

Viola Turpeinen induction

Brian Juntikka, District 6 delegate to the Michigan State Music Hall Of Fame, has nominated the late *Viola Turpeinen Syrjälä* to be inducted into the Hall Of Fame at a ceremony coincidental with the Ninth Annual Polka Celebration in South Range, Michigan on Sunday, September 16, 2001. It will be the first post-humus induction ever made from the Upper Peninsula and she will join seven others already inducted from the U.P. since 1997. *Arthur Moilanen* of Mass City and *William Stimac* of Dodgeville were the first U.P. inductees in 1997. In 1999, *Edward Raffaelli* of South Range and *Joseph Pleshe* of Portage Township were inducted. Last year, *Richard Debelak* of Munising, *Robert Raffaelli* of South Range and *Tone Pleshe* of Chassel were inducted.

As a small child, Viola Turpeinen and her family moved to Iron River (Iron County), Michigan and it was there she took interest in playing the accordion. She started taking accordion lessons at the age of nine and was playing local dance engagements by the time she was in her early teens.

By the time she was sixteen, Viola Turpeinen was traveling with violinist John Rosendahl. She cut her first records for Columbia in January of 1928 shortly after her eighteenth birthday, and was a Finnish-American musical legend by the time she was twenty-one. Ultimately, she recorded over 100 sides for Columbia, Victor and

Standard record labels. Viola passed away on December 26, 1958 at age 49.

The Michigan State Music Hall Of Fame was organized in 1972 as the "Michigan Polka Hall Of Fame." The name was changed in 2000 when the organization was formally incorporated under Michigan law. Daniel F. Coppens of Troy, Michigan is president of the Hall Of Fame.

Viola Turpeinen Syrjälä

Viola Turpeinen was born November 15, 1909 in Champion (Marquette County), Michigan. She and her family moved to Iron River (Iron County), Michigan a short time later. Legend is that she became fascinated with the accordion as a small child by watching her uncle play the buttonbox. Recognizing her interest, Viola's parents arranged for her to take accordion lessons when she was nine years old.

Viola's accordion instructors were Italian, and as a result, she learned to play Finnish polkas, waltzes and schottisches with a decidedly Italian-staccato accent. It was a fusion of two different musical styles into a brand new style that made Viola Turpeinen and her music extremely popular. By the time she was in her early teens, Viola Turpeinen was already playing public dance engagements – in both Finnish and Italian halls throughout the territory.



Viola Turpeinen in 1926 or in 1927. – Photo: *Martin Koskela, USA.*

In 1926, Viola Turpeinen teamed up with violinist John Rosendahl and re-located to Chicago. From there, she and Rosendahl toured the midwest for about a year but still wanted to reach a larger audience. To accomplish this, they moved to New York City in 1927.

During her early days in New York, Viola Turpeinen had the good fortune of taking additional accordion lessons from Pietro Deiro, one of the leading piano-accordion teachers (and recording artists) of that time. In addition, she and Rosendahl played dance engagements in and around New York City as well as other Finnish communities in the lower New England states. By the time she was eighteen years of age, Viola Tur-

peinen was ready to make records.

Viola Turpeinen and John Rosendahl's first recording session was for the Columbia Phonograph Company in New York City on January 11, 1928. Starting with "Hämärä Sottiisi", a total of four sides were cut. The "wax" wasn't even dry yet when she and Rosendahl switched to Victor Records. On January 30, 1928, Viola Turpeinen cut six sides with John Rosendahl for Victor Records in New York City – starting with "Emman Valssi" (Emma's Waltz). Those records sold so well that another recording session was held by Victor Records before the year was out.

By 1929, Viola Turpeinen's fame had grown to the extent that Antti Syrjaniemi, another Victor recording artist, wrote a song about her performance at a dance in Massachusetts. Based upon "Kaustisen Polkka", it was called "Viola Turpeisen Tanssit Kiipillä" (Viola Turpeinen's Dance At Cape Ann), and he recorded the tune for Victor Records on April 15, 1929.

More Victor records were cut in New York on October 5, 1929. Soon afterward, accordionist Sylvia Polso joined the group and she was featured with them on no less than five sides cut for Victor on August 3, 1931.

John Rosendahl acted as Viola's manager during the time she

was legally considered a minor (under 21 in that era). Even after her twenty-first birthday in November of 1930, he continued in this role until his accidental death in 1933. With Rosendahl's passing, Viola became her own manager and it wasn't long before she organized a new trio featuring herself on piano-accordion, Werner Birch on piano and drummer/cornetist William Syrjälä who she married in 1933. The "Turpeinen Trio" cut six sides for Victor Records on June 18, 1934.

The last Victor sides cut by Viola Turpeinen were made on October 24, 1938, and featured her very first vocal on record. The song was "Unelma Valssi" (Dream-Waltz), written by her husband. Since Victor Records only wanted a couple of accordion solos, her husband did not accompany her to the recording studio that day. While she made no secret of her intent to record the song, Viola surprised her husband by recording the song as a vocal. In fact, he had absolutely no idea she sang on the record until Victor Records sent them a proof copy of the disc just prior to its release. All told, some thirty-three Viola Turpeinen Victor sides were ultimately released.

During the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s, Viola and her husband continued to travel and play dance engagements in the east,

midwest and far western states – always drawing large crowds. In Michigan, her appearances drew record crowds in Kaleva and Detroit in the lower peninsula as well as the upper peninsula communities of South Range, Eben Junction, Escanaba, Marquette, Bessemer, Hancock, Quincy, Calumet, Tapiola and many others.

Viola and William Syrjälä recorded some sixty-two sides for the Standard Phono Corporation between 1946 and 1954. Most of these recordings were later re-issued on LP records under Standard's "Colonial Records" label.

By 1952, she and her husband moved to Palm Beach County, Florida. In the years that followed, Viola became ill and on December 26, 1958, she passed away at the age of 49.

Viola Turpeinen is remembered because she was the most successful Finnish-American musical artist of her time. While many of her musical contemporaries were Finns, Viola was an American-Finn. She wanted to play her style of music to appeal to everyone, and not just those of Finnish background. History proves she was successful. More than anyone else, Viola Turpeinen led the way to popularize Finnish old-time music in North America.

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