



Frankie Yankovic

July 28, 1915 - October 14, 1998

New Port Richey, Florida

Frankie Yankovic, the Cleveland accordionist who made polka a national dance-floor language and earned the unofficial title America's Polka King, died in New Port Richey, Florida, on October 14, 1998. He was eighty-three.

He was born on July 28, 1915, in Davis, West Virginia, to Slovenian immigrant parents who soon moved the family to Cleveland's Collinwood neighborhood. His father played the dulcimer; young Frankie took up the button box and then the piano accordion, forming bands while still a teenager. During World War II he served in the Army and was wounded in the Battle of the Bulge; cold injury damaged his hands, but he returned to music determined to keep playing.

After the war his recordings for Columbia scored major pop-chart hits. "Just Because" and "Blue Skirt Waltz" sold in the millions in the late 1940s, proof that a Midwestern dance-band sound could cross into the mainstream. He toured relentlessly, often with a trumpet-and-sax front line over accordion, bass and drums, and he became a fixture at festivals, weddings and television variety shows. In 1986 he won the first Grammy Award given in the polka category for the album 70 Years of Hits.

He was no relation to the comedy accordionist "Weird Al" Yankovic, a fact both men patiently explained for decades. Cleveland remained home base even as he wintered in Florida in later years. He kept performing into his eighties, a compact figure behind a big accordion who treated every hall like a neighborhood hall. He is buried in Cleveland. For countless Slovenian-American and Midwestern families, the first notes of a Yankovic waltz still mean the floor is open.

Services

Died in New Port Richey, FL, October 14, 1998, aged 83. Portrait: Photograph by Curt Teich, 1958 (public domain), hosted by Notice Nearby.

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