

Where the Polka Plays

Bob Brock & The B Tones

Going all the way back into the 50s, my uncle's love for polka began. Over the next 65 years, Bob captured the hearts of people all over the west side of Grand Rapids, quickly becoming known to all as the frontman of Bob Brock & The B Tones, a band originally formed to rival against my cousins and later a culmination of several musical members of the Brock family that share a love for polka. Although my uncle passed away in 2022, his joy and pride for his heritage is something I continue to strive for in my daily life.

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The dense wood structures forming the four walls to Jackson Street Hall quickly succumb to the sounds of tubas blasting, piano keys being smashed, and lovely little accordion player screaming the lyrics to famous polkas into the already overwhelmed microphone. At the front of the stage is a short older man with eyes that smile to everyone in the crowd long before his lips can keep up. Between long notes ringing through his saxophone he makes sure to entertain the crowd, often running out and joining those out on the dance floor and sprinting back just in time to play his next part.

My 8-year-old brain lights up with joy as I wrap my arm around my cousin and am swung around the dancefloor once again. For the few seconds between songs all that can be heard is heavy breaths and short exacerbated giggles before they are right back at it again and everyone begins to find a partner to spin around once more.

Several hours later I find myself in the back of my mom's car, mustering up the last of my energy to hold my eyes open on the short ride home. Weekends at Jackson Street were the only time I was allowed to be up past nine pm (and the one of the only times I appreciated a bedtime).

Despite my exhaustion, I couldn't help but hold a smile on my face- the sounds of blasting horns and a cacophony of Polish lyrics ringing through my ears the rest of the way home.

Pulaski Days

It is late September and the air is just beginning to form a crisp to it, sending clouds of condensation against the glass windows of our house in the early morning. Inside, I reach up on the furthest point of my tippy toes, finger tips just barely brushing against the box full of bright red clothes stored in the top of my closet, tipping the large pile of cherry spilling over my short frame. I gather up as many layers of red as I can and head out the door, over the moon to celebrate Pulaski Days once again.

As we make our way downtown, a rush of excitement races through my body once again. For most people in Grand Rapids, it is just another day, but as we draw closer to the west side of the city a flood of people happily roaming about fills my vision and it is clear the celebration has begun. Tee shirts ornamented with Polish sayings crowd the streets, and the speakers blasting polka are so loud I wonder if they can hear us across the state.

Golumpki

A line of cheerful people eagerly clutching paper plates swirls throughout the room, filling the room with sounds of laughter and chatter as they wait to fill the flimsy surface balanced in their hands. My nose is filled with the delightful aroma of the row of food on the table as I continue the torturous crawl to the buffet. My stomach feels like it is clawing against my backbone as I lock eyes on the giant trays of pierogi and kielbasa glistening under the dim fluorescent lights of Jackson Street Hall. I begin to count down the people in front of me, timing exactly how long it

will take before it is my turn to overfill my plate and devour the smorgasbord of greasy Polish deliciousness once again.

I finally make it to the table, eyeing the options down the line and perfectly calculating how to max out the thin dixie plate with all of my favorites without losing it all to the floor. I begin covering the plate in all my favorite things: placki ziemniaczane (potato pancakes), krokiety (fried crepe rolls filled with meat), and of course, two huge piles of pierogi and kielbasa. My hands strain under the weight of all the food, but I spot one last section on my plate and move towards another large pan full of something I have never seen before. I study the rows of small cylinders topped with tomato sauce and make the assumption that it is some form of stuffed pasta set out for the picky eaters at the dinner and plop one on my plate before skipping away to find a table where I can chow down in peace.

Minutes later I am almost all the way through my scan with only the roll of mystery pasta to go. As I dive my fork through the thick layer of dough, I am left with an overwhelming feeling of disappointment when I realize it is not dough at all- its cabbage. Disgust fills my mouth as I struggle to chew through the mess of wet cabbage and tomato sauce, desperately avoiding the judgemental eyes from my family from across the table. I guess this isn't the place for picky eaters after all.

Home

As I slip into my car and turn on the ignition, I am greeted with the sound of a random song from deep within my liked songs on Spotify. Often this leads to immediate embarrassment and a quick scramble to change the playlist before anyone recognises the boybands I was obsessed with back in middle school, but occasionally a polka comes up and I can't help but giggle. There is almost never a correct time for polka, which makes these moments so much better. As the sounds of

loud horns and dramatic vocals fill my ears, I feel myself drifting back to the eight year old girl being swung around the dance floor, breathlessly singing along without a care in the world. For the next three minutes as the song blares through my radio my worries are washed away and once again I am home.