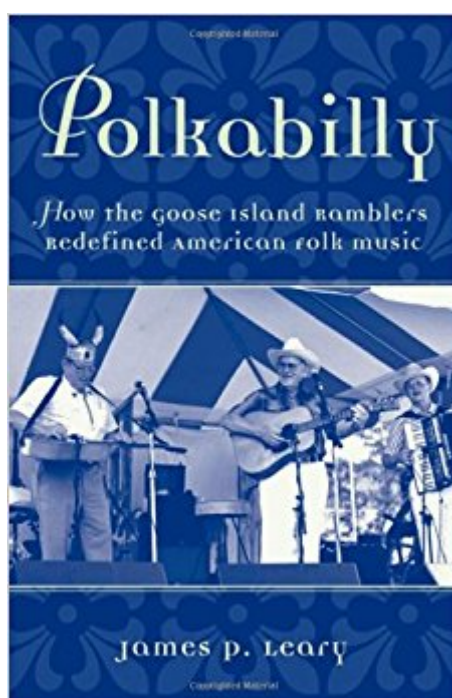


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# Polkabilly: How The Goose Island Ramblers Redefined American Folk Music Includes CD (American Musicspheres)



## Synopsis

A freewheeling blend of continental European folk music and the songs, tunes, and dances of Anglo and Celtic immigrants, polkabilly has enthralled American musicians and dancers since the mid-19th century. From West Virginia coal camps and east Texas farms to the Canadian prairies and America's Upper Midwest, scores of groups have wed squeezeboxes with string bands, hoe downs with hambos, and sentimental Southern balladry with comic "up north" broken-English comedy, to create a new and uniquely American sound. The Goose Island Ramblers played as a house band for a local tavern in Madison, Wisconsin from the early 1960s through the mid-1970s. The group epitomized the polkabilly sound with their wild mixture of Norwegian fiddle tunes, Irish jigs, Slovenian polkas, Swiss yodels, old time hillbilly songs, "Scandihoovian" and "Dutchman" dialect ditties, frost-bitten Hawaiian marches, and novelty numbers on the electric toilet plunger. In this original study, James P. Leary illustrates how the Ramblers' multiethnic music combined both local and popular traditions, and how their eclectic repertoire challenges prevailing definitions of American folk music. He thus offers the first comprehensive examination of the Upper Midwest's folk musical traditions within the larger context of American life and culture. Impeccably researched, richly detailed and illustrated, and accompanied by a compact disc of interviews and performances, James P. Leary's *Polkabilly: How the Goose Island Ramblers Redefined American Folk Music* creates an unforgettable portrait of a polkabilly band and its world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Polkabilly offers an entertaining and enlightening look at the music of a region that's been little explored as well as an endearingly entertaining band."--Jeffery R. Lindholm, *Dirty Linen*"I have learnt much more from Leary about the Upper Midwest's vernacular music than I have from the many books and articles I have read on Dylan."--Michael Pickering, *Folk Music Journal*"It's an intriguing title, and Leary makes a cogent case for a hybrid music of the Upper Midwest, a mix of American, English, German, Scandinavian and country music that's developed over the last century or more. At the very least it's an interesting tale that gathers several strands of American and immigrant history. As a history of upper Midwestern folk music, this makes a very interesting and informative read." --Sing Out!"This is a well-researched look at an overlooked form of American folk music."--Anything Phonographic"Jim Leary has written a rich masterpiece about people and music, cultural processes, and meanings in a part of America long misunderstood or ignored. His treatment of the Goose Island Ramblers is as engaging as their personalities and the music they play from neighborhood bars to country fairs ... Full of the humor of the real folks from places defined too often by stereotypes, *Polkabilly* is a fine personal and musical history."--Nick Spitzer, Professor of Folklore, University of New Orleans, and Host, *American Routes*, Public Radio International"Jim Leary has produced a rich, scholarly, and lively account of the making of the little known folk music of the Upper Midwest. He has thus at last raised that style from its local base to its proper place alongside the more familiar, nationally known musics, such as jazz, country, zydeco and others. Leary shows how this regional style is unique in its blending of resident ethnic cultures, from groups originating from the Baltic to the Balkans. The result is indeed *Polkabilly*, and its promoters, the Goose Island Ramblers."--Victor Greene, Emeritus Professor of Ethnic History, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee"This is an impressive and convincing piece of scholarship! Those who read it will come away with not only a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the vernacular music of the Upper Midwest, but also a broader perspective of what American rural music really is. Jim Leary reminds us, too, that the infectious polkabilly music of the Goose Island Ramblers is both a tribute to American pluralism and a testimony of the marvelous ways in which our working people have sustained their lives and identities."--Bill C. Malone, Professor Emeritus of History, Tulane University"Polkabilly is one of the most important books on American music in recent years. It is meticulously documented and tells an important story, not just about the Goose Island Ramblers, but dozens of other polkabilly musicians of the Upper Midwest." --Journal of American Folklore"As much as I enjoyed this book for my nostalgic romp through the familiar and exotic Wisconsin locales of Lodi, Oulu, Rice Lake and Boscobel, I enjoyed it even more for its informative account of the

origins and context of the Goose Island Ramblers, for its passionate argument for a re-evaluation of Midwestern U.S. musical culture, and for its insights into the everyday musical life of the region...Meticulously researched." --Gage Averill, Yearbook for Traditional Music

James P. Leary is a professor of Folklore and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he also serves as director of the Folklore Program and co-director of the Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures. A native of northern Wisconsin, he has conducted field research on the folklore of diverse cultural groups in America's Upper Midwest for more than thirty years and is author of *Minnesota Polka*, *Yodeling in Dairyland*, *Wisconsin Folklore*, and *So Ole Says to Lena: Folk Humor of the Upper Midwest*.

This is a fascinating account of the little known regional music of the upper-Midwest. The Ramblers are the focus here, but this is really an in-depth study of the scene that produced them, from Slim Jim to Bob Andresen's "Jack Pine" guitar, and beyond. The Goose Island Ramblers were one of a kind, combining (seemingly) effortless mastery of multiple instruments, musical styles from around the world (Scandinavia, Russia, Germany, Poland, etc.) and the U.S. (folk, country, Hawaiian, western swing), and a great repertoire of songs familiar and obscure. The only reason this gets 4 stars instead of 5 is Leary's tendency towards academic jargon (terms like "syncretic"). Not exactly my cup of tea, but it really doesn't interfere too much with the pleasure the story. If you've never heard the Ramblers, you need to check them out. Almost all of their recordings (with the exception of the extremely rare "Syttende Mai in Stoughton") are still available from the Cuca Records (their original label) website. While you're there, check out the other great releases. Cuca Records founder James Kirchstein (who still runs the site) amassed an amazing, beautifully recorded chronicle of the regional music of the upper-Midwest (folk, country western, ethnic, garage rock - even circus music) in the 60s and 70s.

Had to read this for a class. Can't say I ever wanted to know this much about niche folk music.

I spent many a Thursday night with a gang of Rambler fans at Glenn and Ann's in Madison. But I didn't know how they came to know each other or their long history before they played there, or how they related to other musicians and influences. Simply great!

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