

CD REVIEWS - SEPTEMBER 2020

by Jim Price

ZUPE AND THE POLKA COMMANDOS – NA ZDROWIE! (NOSTROVIA!)
(Menthol Bees Records)



In this tumultuous and troublesome year that is 2020, perhaps what the world really needs right now is a cheery polka album. Enter longtime western PA-based entertainer Zupe and his Polka Commandos with their new, happy-go-lucky polka album, called Na zdrowie! (Nostrovial!) (“Cheers!” or “Bless You!” in Polish and several eastern European tongues).

Uplifting polka-flavored merriment fills this album’s 15 tracks as Zupe celebrates the music, his family and Eastern European heritage, Pennsylvania traditions and more. Zupe sings, plays keys, trumpet, accordion and percussion, and wrote/co-wrote the music on this album with collaborator Mike Popovich, assisted by his ‘Commandos,’ which include popular modern-day polka

artist Alex Meixner on accordion and trumpet, drummer Tommy Halla, bassist Christian Fabian, singer and multi-instrumentalist Mollie B, sax player Joe Tierney, guitarist Jimmy Meyer and others.

Inspired by family picnics and Zupe’s grandfather, the title track “Na Zdrowie! Polka (Nostrovial)” eagerly gets the album off to its robust start, recalling Polish picnics, food, drink and fun. Giving a nod to one of Johnstown’s popular summer events is “Polkafest Polka,” one of several numbers with a local flavor. Another is the rust belt-inspired “Are You Workin’? Polka” with its triple-accordion army of Alex, Zupe and Dan Crosser (of Dan & Galla fame). Two waltzes are part of the fun – the tongue-in-cheek, Klezmer-toned “Pitiful Pierogi,” about a Polish husband’s bewilderment over his Italian wife’s cooking; and the forgiveness-seeking ode “My Heart.” “Polka Vibe” celebrates Polish pride as it rails against Polish jokes and other ridicule. Another food-inspired number, “Halupki Polka,” weaves a tale of a cook wary of her disappearing pigs-in-a-blanket.

Two polkas are holiday-themed, as Zupe and his Commandos give a famous whistlepig his own polka with “Punxsutawney Phil Polka,” and they consider the point of view of the reindeer who lost his leading gig to red-nosed Rudolph on “Dasher, the Reindeer.” Zupe and his cohorts celebrate the passing of the polka torch between generations on “Polka Revolution.” The album contains one cover song, an update of Mitch Biskup’s “Strawberries, Raspberries Polka.”

As any polka album worth its weight should be, this album is continually upbeat from start to end, and Zupe and his cast radiate happiness and enthusiasm throughout this set. The performances are robust, and listeners will be hard-pressed not to tap their feet along to these songs. Produced by Zupe and recorded using seven different studios in five states, this album sounds clean, bright and full. Na zdrowia! (Nostrovia!) is a feisty polka party that will jump from your favorite listening device, bring smiles and laughter from your soul, and could well have you dancing throughout your living space. Zupe and the Polka Commandos deliver a spirited, charged polka joyride!

The album can be obtained through Zupe's website, (www.zupe.net), as well as online digital platforms.