

## Mp3 Rotondi - Preaching + Confessing



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Crazy alternative polka from the 1980's, political and social satire under the infectious beat. 12 MP3 Songs

**WORLD: Polka, FOLK: Folk Pop Details:** "I first heard Rotondi on the Polka Comes to Your Haus compilation CD and was knocked out by their song "Blue Polka." It's your chance to hear one of the seminal bands of New Wave Polka. Back in the day, Rotondi (named for an eccentric vegetarian author from California) could be found playing on the same bill with Brave Combo and Polkacide. The band members were a wickedly talented bunch: lead singer Tony Patellis went on to a career in theater but in Rotondi, he was a powerful and expressive vocalist. Bassist Peter Curry has backed Eddy "The Chief" Clearwater (a name that should be familiar to true EBV fans) and played in many bands including Los Straitjackets and The Halibuts. Mike Rose, who lent his classic sax chops to "She's the Lion," a Paul Lacques original with an Mbube-like groove, has played with the Ventures and done much other session work. All the music is original, written or co-written by Paul Lacques, the mad genius who put this wild bunch together. Paul has started or performed with more bands than almost any human alive today. Overall, the material ranges from manic to sweetly charming." --Nostradamus, THE POLKA PAGE

**POLKA CHANGED MY LIFE ONE DAY** A reminiscence by director Christopher Monger My phone rang on a still, earthquake-weather, lizard-skin, orange-air L.A. day back in 85. It was too hot to even pick up the receiver but then I heard Lacques voice on my machine and Lacques was always worth talking to. Paul Lacques then and now was and is a stellar presence in several LA bands. You could take in three clubs a week in Hollywood and find Paul playing in all of them. But on that blistering day he was calling in a panic: Hed written a musical centered around his most recent band, and with just a week left before opening night, he had lost the director. Would I take a look at the show and offer advice? The Wallenboyd theatre was situated, unsurprisingly, at the corner of Wall Street and Boyd Street in downtown LA. Far

from the wealth and glamour of Tinseltown this is a place where it wasn't worth locking your car, but it was a really good idea to take out the battery and distributor. Heck, one guy I know lost his whole damn steering column. I found Paul and his new seven-piece band ROTONDI in a large, even hotter, basement, overcrowding a tiny stage. The rest of the room was filled with enough bleachers for just ninety-nine people. The play was called Rotondi. One of the first songs it was a musical - was also called Rotondi. I guess it was my introduction to Rotondi. The first big surprise was seeing Paul a stunning guitar player - sitting in on drums. And there was Peter Curry an established drummer, playing bass. The only other face I knew was Ray Symczyk, a guitarist from the Ghanaian-Nigerian band, SANKOFA. And Ray was playing mandolin. Hello? The bigger surprise was that the music driving this mad musical was Polka. Yep. Let me repeat that: POLKA. New Polka, New Wave Polka, Next Wave Polka, Future Polka, Punk Polka, Accordion Rock none of these terms had yet been used but this is what these guys were playing or attempting to play on their unfamiliar instruments. It was novel and yet while Rotondi was being born here in an LA basement, Brave Combo were already playing the stuff in Texas and Polkacide were emerging in San Francisco. It was going to be a strange summer. I had strolled in, ready to watch a performance, offer a few words of advice and split. Truth is that by the weekend I was taking dance lessons and after that I don't think I missed a Rotondi performance for the next two years. While the play was running, Paul and I liked to disseminate wild histories for the Press. We tried to spread the rumor that the band were a bunch of mittel-Europeans stowaways who had been thrown ashore one gloomy night in San Pedro. They were playing - the only way they knew how - in the hope of raising enough cash to go home. Another version had Paul, Richie and Tony encountering a glowing dancing figure in the sky who proclaimed that the saving of mankind would be Polka. These were the tamer versions. Some of the others included wrestling and vampires. The truth was a little more down-to-earth, but just as interesting. Rotondi the band had actually been born the year before and had played just a couple of songs at a handful of gigs. One of them a jazz-fusion joint called AT MY PLACE emptied at the mere sight of Richies accordion - he didn't need to play a note. This great idea was Paul's brainchild after a day stuck in a motel in New Jersey, in a blizzard. His room had one radio station that only played polka. While Paul was a guy who had played every style from Rockabilly to Reggae to World Beat, even he had no time for these endless Polkas, but after a while the music started to get to him. By the end of the day he was making calls to organize a band. Of course if you live in Los Angeles, it's pretty hard to miss Mexican

Polka which blasts from cars and restaurants, but Paul swears that it was the day in Jersey that made him really listen. After the snow-bound indoctrination he realized that while he still didnt relate to most of the lyrics, he loved the pace, the arrangements, the sheer drive of the playing. Within months hed pulled together a bunch of players who would be the core of Rotondi. Apart from the already mentioned Ray Symczyk and Peter Curry, there were three other players: On accordion was blues pianist Richie Lawrence (listen to Now All She Wants To Do Is The Polka and youll hear those roots). Paul and Richie had long admired each others work but had never been in the same band. It was to be a great pairing for together and singly they would write many polkas for the group. Peter Lacques, one of Pauls enormous family, was on rhythm guitar and harmonica; and for the first run of Rotondi - The Play Antoinette Toni Hilary Marcus played a mean Gypsy violin. In time she was replaced by Mike Rose on saxophone (also formerly of Sankofa), who plays on all these tracks. Originally at the front of the band were two vocalists. On just one number the renowned actress, Robin Ginsburg, sang as The Polish Queen. For the rest of the night the spotlight was filled, literally, with the crazed energy of Anthony Tony Patellis. Paul didnt know Tony but had gone to see Robin Ginsburg in a musical version of Twelfth Night and had been captivated by the guy playing Malvolio. This actor Patellis - sang like an angel, projected like the devil and had the amazing ability to sustain a note long enough to bring the most world-weary audience to a standing ovation. Paul caught up with him backstage. Wanna join a Polka Band? asked Paul. Sure, replied Tony which only goes to show that if you have the balls to ask outrageously silly questions, youll get equally outrageous answers. But with this great bunch of musicians Paul now pulled a particularly Lacquesian stunt: They were, for the most part, to take up unfamiliar instruments. These guys werent going to just play Polka they were going to re-invent it. So with this tabula-rasa-band in place, Paul started to write. The first three songs to appear from his addled mind - Polka Changed My Life Today, Why Cant My Mother Be The Leader of the Church and Theresa - were all written on the same afternoon. It started with a flood, it continued as a deluge. Within a short space of time Paul and Richie had written sixteen songs. And yes they all sound like polkas and oh no, they really dont. Many of them were very theatrical (just listen to Oh Java) and it was a natural extension to introduce bridging monologues and dialogues which turned this set list into a play. To this day I would find it hard to tell you the plot-line of Rotondi The Musical and I watched all the performances and was the putative director. What I can tell you is that the first night was an abject disaster. The show ended with an accappella downbeat song.

Rather than a climax, or an ending, it was a withering stop. The lights went out and I had to lead the applause because the audience had no idea that it was over. They filed out, mystified. Guys! Guys! You gotta end upbeat! rasped the plays producer, Scott Kellman, and on the next night we reprised Polka Changed My Life Today! as the finale. The band played faster and faster and just when it should have all ended, Tony grabbed a member of the front row and started to dance. Moments later the whole audience were dancing. And the band kept playing. For weeks. Months. Suddenly, bizarrely, strangely, we had a hit. The play with its themes of redemptive love; of the curative powers of song and dance; of the dangers and joys of coffee; of Krupp, the arms manufacturer, and the dark shadow side of the amoral, raging human ego; and Doctor Rotondi (more of him in a moment) seemed to release audiences. None of them could have summarized the show, let alone parse or explain it. But for a strange ninety minutes audiences were taken on a unique journey through the music of Lawrence and Lacques and were left at the end, inspired to feel and share simple joy. If Paul and Richie share the writing credits, and the band the performance credits, two other figures were crucial. The first was the bands namesake, Doctor Pietro Rotondi; the second was Tony Patellis. I never met Doctor Rotondi but both Paul and Tony had independently known him. Pietro Rotondi, Theosophist, vegetarian and naturopath lived in East Hollywood, surrounded by an herb garden. He arrived in America from Sicily, at five years old without parent, guardian or knowledge of English. In 1918, after the tragic death of his young wife in the influenza epidemic, he came to LA, became a theosophist and dedicated his life to natural healing. He saw Rotondi play once before his death in 1986 at 96 years old. Quite what he made of it well never know, but his vitality and eccentricity were a great inspiration to Tony and Paul. If Pietro Rotondi was the inspiration, Tony Patellis was the execution. He didnt sing at the front of this polka band, he roared and raged and simpered and crooned. He danced and lunged and sweated and leapt. He made faces, he made gestures, he made music, he made mad. All the band members took on, over the course of the show, a set of comical personas. But Tony, out at the front, was crazily serious. Very often it felt that one was watching a man in the agonies of a Faustian pact. He pulled from the audiences emotion amplified it and pumped it right back at them. Its the kind of energy that is hard to replicate in the studio, so were lucky that there are two live tracks on this compilation (Oh Java and Rotondi) that give you Tony live, Tony released, Tony Unbound. None of us thought that the play at the Wallenboyd would last more than a few weeks, but instead it played for months and then moved on to a supper club on Sunset Boulevard,

Mischas. Mischas is where the band finally learned to play and really perform. At the theatre the audience were committed they had bought a ticket and weren't likely to leave early and face a lone walk to their car in that neighborhood. But at Mischas the polka band had to grab the attention of diners and drinkers. It was a strange venue. Paul Lacques talks of playing his satirical song Lets Lower Our Standards and Have A Real Good Time! to a group of drunken executives who were roaring their approval of the lyric. For a moment it was Weimar Germany. At Mischas, with this odd collision of downtown and uptown cultures, the energy increased. With the departure of violinist Hilary Marcus, a Gypsy sound (which remained with the mandolin and accordion) was now augmented by Mike Roses exquisite saxophone: One moment Klezmer, next moment Albert Ayler, Rose could be relied upon to push and pull the band into deeper musical realms. By now the band had a following and whenever and wherever Rotondi played they could count on an increasing number of fans showing up to Polka, or Slam-Polka, or just dance like mad people. The fans included older folks in real plaid who desperately wanted to dance. Right alongside them were younger punks, in even wilder plaids, doing their best to keep up. It was, let me tell you, a scene. With the weekly shows at Mischas, Rotondi started to secure more nightclub gigs: Club Lingerie, the Anti-Club, The Blue Lagoon, Trancas soon Rotondi was all over the LA area. Sometimes they would double-bill with Pauls other band of the hour The Bonedaddys and you could hear both bands cover Shes The Lion in two totally different ways. And sometimes they played with other New Wave Polka Bands. Billed as the POLKA WARS! at Club Lingerie, Rotondi took the stage with SFs Polkacide and Austins Brave Combo. It was a wild night. Dancing? You don't know the meaning of the word less you were at one of those shows! The dancefloor not that you could see a square inch for pounding feet - was literally awash in beer. Sweat condensed and ran down the walls. At the end of the night the floor was studded with heels pulled from womens shoes, buttons ripped from mens shirts. This was physical. Ever done the Polka? Or put it another way ever done high-impact aerobics, while hanging onto someone else and trying to negotiate your way across and through a crowded dancefloor? Find it hard to imagine? Get one of those old Hollywood movies where a ballroom-full of aristocrats do the Waltz. Press fast forward and then imagine what a bunch of punks could do thrown into that mix. It was Marie Antoinettes court on leaded, it was bumper cars without the cars. The first Rotondi CD was released in late 86 and by now the Polka Press (yes, there is such a thing) started to report on New Wave Polka. It was only a matter of time before Rotondi would have to go on the road and meet the very acts they were

parodying. A lot of the Polka Press muttered dire warnings and threatened a ban on New Wave Polka, but one of the great figures of Polka - none other than Jimmy Sturr - invited Rotondi and personally MC'd their first show at JIMMY STURRS ALL AMERICAN POLKAFEST in upstate NY. Rotondi had walked through the looking glass. It was the first time I heard how Polka was supposed to sound, says Richie. I would be lying if I said that mainstream polka fans warmed immediately to Rotondi but I think a grudging respect developed. After all, here was a band that was expanding and enriching the polka tradition. In time some of the most hardened cynics and naysayers softened. There were another two albums (on ROM records) within a couple of years, and other tours of the Mid-West. There were appearances at New Yorks CBGB, with Dennis Moody guarding the truck with a tire iron. There were plenty of gigs in LA and several television appearances. When David Byrne got married, he had Rotondi play at his reception. There was talk of the show going to Off-Broadway. There was talk of a movie. And then Rotondi did what most bands do it slowly fell apart. Peter Curry didn't want to tour (not the way they would have toured) and was replaced by surf-guitarist John Noreen. The next guy to go was Lacques himself. The joke was that when Paul started he had been a lousy drummer. He'd taken up the drums in a fit of hubris and had the horrible surprise that it was harder than it looked. And it's harder still to whack out that relentless 2/4 Polka. But within a couple of years Paul had become a mighty Polka thrasher. However, the Bonedaddys were starting to tour most of the year, and Paul chose to put his energy back on guitar, with them. Something makes me think he was bored with Rotondi and lugging drums. Not long after, Ray moved to San Antonio and Tony moved to the East Coast. For Ray it was a move deeper into the music. As the only member with Polish, Italian and Irish roots, he leapt at an invitation to play with the great accordionist, Steve Jordan. Now Ray plays a lot of Cajun/Zydeco and bouzouki in the Greek band, IKON. Peter Curry the guy who didn't want to go on the road is now almost continually on the road with Los Straitjackets. And yes, he's still playing bass. Peter Lacques is an environmental and minority rights lawyer but in demand to sit in with his harmonica for many Bay area bands. Mike Rose has since played with Freddie Fender, Charlie Rich and is now with the Elliott Caine Quintet. Richie Lawrence now lives and plays in Sacramento. He plays solo piano, but also still plays accordion, now with The Deltabillies. Tony Patellis has a thriving acting career with long running appearances in the Off-Broadway hit Tony Tinas Wedding and a recurring role on The Sopranos as Charles Cirillo. And Paul? I've lost count of the bands he's started since Rotondi each with a distinctive style. At the time of writing he's doing lots of

sessions, the occasional film soundtrack -- and has just two bands: Double-Naught Spy-Car and I See Hawks In LA. Many of the bands have been novel but none has had the absurd clarity of Rotondis polka. Within a few years of Rotondis demise there would be a swathe of new Irish bands with accordions and fiddles, playing in 2/4 and no-one would call them Polka. Los Lobos Mexican polka (which pre-dated Rotondis) would sweep out from LA to mainstream America and beyond. And all the world fusions would start hitting the airwaves. Is it Ska? Is it Polka? Is it Tex-Mex? Irish Beat? None of the labels seemed to matter any more if they ever did. What mattered were the same old simple things: The songs, the performances and the players. Enjoy.

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