or stage Dutch songs among both cultural insiders and outsiders; 2) the longstanding existence of bawdy or profane Dutch songs circulating in oral tradition; 3) the proliferation of a comic “Dutchman” image amongst regional musicians, radio disk jockeys, and their audiences; 4) the conflation of Dutch dialect humor with cultural elements not exclusively German to form new songs signifying regional identity; and 5) the emergence of Dutch dialect songs in rock, hip-hop, and “polka punk” veins that parody older instances of the genre. Such a panoply compels elaboration.

Vestiges of Songsters and the Stage

In summer 1946 Helene Stratman-Thomas of the University of Wisconsin made the last of three recording trips throughout the state for the Archive of American Folksong at the Library of Congress. Henry Humphries, a seventy-six year old retired lumberjack in the village of Hancock, sang her five verses about a young man smitten with “a pretty little Deutscher gal and her name was Kitty Grause/And now she is the new cook at the steamship boarding house.” Although the lovesick fellow proclaims “Ya, Ya, she is the prettiest little Deutscher gal that you ever did see,” he is rejected for “another Deutscher man, and he was pretty drunk” (Peters 1975:46). To the southwest, in Millville near the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers, the retired sailor Noble Brown, sixty-one, sang the terse “My Fadder Was a Dutchman,” quoted previously, with its alternation of English and German lines. And just to the south of Millville, in Lancaster, sixty-eight year old Minnie Plimpton Pendelton performed “Oh Yah, Ich Das Bin Fine.” A ditty concerning the courtship of Katrin and “Scharlie,” Ms. Pendelton’s song has Katrin rhapsodize:

Now when we get married, won’t we put on schtyle?
We’ll chump on a streetcar and ride all the while.
We’ve got plenty of sauerkraut always on hand,
And live chust as good as the king of der land.
Den I get some dresses what schtick out behind
And drag about a yard in der schtreet.
And a nice liddle hat, chust the best I can find.
Oh, Scharlie, den von’t I look schweet? (Peters 1975:148)

With their combination of German, English, and Germanic English, their references to beer and sauerkraut, their presentation of good natured characters with high style aspirations amidst rustic settings, and their allusions to hefty girth (albeit via a bustle), the trio of Stratman-Thomas recorded songs are very much in keeping with the comic Dutch dialect lyrics of songsters and stage.

None of these singers, as far as I have been able to discover, were of German heritage. Noble Brown comes the closest. While his father was English, his mother was Scottish and “Holland Dutch.”

Whatever their backgrounds, all three were living in communities strongly shaped by Wisconsin German culture. As late as 1990 51% of Humphries’ Waushara County claimed German heritage, while for Grant County, home to both Brown and Pendelton, the figure was 57% (The Wisconsin Cartographer’s Guild 1998:19). Other evidence from the area confirms that



German American humor was an integral part of the local cultural experience. The December 10, 1915, edition of Grant County’s *Cuba City News-Herald* touted the upcoming arrival of Ben Holmes, “The Fatherland’s Sweet Singer, in His Famous Musical Comedy-Drama ‘*Happy Heinie*,’ featuring such new songs as “I’m a Jolly German,” “My Fatherland,” and “Happy Heinie.” The ad included a cartoon of a grinning, corpulent fellow in ill-fitting formal attire, presumably the “Happy Heinie” figure, together with a touting of Ben Holmes as “THE PRINCE OF GERMAN DIALECT COMEDIANS.” During that same era The Famous Boscobel Dutch Band hailed from Grant County’s northern border, traveling to local events like Fennimore’s “Big Days.” Their promotional postcard shows five members, several with healthy paunches and unkempt chin-whiskers, variously toting brass instruments, and togged in wooden shoes, tiny hats, and colorfully billowing outmoded suits that might have been worn by Weber and Fields.

Figure 4: Boscobel Dutchmen

[See Figure 4.]

Oral Tradition of the Home, Tavern, and Playground

Elsewhere Peter Dorner, now retired from the faculty at the University of Wisconsin, was born in 1925 and raised on an eighty-acre farm three and a half miles south of Luxemburg in Kewaunee County. With the exception of one Belgian family, his neighbors were Germans: a few Lutherans who favored high German and Plattdeutsch, but mostly Sudetanland German Catholics whose dialect was influenced by their “Bohemian” or Czech neighbors in both the old country and Kewaunee County. Dorner grew up bilingual, acquiring the bulk of his childhood English from older siblings who did not learn the language until they started school. As a kid, he tagged along with his parents to Alfred Rueckl’s tavern and other gathering places where singing was common. An older brother, Killian, also played clarinet in a proverbial “Little German Band” led by Bill Zellner that featured singing (Dorner 2003).

In the home, the local tavern, and country dance halls the repertoires in the late 1920s through the 1930s included at least two Dutch dialect songs that Peter Dorner remembered and sang more than six decades later. The first—“They Say I’m a Dutchman (And Ain’t Got No Schtyle),” concerning a dowdy fellow who, try as he might, can’t impress “the American girls”—is in keeping with nineteenth century dialect pieces from songsters and stage. The latter, “I Feel Myself Here (Dat’s Vat I Learned in Mein Schul),” is a mildly risqué children’s song featuring incremental repetition and gestures that likely owes its sustenance entirely to oral tradition. In the manner of the celebrated “Schnitzelbank” song, the singer points in successive verses to his eyes, nose, moustache, mouth, neck, and so on in descending order, identifying each part with some colorful term (“soup-strainer,” “rubber-necker,” “baby-maker,” “fart-blower,” “ass-kicker”) and attributing the acquisition of each term to the kinesthetic/anatomical lesson plan of some visionary educator. While perhaps not exactly what Margarethe Schurz might have encouraged in the 1850s when instituting the German kindergarten in Watertown, Wisconsin, “I Feel Myself Here (Dat’s Vat I Learned in Mein Schul)” was just the sort of song I valued from 1956-1964 while attending St. Joseph’s Catholic school in Rice Lake, run coincidentally by mostly German American nuns from rural Kewaunee and Manitowoc Counties. It was neither from them nor in the classroom, however, that I learned the best songs.

Various classmates sang English versions of “Im Himmel geb’ts kein Bier” (In Heaven There Is No Beer), which was a standard both on the playground and in the bus on football and basketball road trips. And my grade school pal Don Henrich knew a kindred song, “Drunk Last Night,” with Dutch lyrics invoking both Germany and the Netherlands. Appreciating its mild profanity and hedonism, we sang it enthusiastically during recess and around Boy Scout campfires while our elders either frowned or smirked and pretended not to hear.

Drunk last night, drunk da night before,
 Gonna get drunk tonight like I never got drunk before,
 For when I’m drunk I’m as happy as I can be,
 For I am a member of da Dutch Company.
 Oh da Dutch Company is da best company
 Dat ever came over from old Germany.
 Dere’s da Amsterdam Dutch and da Rotterdam Dutch,
 Da Potsdam Dutch, and da goddam Dutch,
 Singing: Glorious, glorious, one keg of beer for da four of us.
 Glory be dat dere are no more of us,
 ‘Cause da four of us can drink it all alone!

We never learned “A Little Dutch Soldier,” but likely it was around. In 1938 folklorist Alan Lomax recorded a raunchy version from an unidentified lumberjack in Newberry, Michigan. Widely reported by folklorists from the oral tradition of soldiers, sailors, loggers, and male groups generally, this account of a young woman’s sexual romp with a wandering Dutchman likely derives from a sixteenth century German song that crossed over into English during the Napoleonic wars (Randolph and Legman 1992:308-311).

Dutchmen and Midwestern Media

For Wisconsin kids like myself, notions of just what a Dutchman was derived from a complex of language, music, and images that suffused everyday life and were echoed in the region's media. My dad, Warren Leary, Irish though he was, might sing a snatch of "Ach Du Lieber



Figure 6: Whoopie John Wilfahrt, in lederhosen and hunter's cap, contrasts with his urbanely-attired sidemen. Minneapolis, late 1930s.

Augustine," refer to a scruffy childhood adversary as "Dutchy," describe a round blue patch in a cloudy sky as "big enough to fill a Dutchman's britches," and peg nearby Bloomer, still a predominantly German town, as peopled by "a lot of big Dutchmen." The Dutchman polka band of Whoopie John Wilfahrt played regularly in Bloomer's Pines Ballroom. Even closer to home we could exclaim "wunderbar!" while enjoying a Friday night fish fry at Herman's Wonder Bar in Brill.

In the 1920s professional polka bands formed in the Upper Midwest to take advantage of the burgeoning record industry, radio, and improved transportation that allowed travel by car to regional dance halls. Their sudden access to what nowadays is dubbed a wider "fan base" prompted them to develop a collective "Dutchman" image signifying their cultural and musical style. Hans Wilfahrt (1893-1961) was the genre's pioneer. Born in "Goosetown," the German Bohemian district of New Ulm, Minnesota, the concertina-playing Wilfahrt began leading a rural polka dance band at fifteen. By the mid-1920s he had begun an extended career making commercial recordings, entertaining a broad Upper Midwestern audience through radio broadcasts from Minneapolis stations, and barnstorming the region's dance halls (Ripley 1992; Leary and March 1991). The musically sophisticated and economically savvy Wilfahrt nonetheless cultivated a rustic ethnic image that contrasted mightily with the attempted champagne sophistication of fellow Midwestern German Lawrence Welk. Naturally short and rotund, Hans Wilfahrt affected a classic stage Dutchman's part by wearing plumed jagger hats and lederhosen, making goofy faces amidst performances and in publicity photographs, and yodeling in the exuberant manner that earned his "Whoopie John" nickname. [See Figures 5 and 6.] Meanwhile Wilfahrt's Goosetown neighbor and fellow musician Harold Loeffelmacher found success in 1933 when he abandoned such cosmopolitan names as the Broadway Band and the Continental Band to call his group the Six Fat Dutchmen. Scores of subsequent German polka bands in the

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Figure 5: The Whoopster sticks out his stomach and yodels. Minneapolis, late 1930s.

Upper Midwest have followed suit, often projecting tubby dishevelment through a logo if not in person. In the early twenty-first century active nominal Dutchman bands include Becky's



Figure 7: The Dutchman logo of Ray Dorschner, leader of Menasha, Wisconsin's Rainbow Valley Dutchmen, 1950s through 1990s.

Ivanhoe Dutchmen, Brian and the Mississippi Valley Dutchmen, Gary's Ridgeland Dutchmen, the Goodtime Dutchmen, and Karl and the Country Dutchmen. [See Figure 7.]

Since the late 1920s Dutchman bands have specialized in a driving, syncopated fusion of old country brass band and accordion tunes with American pop sounds and rhythms. Despite their calculated names and looks, they play for dancers and have never larded an evening's program with dialect songs. Yet most know a few and can slip into Dutchspeak without tongue-twisting. In the early 1950s, the Whoopee John Band recorded "Elsie Schultzenheim" regarding a cheerful German American's love for a woman, as large as a hippopotamus, with two left feet and lips smacking of turpentine. About the same time, in the heavily German Catholic "Holy Land" of eastern Wisconsin, between the shores of Lakes Michigan and Winnebago, Syl Groeschl of Calumetville began performing "Herman Take Me Home" and "Ve Get So Soon Oldt, Und Ve Get So Late Schmaradt." Just up the road in Chilton, the Howie Bowe Band cut "The Little German Ball"—celebrating conviviality "at Schultz's Bier Garten on Saturday night"—for Sheboygan's Polkaland Records. Some eighty miles to the south Milwaukee's Pfau Records issued a version of the "Milwaukee Waltz," a beery account of dance hall fun

that the Madison area's Goose Island Ramblers would cover in the 1960s and perform through the 1990s. And in Manitowoc County Romy Gosz, a specialist in the region's Bohemian polka sound, added new words to the old Czech standard "Svestkova Alej." The resultant "We Left Our Wives At Home," known throughout Wisconsin's polka scene, involves the band's mock-tipsy Dutch confession: "Ve left our fraus to milk all da cows."

In between or sometimes during performances, Dutchman style musicians have interjected German exclamations (like Syl Groeschl's trademark "Ach Ja!), a Whoopee-esque barnyard yodel (the specialty of Karl Hartwich of the Country Dutchmen), or song introductions in Dutch dialect. [See Figure 8.] Some of their locutions and patter invoke Dutch disk jockeys and humorists who have been a presence on Upper Midwestern radio since the



Figure 8: Fountain City, Wisconsin's Karl Hartwich, leader of Karl and the Country Dutchmen, adorns the cover of his *Hooked on Old Time* LP, early 1980s.

1920s. In 1928 a pair of dialect-spouting comedians calling themselves Herr Louie and Weaselis recorded "Down by the Pickle Works, Parts I&II" on both sides of a 78 rpm disc. The label added that the duo were "Broadkesting from WGN," a prominent Chicago radio station then and now. From the late 1920s to the mid-1930s the Windy City's WLS radio also featured a Little

German Band on broadcasts, as well as the musical antics of Ted Morse, leader of Otto's Tune Twisters. The August 17, 1935, program guide for WLS informed readers that Otto "stands five feet, four and weighs 225 pounds by his own admission." Several accompanying photographs reinforce a stout, jolly Dutchman image as Otto, eyes bugged out and cheeks bulging, dons a tight-fitting continental bandsman's outfit to tinker with a cornet (*Stand By! Prairie Farmer's Radio Weekly* 1935:9). [See Figure 9.]

From 1932 through 1964, except during World War II, Milwaukee-born radio announcer Jack Bundy assumed the persona of "Heinie," leader of Heinie and his Grenadiers, to host a regular program over Milwaukee's WTMJ radio that was distinguished by, in the words of the *Milwaukee Journal's* Jay Joslyn, "Deutsch brand corn freely seasoned by outrageous accents that listeners seem to relish" (Leary 1998:49; see also Corenthal 1991:274-275). Commencing programs with "Hello efferybody," Heinie let his audience know that "ve're gonna spiel." He also sent out postcards in Dutch dialect to fans and even published a booklet of the region's broken English culled from 2,117 letters sent in for the purpose by listeners. In one example a Milwaukee area farmer purportedly phones in a classified newspaper ad:

Just put what I told you. Vun day about a week ago last munt I heard me a noise in the middle of the pack yard that did not jused to be. I jumped mit the bed out, and ran mit the door off, and der I found my pig grey mare tied loose and running mit the stable off. Whoever prings him pack pays \$5.00 reward (*Milwaukee Talk* 1951).

Elsewhere in Wisconsin, from the 1930s through the 1990s, a succession of Dutch radio personalities, typically the hosts of polka music programs, have entertained audiences in the Madison, Wausau, Green Bay, Fox River Valley, and Milwaukee areas through such personas as Uncle Julius, Schnickelfritz, Uncle Louie, Crazy Otto, and Fritz the Plumber. And in the early 21st century Monroe's Huber Brewing produced radio ads that feature a little German brewer's dialect croon about barley pop, while a backup band churns out riffs stolen from bluesman Willie Dixon's "I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man."

Ethnic Songs/State Songs

Just as Dixon's blues licks, once restricted to the musical vocabulary of Mississippi Delta African Americans come north, have become an integral part of American vernacular music, so also have the sound, the look, the stereotypical associations borne by Dutch dialect songs entered into the everyday culture of the Upper Midwest. In Wisconsin particularly—the state where brats, kraut, limburger, and beer abound; where citizens lead the nation in obesity; where "yah" and "dese" trip from most tongues—what were once distinctively Dutch characteristics have become associated, by insiders and outsiders alike, with the image of Wisconsinites. In 1992 Sinovi, a Croatian tamburitza band based in Chicago but frequent entertainers in the Milwaukee



"That darn middle plunger has been sticking for weeks."

Figure 9: Ted Morse as Otto, leader of the Tune Twisters— "That darn middle plunger has been sticking for weeks"—in the August 17, 1935 issue of WLS radio's weekly *Stand By!* listener's guide, Chicago.

area, taunted a West Allis crowd with the “Milwaukee Song.” Beginning with “You say you don’t like Illinois,” Sinovi’s song invoked the group’s flatlander allegiance in rivalries across the Wisconsin/ Illinois border. A good natured rant ensued, punctuated by a chorus exuding familiar features.

Hey, hey, Polka Boy, go home and suck a beer.
 Hey, hey, Bratwurst Head, go drive your old John Deere.
 Hey, hey, the women all weigh, the smell will make you cry.
 Hey, hey, old Cheesehead, stay in Milwaukee and die.

The once Dutch polka-dancing, sausage-chomping, beer-slurping, stout, smelly, rustic had become a generic Wisconsinite.

Sinovi’s “Milwaukee Song” was compelled in part by football rivalries smoldering between fans of Chicago’s Bears and Wisconsin’s Green Bay Packers. In the 1980s and early 1990s the Bears fans held the upper hand, as their team dominated the interstate series, won a Super Bowl, and recorded “The Super Bowl Shuffle,” a rap song featuring prominent players touting their own prowess. Packer fans responded with bumper stickers and bywords proclaiming, in regional dialect, that however successful they were “Da Bears Still Suck.” By 1991 Manitowoc’s Happy Schnapps Combo had turned the phrase into a song. And it was only after Sinovi’s spring 1992 audience heckled the group with cries of “Da Bears Still Suck” that the Illinoisans retaliated.

On Beyond Dutchmen: A Genre Pushed and Parodied and Prized




The Happy Schnapps Combo produced a half-dozen recordings in the 1990s: *100 Proof* (1991), *Raise It!* (1992), *Behind Bars* (1994), *Polka Power* (1996), *Football Trash Talk* (1997), and *Beer Muscle* (1999) (<http://my.execpc.com/~sjkrautk/schnapps.html>). Their CD titles celebrate beer, shots of hard liquor, polka music, large bellies, and tavern sociability—elements that, when fused with football mania, transform the old time Dutch figure into a still goofy but more aggressive and decidedly mouthy Packer fan. [See Figure 10.]

Individual tracks occasionally nod toward polkas and waltzes, but renditions are more up-tempo than old time dancers would favor, vocals occasionally incorporate rap, and instrumentation is pure rock: two guitars, electric bass, drums, and harmonica. Through lyrics like “Dutch Pile,” the Combo spurns the sedate dance floor swirl of tubby couples for a bunch of roughhousing, tanked up, moshing guys:

Dutch pile . . . Dutch pile
 Ain’t had one in a while.
 I like to drink beer and wrestle wit da boys
 Now we’re gonna have a Dutch pile.

Still, I think Gus Williams, Weber and Fields, and the Dutch singers of a century before might



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Figure 10: Happy Schnapps Combo

not only approve, but also recognize something of themselves. The Happy Schnapps Combo clearly draws upon and appreciates the Dutch dialect song tradition, even as they stretch and satirize it.

Unlike old time performers, the Happy Schnapps Combo's members are neither immigrants, nor their children, nor their cheek-by-jowl neighbors. Rather they grew up in a part of Wisconsin where German American identity has become entrenched over the past 150 years. From World War II through the present, German Americans in the Combo's home Manitowoc County have frequently visited the old country, studied the German language in school, participated in festivals celebrating their ethnic heritage, and hosted visits from German relatives, tourists, and cultural delegations. So rather than portraying German immigrants trying to be Americans or, at least, German Americans, the Combo's members portray Americans of German heritage who are playing at being Germans despite the fact that they are inescapably from northeastern Wisconsin. In other words, while their Dutch dialect songs may harken back to the immigrant and ethnic experience of their ancestors, they have much more to do with regional identity and with the ethnic revitalization movement that commenced in the 1970s and shows no signs of diminishing.

The Happy Schnapps Combo's particular stance is borne out not only in lyrics about being kraut-eating Packer-backers, but also through mock biographies and motley get-ups. Various members Shawn Sargent, Bill Soucy, Eric Werner, Steve Klein, Rich Krueger, and the late Jim Krueger (1949-1993) have all assumed German stage names reminiscent of *Hogan's Heroes* sitcoms: Klink, Horst, Klaus, Guenter, Wenzel, and Otto. Phony biographies in their publicity materials meanwhile demonstrate, not a German's attempt at English, but an English speaker's pseudo-German. Horst, we are told, was

abandonische by der folkenparents in der Swiss Alps on accounta excessomassive
childhooden flatulence undt scandalous lack uf continence . . . undt reared by der
packengangen uf vild und frothing BernardenSainten und made like der
shtowawayen on der Vienna-Manitowoc carferry, vhere he fell in mit der Combo.

Horst vil play der bluesenharpfen mit der greatest of ease unless der Blatz undt
der Sauerkauten backen up on him.

The Combo's stage attire, shown off in posed publicity photographs, trades in the image of Germans off the boat vainly striving to look American for one of hardcore Wisconsin cheeseheads ineptly attempting to look German. Toggled out in crudely sewn jump-suits that suggest lederhosen but look more like toddler outfits rejected by Oshkosh B'Gosh, Combo members don other "German" gear—a plumed jagger hat, a bandsman's uniform, a soldier's helmet—that is simultaneously countered by such signs of an American pedigree as sweat pants, running shoes, John Deere caps, and cans of anemic Miller Lite.

Celebratory and silly, related to yet reversing the trajectory of Dutch dialect songs, the Happy Schnapps Combo's compact disks, live performances, and web site demonstrate that the genre is alive and well in Wisconsin in the twenty-first century. Indeed the proliferation and persistence of Dutch dialect songs in America's Upper Midwest compels us to revise our still shallow understanding of ethnic cultural performances as to regard them as enduring, evolving components of the inescapably pluralist nature of American life.

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