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Is this The Last Polka?

Canadian rivalry between Walter Ostanek and John Góra plays out against background of declining sales and fans

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It may just be the last showdown in the Polka Corral, but when friendly rivals Walter Ostanek and John Góra – the reigning hotshots among Canadian polka slingers – face off at the Grammy awards in Los Angeles Feb. 10, there'll be no fond reminiscences of the glory years.

"We both wish each other the best and we keep telling folks it's a friendly competition," Ostanek said from his home in St. Catharines, on Friday, "but two minutes before the winner is announced, the friendship is over."

Champion accordionist Ostanek (pictured at right) and his band are nominated for the 2007 album *Dueling Polkas*, a joint effort with Saskatchewan country fiddler and occasional Slovenian polka specialist Brian Sklar and The Western Senators.

Saxophone virtuoso Góra, from Burlington (pictured at left), and his band Górale, is also in the running for his album *Bulletproof Polkas*.

Both nominees have their flights and hotel rooms booked. They've RSVP'd in the affirmative to invitations to a pre-Grammys bash being thrown for this year's Canuck nominees by the Canadian consulate. Their blood is up and they're ready for the fray.

This is a particularly auspicious event for 72-year-old Ostanek: his 20th nomination for Best Polka Album since the category was established in 1985. It's the fourth time he has been up against Góra, 49, and may be the last chance to pick up a Grammy (it would be his fourth).

Góra has yet to bring the coveted award home.

With record sales declining across the entire musical spectrum, polka music isn't the force it used to be. From 60 to 70 albums a year in polka's heyday in the mid-1980s, the annual Grammy polka pool has dwindled to 37 contenders this year, five of whom are nominated in what may be the final or next-to-last polka shootout.

Four of those five acts produce, release and distribute their own records independently and are lucky to sell more than a couple of thousand copies, most off them off stage at performances, Góra said.

Jimmy Sturr, from Florida, N.Y., has won 16 of the 23 polka Grammys handed out since 1985 and insiders say this year's nod will likely go elsewhere, even if just to imply it's still an open race.

That's good news for Ostanek and Góra, who agree that if Sturr is

A polka primer

Polka is a lively central-European dance as well as a genre of dance music that originated in Bohemia in the mid-1800s. Though popularly associated with feasts, celebrations and drinking, polkas were also composed by Johann Strauss and Johann Strauss II, as well as by other composers of classical music and opera. The name comes from the Czech word Polka ("Polish woman"). Polkas have a strict 2/4 time signature.

NORTH AMERICAN

POLKA STYLES

Chicago- or Polish-style polka features horns and accordion in two variations: the "push" with two trumpets in the lead, and the "honky" with trumpet and clarinet.

Cleveland- or Slovenian-style polka is known for its up-tempo dance rhythms, and features piano accordion and/or button accordion as lead instrument.

North American polka variants also include the Midwest- or

indeed out of the running, and with Texas-based polka new-wavers Brave Combo (who won in 1999 and 2004), and Bubba Hernandez and Alex Meixner splitting the non-traditional polka vote, they are indeed the only two real options for Grammy voters with conservative polka tastes.

But even in the traditional polka world, there are no sure bets. Góra, who plays the horn-heavy pop variant known as Chicago-style, believes he can count on a lot of votes that might otherwise have gone to Sturr, king of America's Chicago-style specialists. Rooting for Ostanek, a master of the accordion-fronted Cleveland style, are Sklar's legions of country fans who have been lobbying Grammy voters from Canada's West.

"We have very different audiences and, as with any contest, politics play a part," said Góra, who was born and raised in Poland but never heard a polka till his family settled in Canada.

"Polka is folk music and, like all young kids in Poland, all I wanted to hear was rock 'n' roll," he added.

"The music I play is more rock-based ... we polkaize pop music. Walter takes a more traditional approach."

For all that, both Canadian polka stars agree there's little to be gained these days from a Grammy win unless you're signed to a major label with access to promotional money and space on record shelves.

When the polka Grammy was established it was in response to a huge lobby by Polish and other European immigrants in the American Midwest demanding recognition for the music they loved, Ostanek explained.

Though major North American polka festivals still draw multiple thousands, they've diminished over the past 20 years, threatening to disenfranchise the once powerful musical art form.

"Everyone in the polka business is wondering how long (the Grammy polka category) can last," said Ostanek, who celebrated his 51st anniversary as a polka band leader Saturday.

"Polka will never die, but no one makes a living at it. It's music you play for the love of it. It's for parties and good times, and it will always have a place in people's lives. But it's for weekend warriors now.

"If the polka Grammy disappeared tomorrow it will be thrown into one of the roots music or world music categories," Ostanek added.

"And then you'll never hear of guys like us again."

Dutchman-style (an aberration of "Deutschmann," not associated with The Netherlands), characterized by a pronounced oom-pah, often reinforced by a tuba playing bass notes.

Norteño or conjunto-style, which has its roots in northern Mexico and Texas; and San Francisco- or punk-style, which blends rock elements and instrumentation with traditional polka melodies and rhythms.

Sources: Wikipedia; Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences; John Góra; Walter Ostanek