
Chapter 33

The Accordions

Program 33 Performances

1. Cousin Fuzzy, "Why Don't You Squeeze Me." 2. Tom Marincel, "Croatian Kolo." 3. Richie Yurkovich, "Marička pegla." 4. Arthur "Zeke" Renard, "A la fête." 5. Louie Bashell, "South." 6. Hank Magayne, "Barking Dog Polka." 7. Jerry Schneider, "Emil's Polka." 8. Tuba Dan and the Polkalanders, "Flutaphone Polka."

Accordion Jamboree

For the past fourteen years on the Sunday after Easter, two or three dozen accordion players have gathered at the Chalet St. Moritz, a Swiss restaurant surrounded by dairy farms just west of Middleton. In front of two or three hundred listeners, these men and women spend a long pleasant afternoon taking turns on stage at the Accordion Jamboree. For many years, Rudy Burkhalter, the patriarch of Swiss music in America, was master of ceremonies. The accordions' variety and appearance are striking: little one-row button boxes have big onion-shaped handles on the stops; two-, three-, and four-row button boxes are encased in gleaming red plastic from Germany or intricate inlaid wood from Slovenia; piano keyboard accordions are bejeweled with rhinestones, with a phalanx of rectangular stops labeled Trumpet, Clarinet, Musette; chromatic button accordions have a dizzying array of black and white dots flanking ribbed bellows emblazoned with a kinetic diamond pattern; electronic cordovoxes are technical wonders running on electricity, not air, the bellows but vestigial reminders of their lineage; and a few other squeezeboxes are not even accordions at all, but concertinas and a bandoneon.

The players play only the southern Wisconsin sampling of the diverse ethnicities and musical styles of the accordion world: Swiss *ländler*s, German and Slovenian polkas, Polish *obereks*, Finnish *hoppwaltzes*, Irish and Scottish jigs, Norwegian *schottisches*, French-Canadian reels, Italian operetta overtures, Czech waltzes, a few jazz numbers, and some country and western tunes.

Squeezebox Typology

One of the most successful musical instruments in history, the accordion is played on all inhabited continents of the earth and has become central to numerous musical traditions. The various contemporary types of accordion result from the tinkering of nineteenth-century inventors who sought to create new sounds and to automate the playing by using a cluster of mechanical levers and springs—the latest technology of the Machine Age. The accordion relies upon the basic principle of the free reed to produce its tone. Earlier European reed instruments such as the oboe, clarinet, pipe organ, and bagpipes use "beating reeds," that is, reeds that produce a sound by vibrating against another sur-

face—another reed, the player's mouth, a mouthpiece, or a metal pipe. The free reed, in contrast, is fitted into a tight frame, but is attached to it or touches it at only one end. When air is forced through a passage containing the reed, the air in escaping makes the reed move or vibrate in the frame, and so produces a sound.

Although the idea of the free reed was certainly known earlier, it was not until 1777 when a French Jesuit missionary, Father Joseph Amiot, sent to Europe a Chinese free reed instrument, the *tcheng*, that European inventors began to take a keen interest in developing new free reed instruments. The first innovation was the reed or parlor organ, devised to replace earlier, less practical attempts to produce a portable pipe organ.

In 1821 a German named Buschmann invented a basic harmonica, a mouth-blown free reed instrument that he called the *aura*. The next year, he devised the *handaeoline*, a harmonica blown by a small bellows pumped by the left hand with a keyboard of buttons to be played by the right. Like the harmonica, a different chord is produced depending on whether the bellows is pushing air out or drawing air in through the reeds. In essence, this was the origin of the right-hand melodic side of the accordion. In 1829, it occurred to Cyril Damian, an organ builder from Vienna, that the left hand could do more than just pump the bellows. He added a second box to the left side of the *handaeoline* with two levers to play an accompanying bass note and chord for each direction of the bellows. Damian dubbed his innovation "accordion" after the German word *akkord* (chord). It was a one-row diatonic button box—an instrument that is still manufactured and played today.

Other inventors, mainly French, improved upon Damian's patent and added more buttons, rows, basses, and chords in an effort to increase the accordion's versatility. Button accordions of various sizes and designs proliferated and became very popular, even integral, to the musical traditions of many nationalities, like the Swiss, Bavarians, Austrians, Slovenians, and Czechs of central Europe; the Mexicans in northern Mexico and the American Southwest; the Cajuns in southern Louisiana; the Irish; and the Dominicans and Haitians of the Caribbean.

Button accordions are often mistakenly called "concertinas" by the uninitiated, sharing as they do buttons and bellows and free reeds. The concertina, however, has no single buttons producing pre-set chords, and it stems from a completely separate lineage. The octagonal English concertina was invented—also in 1829—by English physicist Sir Charles Wheatstone. His invention is a chromatic instrument with uniform tone regardless of the direction of the bellows. Around the same time German technicians in Chemnitz began to develop a larger, basically rectangular diatonic concertina.

The first fully chromatic accordion with uniform tone was created in 1892 by a Belgian inventor, Armand Loriaux. These button chromatics are widely played by contemporary musicians in Europe and many contend that they are the most versatile type of accordion. The button arrangement was developed in 1882 by the Hungarian inventor van Janko, who proposed that it should replace the piano keyboard. Since the fingerings for all scales are identical, a player has to learn only one scale and can easily transpose keys. Though pianists were not persuaded to abandon their traditional keyboard, the buttons caught on among European accordionists.

In 1909 accordions with a piano keyboard arrangement for the right hand and the 120 bass Stradella left hand were introduced. These came to predominate in the United States, where the chromatic button accordion is still a relative rarity. Although the diatonic button box was already ingrained in the musical tradi-



Alfonso Baldoni posing with a Baldoni button accordion in his Milwaukee store, 1990 **Photo: Jim Leary**

tions of a number of American culture groups, by the 1920s many players were drawn to the modernity and versatility of the piano accordion. One of the first virtuosos on the piano accordion, Pietro Deiro, popularized the instrument not only among his fellow Italian Americans, but also for the general public. Dick Contino, Lawrence Welk, Pee Wee King, Frankie Yankovic, and Myron Floren are some of the most influential players, who helped incorporate the piano accordion into popular dance band and western music and created a 1950s polka fad.

After the emergence of rock 'n' roll in the later 1950s, the accordion became less popular, although it remained crucial in various ethnic traditions. Today, as pop musicians seek to incorporate some of the ethnic sounds of Cajun, Zydeco, and Texas Norteno music, the squeezebox is enjoying a robust revival. Although it is unlikely ever to challenge the popularity of the guitar, the accordion has shown up recently in the bands of pop musicians Bruce Springsteen, Tom Waites, Ry Cooder, and John Cougar Mellencamp. Buoyed by the recently increased visibility of the accordion in mainstream media, the many accordionists of Wisconsin and the Upper Midwest can be proud that they never lost the faith!