

The Accordion The People's Instrument

by Len Wallace

"The only person who can play both ends against the middle and get away with it is an accordion player."

--Anonymous

Rumour has it that the accordion is enjoying a resurgence of popularity as of late. It's about time. No other instrument around has been so established in the homes of working people for so many years, yet no other instrument has been the butt of so many disparaging remarks.

Tell someone you play the accordion and they immediately conjure up visions of Lawrence Welk, of oom-pah-pah polka bands or a slick-haired accordionist grimacing and gyrating to the tune of "Lady of Spain." Take it from me. After 26 years of playing the accordion (mostly classical or folk music), I still cringe when someone in the audience cries out "Play the Beer Barrel Polka." Such is what North American "pop" (as opposed to "popular") music has conditioned us to accept in the past twenty years.

What has impressed me over the past few years of increasingly playing labour music is that the accordion has a forgotten history of being a popular instrument of working people. That history proper begins in Europe. The accordion was invented in 1822 by Friedrich Buschmann of Berlin. He called it the "Handaoline" (hand aeoline). Seven years later, the Viennese Cyril Demian improved it and called the "Akkordion." Competitors called their copies "Handharmonika." The variant is the concertina devised by Charles Wheatstone of London in 1829. In 1852, the application of a piano-type keyboard to the accordion was patented in Paris and became known as the "accordion-piano" or piano accordion.

Its use quickly spread across Europe. From the Urals of Russia through eastern and central Europe, the Mediterranean countries, to Britain, Scotland, and Ireland, it would be hard to name one country in which the accordion did not play a significant role in its music tradition. The instrument has even been characterised in literature as downright heroic. Note the following excerpt from the 1929 Soviet novel by Nicholas Ostrovski's **Making of a Hero**:

That evening Paul played unusually well, and when to everybody's amazement, lanky Pankratov started dancing, Paul forgot himself, and the accordion obtained new strength and burst into a music of fire. The instrument spoke of past days, of fiery years and then of the comradeship of today, of the struggle and joy they were living through.

It was truly the people's instrument. It was earthy, loud and took skill to play well. John Berger's characterization of the instrument indicated these qualities:

Perhaps they are right, those who pretend there are harps in heaven. Maybe flutes and violins too. But I'm sure there are no accordions, just as I'm sure there's no green cow shit that smells of wild garlic. The accordion was made for life on this earth, the left hand marking the bass and the heartbeats, the arms and shoulders labouring to make breath, and the right hand fingering for hopes!

--"The Accordion Player." **Granta** New York 1986.

Its popularity spread from its European home to a number of Arabic countries, and is used today by striking black workers of South Africa and in the folk music of Central and South America.

It was originally brought to North America by working people. It was compact and versatile. What other instrument could compete with it? It was small enough to carry and was many instruments in one. One person could play melody, chords, bass and punch out a rhythm. Although making one took great skill, smaller versions were still affordable enough to working men and women. It was "the poor man's piano" in contrast to the instruments of the well-to-do.

Look at some old photographs from unionizing efforts and of workers banding together and invariably you will find someone playing the accordion. Perhaps you can recall the well-known photo from 1940 of Agnes "Sis" Cunningham playing her accordion for the UCAPA workers, or the famous photo of an older black gent in uniform playing the accordion during the funeral procession for FDR. Or how about the unforgettable final scene from the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* after the ordinary townspeople came to the aid of hero Jimmy Stewart to save him from the clutches of the greedy, evil banker? What instrument was being played while every sang "Auld Lang Syne"? It wasn't a guitar.

The "disappearance" of the accordion from the general music scene may have a lot to do with the issues of both social class and ethnicity. The commercial pop music boom emphasised non-ethnic and non-class values and, in North America at least, social class is linked in many ways to ethnicity. If you were growing up in an eastern European, working class family you had a greater chance of playing an accordion than if you were from an upper middle income family. If you grew up striving to become upwardly mobile, it meant that you ditched your accordion and picked up something else to play. Being working class and ethnic was not considered "hip." And if "hip" is defined by those above you (whether it be music, fashion, etc.), then being "unhip" meant being a failure.

Alistair Brown, a button accordion player now residing in London, Ontario, commented to me that people stopped playing accordion with the proliferation of radio and television. "People just didn't make their own music as much ... just like home baking, they no longer did it for themselves." When the sixties folk music resurgence came along it was a western idea of folk music. It was not until people started digging back into the roots of folk music that the accordion was "rediscovered."

The resurgence of Celtic and Québécois folk music in the seventies, the burgeoning recognition of Zydeco, Tex-Mex, Klezmer and Cajun music has forced many people to reconsider its unique qualities. Alistair Brown feels that the term "resurgence" may be a misnomer. In the communities that enjoyed such music, the accordion needed little revival since it never disappeared. What has happened is that links of these forms to contemporary rock have necessarily highlighted its use. Its unique sounds have thus come through in the works of, amongst others, Ry Cooder, John Cougar Mellencamp, Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel, The Pogues and Los Lobos.

At the Labour Heritage Song Exchange in Washington, D.C., a few years ago, there were two accordions amongst a sea of guitars. Labour singer Joe Glazer seemed delightfully surprised and commented that this perhaps signalled an end to the guitar monopoly. Perhaps he's right. So when you think of "people's music," forget the guitar. Remember, you can't play the Third Movement of Tchaikovsky's Concerto Opus 35 for Violin and Orchestra on a guitar. You can on the squeezebox. And believe me, you've never heard "Union Maid" till you've heard it on the accordion.

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