

“Just Because” by Frank Yankovic and His Yanks (1947)

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Essay by Bob Dolgan (guest post) *



Frank Yankovic

World War II finally ended in 1945. Frank Yankovic, 30, came home to Cleveland after four years of service in the U.S. Army and resumed his career as a bar owner and musician. After four years of fighting, returning servicemen were anxious to celebrate. The bars were packed. Polka musicians were delighted to find they could work seven nights a week, earning twenty dollars for a few hours of work. That may not sound like much today, but it was a goodly sum in an era when the average working man earned about \$3,000 a year.

At that time, Johnny Pecon, the great accordionist, was one of Yankovic's best friends. Pecon was a tall, lanky blond man who was the same age and nationality--Slovenian--as Yankovic. He carried his accordion with him wherever he went, as though it was part of his body and psyche. Although he had never learned to read music, he had perfect pitch and flawless rhythm. He could play anything, including jazz. But he loved the polka most of all.

Pecon's favorite hangout was Yankovic's bar, where the good times never stopped. Pecon, wearing his sailor suit, sat in on the jam sessions as though he were just another box man. He and Yankovic's father, Andy, loved to drink together and tell jokes in Slovenian. “I think my father liked Johnny better than he liked me,” Yankovic once said. “But we were like brothers. I was happy to see my best friend and my father get along so well.”

Sometimes Pecon, Yankovic and the other revelers would sleep all night in the bar. When a manager arrived at 6 a.m. to open the doors they would be hollering for service and start all over again.

Pecon introduced the song “Just Because” to Yankovic in the bar. He had picked up the tune while serving with the Seabees in the Pacific during the war. It was an old country and western number which had been written and recorded by Texas’s Shelton Brothers, Bob and Joe, in 1935. Another version of the song was done by the great guitarist Les Paul, who called himself “Rhubarb Red” before hitting it big in the 1950s. Both the Shelton and Rhubarb Red records flopped.

Yankovic had never heard the tune until Pecon played and sang it in his bar. Yankovic immediately liked the simple lyrics, which tell the story of a man who is breaking up with his gold-digging girlfriend. He knew it would be easy for fans to learn the words. He told Pecon and arranger Joe Trolli to create a polka-sounding bridge for the song, which they did. “Just

Because” made a big hit with audiences at dances in Cleveland. Sometimes they requested it be played two or three times a night.

Pecon and Yankovic combined their accordions on the tune, with Yankovic playing the melody on his piano box and Pecon harmonizing and playing counterpoint on his chromatic. Both men were on the vocals, with Pecon's tenor voice matching perfectly with Yankovic's baritone. There was no doubt Pecon was the superior accordionist but Yankovic was a superb showman and highly adequate on his instrument.

Joining Yankovic and Pecon in the band were the tremendous tenor banjo player Georgie Cook, pianist Al (Nagle) Naglitch, who knew more about music than any of them, and bass violin man John Hokovar, who delighted audiences by twirling and slapping the fiddle.

Polka historian Bob Roth later paid tribute to the group. “This band had a great sound which was never duplicated in future years, not even by Yankovic himself. The Yankovic and Pecon accordions blended perfectly. Most later polka accordionists learned to play fill (counterpoint) by copying Pecon. Cook was a banjoist that no one since has been able to copy. Georgie played a driving banjo and was responsible for the tempo. He used to amaze me the way he slid up or down the fretboard and end up on the right chord. They knocked my socks off when I heard them.”

In early 1946, Yankovic signed a contract with the Columbia recording company, which had been looking to get a good polka band to capitalize on the popularity of the music. Columbia urged Yankovic to travel as much as possible with his band to promote record sales. Yankovic stayed with Columbia for 26 years.

In late 1947, the band went to New York for a recording session. “That Night in May,” another polka classic, was put on one side. Yankovic told the Columbia executive in charge he wanted “Just Because” on the other side. The executive scoffed, “Why go again with that turkey!” he exclaimed. Yankovic argued with him, telling him how popular it was with audiences. The executive still refused. He and Yankovic got into a shouting match. The bandleader threw sheet music on the floor and kicked a chair. “No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get through to this guy,” Yankovic recalled years later. “Finally, I said, I'll make a deal with you. I'll buy the first ten thousand records myself.’ I knew I could sell them off the bandstand. That convinced him. Columbia wasn't taking the chance anymore. I was. He gave us the go-ahead.”

The record took off like a comet. It received its biggest boost in Boston, which had seldom been interested in polkas. Boston disc jockey Bob Clayton played it and within two minutes 60 phone callers requested an encore. Clayton played it six times that first day. Some 25,000 copies were sold in Boston in a week. The spectacular showing was repeated all over the country. It did not take long for the record to hit the million mark in sales. Eventually it would sell about two million, including reissues.

Yankovic was suddenly in the big time, playing all over the nation, from New York to California. George Devine, owner of the Million Dollar Ballroom in Milwaukee, told famous bandleader Guy Lombardo, “You think you can draw a crowd? I got a little five-piece band (Yankovic) that can outdraw all you guys.”

In 1949, Yankovic hit another home run with “The Blue Skirt Waltz.” Columbia had bought a catalogue of old Bohemian melodies and asked Yankovic if there were any he would like to record. Yankovic selected “The Red Skirt Waltz” and said it needed lyrics. Columbia had lyricist Mitchell Parish, who had written the words to “Stardust” and “Stairway to the Stars,” on its staff. Parish quickly came up with the lyric and changed the title to “The Blue Skirt Waltz” for rhyming purposes. Yankovic and Pecon again warbled the tune, along with the

Marlin Sisters. "Charley Was a Boxer" was on the reverse side. Record sales again surpassed a million. "Redbook" magazine reported it was the second-biggest seller in the nation that year, trailing only "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" by Gene Autry.

Yankovic was now a celebrity. "The Cleveland Press" said his 1948 income was \$78,000. The "Cleveland Plain Dealer," which called him "The Aladdin of the Accordion," said he grossed \$160,000 in 1949. "He is a rich, young man," said the "Press." "His polka majesty is a wide-eyed friendly guy who might be taken for 24." Yankovic took to flaunting one-thousand dollar bills, keeping one in his shirt pocket. He had his hands insured for \$50,000 as a publicity stunt and bought an airplane.

Unfortunately, there was trouble in paradise. Pecon and Cook, who were tired of traveling, quit the band. Pecon probably resented the fact that Yankovic was getting rich from "Just Because," the song he had given him. Yankovic tried to placate them by giving them bonuses of \$500 and \$300, but mostly they were paid sidemen's wages. Naglitch also left. Yankovic reorganized with a new band centered around accordionist Tops Cardone, pianist Buddy Griebel and banjo man Carl Paradiso, a fine singer. This group stayed together for six years, highlighted by appearances in Hollywood's Mocambo Restaurant and Las Vegas. Yankovic considered it his greatest show band, but admitted a special feeling for the Pecon years. "Nobody will ever match that sound we had," he said, "The old records sound better than the new."

Yankovic stayed on the road, constantly forming new bands, for 50 years. At its peak, the band played 320 jobs, mostly one-nighters, a year. When Yankovic died in 1998, at age 83, "The Plain Dealer" carried the news of his death in a huge front-page story, with several photos, garnished with praise from editorial columnists and a cartoon that showed a broken accordion leaning off a stool, with the caption, "The Day the Music Died."

Bob Dolgan is author of the book "Polka King: The Real Story of Frankie Yankovic."

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.