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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

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Committees:
Government Reform
Education
and the
Workforce

www.house.gov/kucinich

President William Jefferson Clinton
The White House
Washington D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing in support of the nomination of Frank Yankovic for the National Medal of Arts. The story of Mr. Yankovic's rise from hard scrabble youth on the streets of Cleveland to America's best selling Polka music artist is replete with the sort of values for which all Americans can hold reverence: tradition, ambition, and perseverance.

In a recording career that spanned 60 years, two gold single records, thirty million records sold, and the first Grammy Award in the category of Polka music, Frank Yankovic's "Cleveland-Style Polka" is widely credited with catapulting an Eastern European art form into a mainstay of American music culture. Tinkering with orchestrations and translating lyrics into English, Yankovic proved that Polka music could appeal to millions of Americans and become a vehicle for mass entertainment. His millions of record sales are a testament to this vision.

Born to Slovenian immigrants in 1915, Yankovic found his first audience at age 9, playing Slovenian folk songs on his button box for boarders that lived in the Yankovic family home. Yankovic's recording career began on his own "Yankee" label in 1938 when, performing with three other musicians as the "Slovenian Folk Orchestra," he cut two records that would become instant local hits. By 1943, the "Frank Yankovic Band" was a popular draw in performance halls throughout Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.

Yankovic's career would be put on hold in 1943 when Yankovic volunteered to serve his country in World War II. It was while fighting in the famed Battle of the Bulge that Yankovic was separated from Allied forces only to be found the next day suffering from frost bite so severe that his hands and feet had become gangrenous. Despite doctor's recommendations, Yankovic refused to have his hands and feet amputated. Against improbable odds, the musician was soon back at his craft, entertaining his fellow patients with his accordion. Upon recovery, Yankovic was assigned to special services under which capacity he performed for General George Patton and his legendary Third Army.

Returning to the United States in 1945, Yankovic signed a recording contract with Columbia Records. Yankovic's record sales as part of the Columbia stable of artists were, for their time, unprecedented for any act, let alone a purveyor of Polka music. The musician's success was largely attributable to his intermingling of tradition Slovenian melodies and the Anglo-European Polka beat, an innovation that made Yankovic's brand of "Cleveland-Style" Polka accessible to a wide audience.

An inductee of Chicago's International Polka Association Hall of Fame and the "Cleveland-Style" Polka Hall of Fame, in addition to the Wisconsin and Michigan Polka Halls of Fame, Yankovic has collaborated with an eclectic group of artists, ranging from Duke Ellington to Doris Day to Chet Atkins to Drew Carey. Yankovic was featured with his own float in the 1996 Presidential Inaugural Parade. The "Frank Yankovic Band" has performed to enthusiastic crowds across the country and around the world. The band made its Kennedy Center debut in 1998.

If art, by its most basic definition, is an act of self-expression, then Frank Yankovic's music tells a personal tale that rings true to generations of immigrants whose American experience includes some of our nation's proudest moments, surviving a Great Depression, winning two World Wars, and fulfilling the wildest hopes and dreams of our forefathers. While artistic merit is not measured by populist impulse, any work that depends solely upon abstract aesthetic forms can not help but seem a bit hollow when compared to the vibrant humanity that marks Frank Yankovic's music.

It is for these reasons that we wholeheartedly endorse Mr. Yankovic's nomination for a National Medal of Arts. Thank you for your time in consideration of our request.