

Alfonso and Ivo Baldoni

The Baldonis run A. Baldoni Music Service in Milwaukee, an outlet for the sale and repair of accordions and guitars. Both Alfonso and his son, Ivo, were born in Castelfidardo, Italy, a city which is to accordion-making as Cremona is to violin-making. Accordions have been crafted in Castelfidardo for more than a century, and the city has produced master builders and innovators of the button accordion (Pasquale Ficosecco) and the piano accordion (Paolo Soprani).

Like his father, a reed maker, Alfonso Baldoni learned the craft of reed making and tuning. He progressed to learn all aspects of accordion construction and in his early twenties was foreman for an accordion manufacturing company. In the mid-1950s, Baldoni was hired to come to the United States and work for an American accordion company. Eventually he built a basement workshop and began repairing and building instruments. By the early 1970s he quit his job and began an enterprise in partnership with his son, Ivo. Born in 1954, Ivo learned the rudiments of accordion-making from his father, but soon branched out into the repair, restoration, and construction of guitars.

Eventually the Baldonis formed a partnership with relatives in Castelfidardo. Today they co-own a plant in the old country which manufactures accordions for the American market for Baldoni's specifications. Between them the father and son spend a good share of each year in the old country supervising operations. Once accordions are shipped from Italy to Milwaukee, they are customized to please a broad clientele that ranges from the smooth jazzy nightclub accordionist Charles Nunzio to the more raucous Slovenian polka style of Frankie Yankovic's longtime sideman Joey Miskulin.

Baldoni instruments include a standard piano accordion aimed at the American Polka market, a jazz and chamber model, an electronic accordion fitted with digital features, an array of button accordions (some of them aimed at Italian, Slovenian, Chicano, and Cajun markets), and a concertina (of the sort favored by German and Polish polka bands). The Baldonis stress high quality in their reeds and woods, the overall construction, and the design. Their success in business suggests that accordion players appreciate what they are doing.

In addition to being a fine instrument-maker, Alfonso Baldoni is a gifted player on both piano and button accordion, with a nice repertoire of old time Italian dance tunes on the latter. The Baldonis put on "Accordion Jamboree" around the country from time-to-time, hiring virtuoso players to demonstrate the capacities of their various instruments.

Supporting Materials: 1) a recent catalogue of the Baldoni line of instruments, 2) photocopies of newspaper articles and testimonies from customers compiled by the Baldonis, 3) a taped interview & index; 4) slides & B&W prints.

Availability: The Baldonis are quite willing to loan instruments. I would suggest a standard piano accordion and one of the small Ficosecco button accordions. The Baldonis would also be willing to loan a "disembodied" piano accordion to show the instrument's inner workings.

Special Considerations: As a younger man on his way up, Ivo seems the most able promoter of Baldoni instruments to the public and it would be best to work with him. Contact by early December as the Baldoni shop will close for part of the winter. An "Accordion Jamboree" might work well in a museum.

TAPE LOG COVER SHEET

Wisconsin Folk Museum/for
Cedarburg Cultural Center
Mount Horeb, Wisconsin 53572

Date(s): October 12, 1989
Interviewee: Ivo & Alfonso Baldoni
Address: [REDACTED]
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53212

Phone: [REDACTED]

Equipment Used: Superscope C-202LP
Stereo: no Dolby: no
Tape Brand/Length: Sony HF-60
Amount Used: Side 1: 2/3
Side 2: all
General Subject: musical instrument
making
Fieldworker(s): James P. Leary
Recording Location: Baldoni store
Other People Present: customers and
other workers

SUMMARY OF RECORDING CONTEXT AND TAPE CONTENTS

Ivo Baldoni and I had an extended interview in his office just off the spacious showroom of the Baldoni instrument store. Topics concerned the background of the Baldoni family and their involvement with instrument making. Technical aspects of instrument making, business aspects, aesthetics, relations with customers, etc. The last 15 minutes of the session involved Ivo's father, Alfonso, playing tunes on various Baldoni accordions.

NOTE: The Baldoni interview is on a cassette that begins with interviews at Karpek's accordion store.

TAPE INDEX

Interview With: Ivo and Alfonso Baldoni

Date: October 12, 1989

Tape 1, Side 1 [Immediately following Karpek interview.]

1. Ivo born in Castelfidardo in northern Italy on Adriatic Coast, "a town where the accordion was invented back in the early 1800s." Ivo 4th generation doing accordion work. Started as artisans, great-grandfather and grandfather, making components for accordion companies. Grandfather a noted reed maker. Alfonso became head tuner for Castelfidardo. [Might work for DHD.]
2. Alfonso hired to come to USA to work for accordion manufacturer. Late 1970s decided to break away from big companies and, with relatives, to start something on their own. Design accordions in Milwaukee for the American market, but made in Italy.
3. Alfonso b. 1/4/24, Ivo 6/12/53. Al came over in 1958, family followed in 1959. Family has gone back and forth since. Was in Italy in mid-1960s, then persuaded to return in late 1960s. Now travel back and forth frequently. Between A and I, spend 5 months annually at facilities in Italy.
4. Al working for CMI when first immigrated. Conglomerate owning Gibson, Moog, accordion companies. Based in Chicago area.
5. Al chose Milwaukee for quality of life in that city. First went to NYC. Didn't like the fast past, the environment intimidating for raising a family. Felt the same about Chicago. Milwaukee chosen for business reasons too. In the middle of the country, accessible to either coast--central.
6. Ship to all 50 states. Lots of business in "stronghold" of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio. Very strong states for ethnic music. Ditto Florida because of retirement communities. Lots in California, and in New Jersey and New York.
7. Accordions shipped directly to Baldoni in Milwaukee, then checked and modified for customers and shipped out.
8. Anything that bears Baldoni name exclusively their product. Part owners with the company in Italy and invest in it. Company makes accordions exclusively for Baldoni in America, but they have control of the European market.
9. Neighborhood around their current store used to be an Italian neighborhood, but now only Italian restaurants in evidence. Picked location instead because it is close and convenient to downtown, but distant enough to make access and parking easy.
10. Don't make a generic product. Accordions are designed for American polka music, for jazz, for Germans, Austrians, and Yugoslavians, for Cajuns, for Mexicans, and accordions with MIDI capabilities (Musical Instrument Digital Interface). "We make a product to fit all pockets, all areas."
11. Baldoni accordions different from others in quality of materials: body not plywood but solid wood; soundboard not pine but Norwegian spruce; reeds not

semi-hand-finished, but handmade. "It's like manufacturing your standard automobile or a piece of artwork. It's like taking a Chevrolet or a Mercedes." [Good quote for DHD.]

12. Regarding design, get advice from the musicians themselves. Many manufacturers design for profitability and ease of production. Baldoni does the reverse, takes pains with "the spacing of the keys, the lifting of the keys, the response, the folds of the bellow." [Good quote.]

13. Steve and Vern Meisner, Gordon Hartmann and other regional accordion players "have contributed to the development of our product."

14. On specific changes/modifications suggested by noted regional accordionists. Wanted light weight accordion that can give the volume, the compression of a larger accordion. Weighs 20 #s.

15. Slovenian style musicians an important part of their clientele. On the West Coast, Giovento, Art Van Damme, Frankie Morocco, etc. want an accordion for a mellow, melodic jazzy tonality. Keyboard has a shallower response, chamber is different.

16. Star most noted concertina on the market. Has a certain spacing, look, and sound that people are used to. Tries to work off the Star model, but reckons their reed quality is higher. They also include electronic capabilities in all their concertinas.

17. Making a concertina of a special design for Brian Erickson. Size, dimension, key arrangement completely different. This is an experiment that they will promote to see if others will be interested in the changes.

18. Don Gralak has done some shows for Baldoni, but he has done work mostly with Star. Baldoni not out to steal musicians from other companies. Willing to help and cooperate with others. Have serviced instruments for their competitors for years.

19. Servicing their instruments is essential. Many of their instruments have been customized.

20. Baldoni store run "pretty much as a professional business, not too many people come here just to spend the day." Not a hangout. Not a lot of walk-in trade, but appointments common.

21. Do promotions periodically. Two major instrument shows in midwest and on the coast. Also do a dozen or so "jamborees" or shows around the region. Try to make the shows entertaining so as to get young people interested. [A possibility for programming at exhibit sites?] Bring in a featured artist for their shows. Brought in Charles Nunzio from New York for one. Has had Don Gralak [Milwaukee, concertina], Mike Ashworth [Madison, jazz accordion], Gordon Hartmann [Madison, American polka accordion], Art Gasch [LaCrosse area, button accordion]. Send out invitations exclusively to musicians and their guests. Often draw 400-600 people.

22. Reckons an accordion can be used "in many applications," for many kinds of

music.

End of Cassette 1, Side 1. Begin Side 2.

23. Oakley Yale (sp?) of California scores music for films and runs an accordion orchestra that tours around.
24. Doesn't know enough to speak accurately about the involvement of Italians in accordion production in the USA. His dad knew and tuned accordions for Charles Nunzio in Italy prior to WWII.
25. Baldonis serve Mexican bands in Chicago, Rockford, even Texas. Refers me to a local Milwaukee promotor of Mexican bands, Rudy Borrego [REDACTED, Milwaukee, WI 53204, REDACTED.]
26. Ivo has an old accordion made by Paolo Soprani, "the inventor of the accordion," from Castelfidardo. Dates to ca. 1860. Might be good in the exhibit, says Ivo. Soprani a farmer who saw crude instrument with a reed and bellow played in the village by a peddler. Reckoned he could do better. [Ivo will be donating this to the museum back home soon.]
27. Possible to supply Cedarburg with disassembled accordion to show inner workings, reeds, etc. Accordion has more moving parts than any other acoustic instrument, including the piano. Over 240 reeds, can go up to 400. Intricate mechanism of the "bass machine . . . is very intricate."
28. Family has no historical photographs in this country. Family home still maintained in Italy.

Interview with Ivo concludes, Alfonso plays an assortment of tunes on different instruments.

Ivo states that store will be closed January 18-24. Major show then.

29. "Esperanza Perduda," Lost Hope. Played on their standard model piano accordion.
30. "Spring Polka," an Italian tune played on the "Premiata Fabrica Armoniche" button accordion made after the model of Comm. [Commander] Pasquale Ficosecco, a noted manufacturer of button accordions in Castelfidardo. A model made for Italian folk revival groups. [Good for DHD.]
31. Baldonis are currently making a rock accordion for the BoDeans.
32. Ivo explains the versatility of the Baldoni accordion with MIDI features. Can tie into any state of the art sound modules and control it from the accordion. Can simultaneously do bass runs, chord structure, and solo workings.
33. Ivo plays a tune on the MIDI.
34. Another tune on the MIDI.
35. Tarantella, on the MIDI.

END OF SESSION