

FEATURED

Polka Joe keeps playing the memories at 50th anniversary celebration

by Ron Devlin Staff Writer

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Polka Joe Manjack during the "Polka Joe" 50th celebration, Lakeside Ballroom, Barnesville, Sunday May 26, 2024. By Johnathan B. Paroby

BARNESVILLE — It's not unusual for Polka Joe Manjack to get 75 or 80 email requests for his Sunday morning show on Magic 105.5 radio.

But when he cranked up "The Magic Polka Machine" for a special 50th anniversary broadcast Sunday in Lakeside Ballroom, the requests were pouring in from far and wide.

"Keep playing the memories," pleaded one request, typical of the scores he received. "We grew up with you."

Growing up in Tamaqua a block away from a radio station, Joe, the son of Eastern European parents, collected polka albums as a youngster.

"He was dreaming of playing polkas on the radio when he was little," said Patricia Manjack Lee, Joe's sister, a Cressona resident who attended the 50th anniversary party.

In 1970, when he was 15 years old, Joe obtained an FCC license. As JJ Michaels, he was an afternoon DJ on what is now WZTA.

Starting in 1974, he began hosting polka shows on several radio stations. He's been doing "The Magic Polka Machine" on 105.5 since 1987. He also hosts "Pennsylvania Polkas" on WVIA, the PBS affiliate in northeast Pennsylvania.

Chris Crumbliss, who owns Magic 105.5, reflected on Polka Joe's longevity as a broadcaster.

"He feels like it's the music," Crumbliss said. "It keeps him going, it energizes him."

Taking a moment from being congratulated and posing for photos with admirers, Polka Joe said polkas are an integral part of the region's culture.

"If you grew up in the coal regions," he said, "you grew up with polkas."

What keeps him going, he said, are the people — the listeners who send in requests every week.

In what amounted to a show of ethnic pride, people began arriving at the ballroom at 10 a.m. Sunday. In addition to the live broadcast Sunday morning, the program included performances by The Pennsylvania Villagers and 18-time Grammy award winner Jimmy Sturr & His Orchestra.

Sheree Grant wore a vyshyvanka, a traditional Ukrainian blouse, in honor of her Eastern European heritage.

"We grew up with it," said Grant, a retired Carbon County engineer. "We all know how to dance the polka."

Grant and her cousin, Carol Kluge, often visited their grandparent's cobbler shop in Allentown as children. Alexander and Anna Sokalsky came to America from Ukraine in 1906, and settled in Allentown.

"I performed with the Ukrainian Dance Ensemble at the Bavarian Summer Festival in the 1970s," recalled Kluge, a retired Lehigh County garment worker. "It was organized by St. Mary's Ukrainian Church in Allentown."

The cousins took a selfie in front of a life-sized display of a polka band made of balloons. Robbie Furman, a Lehighon artist, created the immense display.

Keith Heffner flew in from his home in Mesa, Arizona, just to be with Polka Joe on his 50th anniversary.

After retiring as an instructor at Mesa Community College, Heffner began writing polkas several years ago. He was surprised when he sent a demo to Polka Joe and it was played on the radio.

In tribute, Heffner wrote a polka entitled "The One and Only Polka Joe," which is on his album "The Fuzzywig Express."

"This is my first time in the coal regions," said Heffner, "and I'm glad I came."

Polka Joe was asked what's ahead in his career.

He's 69 years old, he said, and has no plans to retire.

Responding to a suggestion from a bystander that he could go on for another 25 years, Polka Joe responded, "I just don't know how it's going to end."