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## The End of an Era: The Legendary Versatones to Retire

by Steve Litwin

After forty-seven years, over 6500 appearances, 60 albums, and tours throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and Mexico, Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones are retiring.

All of us look at retirement as the prize at the end of the work road. Retirement allows us to move on to something else, another phase of life, a time to break from the constant routine of the work that occupied our lives for so many years. Everyone deserves a retirement.

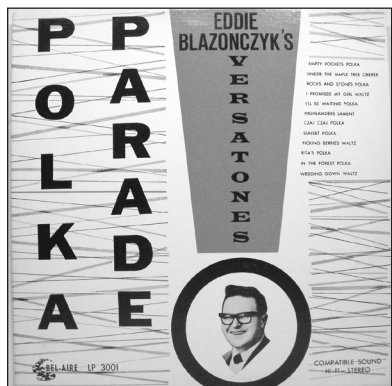
The impact, influence, and dominance of Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones on polka music is unequalled. They set the pace and established a level of excellence that others still follow today. They are Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones and always will be.

It would be difficult to gather past and present members of the Versatones in one location, but we can bring them together virtually to share their feelings, their experiences, their personal memories about those years of being a Versatone on stage and off.

### A VERSATONES VIRTUAL ROUNDTABLE

"Ed Blazonczyk and the Versatones have had their first single 45 rpm released. It is also the first time the Bel Aire label has recorded polka music. The recording consists of two Polish vocals, "In the Forest" polka backed with "Wedding Gown" waltz."

— *Polka Guide*, November-December 1963



**POLKA PARADE.** Bel-Aire 3001, the first record album by Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones.

"I did not start the Versatones, Chet Kowalkowski did. I knew Chet because his parents and my parents were Gorale (Polish Highlanders) and friends for many years. They came from the same Village in Poland. Chet and I hung together as little kids. We both marched in the annual May Day Parades, dressed in our Polish Goralski outfits. My dad played cello and Chet's dad played the fiddle on the floats."

— **Eddie Blazonczyk, Sr.**

"As being one of the original Versatones, and asking Eddie, Sr. to just come on out and sit in with us, never anticipated that the band would take off to such great heights. It was beyond my wildest dreams. We were producing two albums each year. History was being made in 1963."

— **Chet Kowalkowski**

"Chet invited me to sit in with the Versatones in 1963 — that first time we played together was at Club 505. After that job, I encouraged Chet and the Versatones to start recording some albums. They booked studio time at Sound Studios in Chicago, and asked me to play bass on the album. I joined the band shortly

played our wedding" or "you played our Anniversary" and then vividly relate the enjoyment the Versatones brought to their special day — captured forever in their special memory bank."

— **Rich Sendra**, original Versatone, 1959-1969 "Bel-Aire Polka Day, Sunday,



**PRE-1963 VERSATONES.** (l. to r.): Jerry Choholek, Chet Kowalkowski, Rich Sendra and Bob Sendra Photo taken at the Club 505 in Chicago (Hegewisch), Illinois.

after that, and we went on to record fifty-three additional recordings."

— **Eddie Blazonczyk, Sr.**

"Record Session: The Bel-Aire Record Company has release a new LP titled "Polka Parade" with the Versatile Versatones. It consists of 12 snappy polkas, obereks and waltzes with Polish vocals by Chet Kowalkowski and Eddie Blazonczyk on Bel-Aire Records.

— *Polka Guide*, January-February 1964

"I started with the Versatones in August of 1965. Rich Sendra got drafted so Eddie Sr. asked me to take his place. The Versatones always had an accordion, so I was the first concertina player in the band. All I had was an 'A' box (a concertina tuned to play in multiple sharp keys), and the keys these guys were playing in were all over the map, so Eddie goes out and buys three concertinas (A,G and B-flat) so I could grab all the keys. You talk about a challenge! I hoped I would pick up the right box for the tune Eddie called."

— **Wally Maduzia**

"Eddie Senior and I go back almost 50 years. He has always been my idol and a great personal friend and I consider him more of a brother. He took me and my band. The Musical Aires, under his wings in 1963 after we won at the Polka World's Fair beating out 30 other groups. He liked our unique sound and could not believe we were in our teens, between 15-17. We would go on the road with him as the opening act."

— **Rich "Polka Suds" Cerajewski**

"What the Versatones had, worked! The fans knew it, the fans loved it and the fans remembered it! To this day, people come up to me and say "I remember you, you were with the Versatones and you

June 6, 1965. Eleven hours of continuous polka entertainment starting at 2:00 in the afternoon at the Polonia Grove. Five polka bands - Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones, The Casinos, Musical Aires, Bal-Aires, Paliga Polka Dots. First 100 people will receive a free polka record."

— *Polka Guide*, May-June 1965

"We started performing out of state early on. Our first band vehicle was my green Pontiac station wagon. We had many vehicles, trailers, motor homes and buses after that. All of which caused me big headaches! I can't say we ever had good luck with any Versa-mobile."

— **Eddie Blazonczyk, Sr.**

"Polka music was at the height of popularity during my years with The Versatones (1957 to 1967). Playing with the band gave us the opportunity to travel, to record our unique style of music and to showcase that music on T.V. and radio."

— **Bob Sendra**

"Eddie Sr. always had great musicians both musically and personally. To this day, all of the members are friends and maintain friendships. There were no egos, just some really great guys who took their music seriously."

— **Roger Malinowski**

"Working with my friend, Eddie Blazonczyk, in the past was a great ride for me. I enjoyed playing in the band with my fellow musician colleagues. I'm happy to be part of the "Blaz Boys" or Eddie's Versatones. I'll always remember the good times, traveling to different states, recording and performing those polkas and waltzes on stage."

— **Max Kawa**

"As a long time band member of the Versatones I'm saddened to see this band come to a close. The polka field just can't afford to lose any

### New Year's Eve – Last EBV Performance

Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones will make its final performance, New Year's Eve, at the Glendora House, 10225 S. Harlem Ave., Chicago Ridge, Ill. Tickets are now available in advance at Bel-Aire Enterprises 7208 S. Harlem Ave, Bridgeview, Ill. on a first-come / first-serve basis.

Only \$75 per person includes dinner, open bar, dancing, and more. Many Versatones from the past are expected to attend.

The tickets for the New Year's Eve show have been flying out the door. Please give Bel-Aire a call at (708) 594-5182 for the current availability.

more dynamic bands or fans. (Eddie Blazonczyk) Junior gave it his best efforts since Eddie, Sr. retired ten years ago and he deserves our congratulations."

— **Lenny Gomulka**

"As you can imagine, we spent many long hours travelling from place to place in the bus. Eddie would love to play cards, and because of my lack of skill, I was a familiar target. I'll never forget hearing him say, "How 'bout a friendly little wager, Kalhoun?"

— **Kevin Adams**

"As the years went on, I added different instruments to band, and that's how the sound of the Versatones evolved. In 1964 we added Jim Bagrowski and a clarinet to the band. In 1965 Chet and I wanted to record a Po Staro Krajsku (old country) album. We asked Junior Wozniak to record violin on the album. At the time he was playing with Marion Lush. We liked the recording and the sound and the style of music so much, we then asked Junior to join the band, which he did."

— **Eddie Blazonczyk, Sr.**

"I will always treasure those years, but treasure even more the friendships that came after. There will never be anyone or any polka group like Eddie Blazonczyk and the Versatones. They just got better and better and better. God only made one Eddie Blazonczyk and that we need to treasure."

— **Jerry Mytych** 1966-1969, 1971-1972

"I've had the pleasure of being a Versatone under both Eddie, Sr. and Eddie, Jr. One of the things I admired about both of them was their deep commitment to the people, whether it be playing a request or making it a point to acknowledge them individually."

— **Al Piatkowski**

"My thanks to Eddie Nowak for introducing me to Bob and Rich Sendra and Jerry Choholek. The four of us had three wonderful years performing as the original Versatones. Eddie Sr. was a great asset to the band, a leader, song writer,

a good business man, and a gentleman. Thank you, Eddie Sr. for continuing on with the Versatones, for your friendship and fond memories which I will cherish forever. Thanks!"

— **Chet Kowalkowski**

"There is nobody better in the business to work for than Eddie. He's a straight-shooter, and he's a lot of fun. We laughed constantly. When you're on the road as much as we are, you've got to keep things going and it's just a ball with Eddie. He's got this band, the business, the promotion, anything possible in the polka business. Eddie's got it down to a science. Eddie rolls his own ball of wax."

— **Jerry Darlak**, *Polish American Journal*, November 1983.

"Nothing before and no experience since, can compare to the outstanding sixteen years spent with Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones. It was both an honor and privilege to have worked with some of the finest musicians ever to play polka music. Eddie was not only a premier vocalist and musician, but he was also a great bandleader and friend. I will forever be grateful that Eddie took a chance on an east coast trumpet player."

— **Ed Wolinski**

"Our biggest selling CD was *Polka Celebration*. If I had to pick a favorite recording, that would be it. Our fans/friends loved the catchy melody and words to the song. It was an easy one to remember and sing along to. We won a Grammy for that recording, and I can't tell you the excitement that whole experience brought to us."

— **Eddie Blazonczyk, Sr.**

"When we went on the road Eddie and Chet were pranksters, anything to get a laugh. We traveled with six guys in a station wagon so you had to sleep with one eye open hoping you weren't the brunt of the joke and the majority of what went on isn't printable."

— **Wally Maduzia**

*continued next month*



**VERSATONES 1967.** (l. to r.): Chet Kowalkowski, Eddie Blazonczyk, Lenny Gomulka, Wally Maduzia, Bob Sendra, Jim Bagrowski.