

## **Accordions in Louisiana**

The mother of all accordions was a Chinese invention called a Sheng which consisted of a mouth piece connected to a bowl from which protruded a series of bamboo cane pipes internally implanted with vibrating steel reeds. To make the reeds vibrate, the player would blow into the mouth piece creating an ancient music of reed tonality. From this primitive beginning came many adaptations of the free reed. In around 1830, Europeans came forth with a refined and playable free reed instrument eventually modifying this concept to incorporate a set of bellows to drive the reeds instead of blowing into a mouth piece. The cane pipes were replaced with a right hand keyboard having buttons arranged in various configurations. Since the only function of the left hand was to pump the bellows providing an air source to drive the reeds, a system of buttons was also added to the left side for the bass/chord accompaniment. Such an instrument could now play a melody on the right side and play the bass chord accompaniment on the left side. Since the air source was no longer generated by the lungs, this made it possible for the player to sing to his own accompaniment. Here was an instrument that could make a lot of music even in the hands of a beginner. It was very easy to play, and just about anyone could pick it up and play a simple tune. For these reasons alone, the mid-1800s saw the popularity of this instrument mushroom in Germany to the extent that an accordion having ten treble buttons playing a major scale, two bass chords accompaniments along with the voices or stops placed on the top side of the instrument became internationally known as a "German style" accordion or "Melodeon". It became popular in regional music on a world-wide scale, and it appears in early Daguerretype in Japan, Alaska, Africa, Cuba, and throughout the United States. It arrived in Louisiana with the immigration of German farmers and its popularity in the mid 1850s soon created such a demand on the local business establishments that music companies such as C. Bruno and Sons (est. 1834) in San Antonio, Texas began supplying a variety of retail outlets. Louisiana stores that sold clothing carried "German style" accordions. Stores that sold farm implements sold them also. Almost every business place had accordions for sale. The accordion was found not in the fishing and trapping communities of the bayou country but rather in the flat, fertile rice farms around Crowley, considered today as the Rice Capital of the World. The German immigrants, besides introducing the accordion in the Louisiana prairies, are also credited by many with introducing rice farming to

Louisiana. This may be disputed, but one factor remains undisputed - wherever you find rice farming, you will also find Cajun music with the accordion. Cajun accordions purchased in the early 1900s had a price tag considerably lower than \$20. Today a handmade model of the same style, but much more superior quality, can exceed that price by 100 times or more.

Initially, the interest in Cajun accordions was within rural farming communities, which meant that a field hand working in the fields from sunrise to sunset, had to labor at least thirty days at \$.50 per day to earn the price of the instrument. Today an employee working at Walmart, in a climate controlled environment, can earn the purchase price of a much better instrument in about 5 days less. The good old days??

Nero is reported to have played the violin while Rome burned. But whether or not this point is fact, it is a fact that violins have been around for much longer than accordions. The exiled Acadians undoubtedly arrived in Louisiana either with violins or the knowledge of how to play them. It is immediately evident by listening to the early repertoire of Dennis McGee (which is a window into what early Cajun music was like) that this early fiddle music was very complex in its structure, requiring more than the seven note major scale available on the "German style" accordion. Not only did many of the melodies require the twelve note chromatic scale, but also many of the tunes required the fiddle to be "cross tuned" in open tunings. The newly arrived "German style" accordion had many limitations as to what could be played on it, but the advantages it did possess very soon propelled it forward to surpass the popularity of the fiddle. Regardless of the limitations of the newly arrived German Accordion, it did have many other advantages. Compared to string instruments, here was an instrument that, because of the steel reeds, had tremendous volume, did not need to be tuned each time it was played, did not incorporate the "sound board principle" of the string family which, because of its fragility, is very susceptible to humidity, temperature variations and very easily damaged. These advantages quickly caused the accordion to gain popularity to the point where accordion players outnumbered fiddle players ten to one.

Initially the accordion did not find favor with the fiddlers. Unfortunately the first accordions to arrive from Germany were in the keys of A, B, and G. The fiddlers' concept of the violin was that it was a diatonic instrument, one that could play in only one key and had to be tuned to whatever key it

desired to play in. The concept of tuning to concert pitch and playing in whatever key was necessary to match up with the accordion had not yet developed and actually did not develop in Louisiana until 1960. Therefore, in attempting to tune violins with accordions in the key of A, B, and G, the strings were either so loose that they would not respond or so tight that they would break. It was not until the early 1900s that accordions began arriving from Germany in the key of C and D, making it possible at last for the fiddle to tune to the accordion. That, for the Louisiana Acadians, was a historical moment of great importance because it made it possible for the two instruments to play together rather than each instrument playing solo. However, it virtually destroyed most of the early Acadian fiddle music which required a twelve note chromatic scale instead of the seven notes offered by the accordion. Along with the availability of accordions in the right key enabling fiddles and accordions to play together, recording companies became interested in recording the vernacular music of America - reaching as far as the little isolated communities of Louisiana.

In 1928, Columbia Recording Company came to Crowley and recorded "Allons á Lafayette" by Joe and Cleoma Falcon. Cajun music was now and forever afterwards a part of American folk music - legitimate but not yet important. However this importance would eventually happen also. This first recording of Cajun music had a tremendous impact on the Cajun people. Here was this group of French speaking Americans, who by the year 1928 had slowly begun to realize that they were quite different from the rest of America. Deeply rooted to their music and the role it played in their life, they were very impressed that the Columbia Recording Company from "way up north" had come down to Crowley to record their music. Due to the impact of the first recordings, Cajun bands were now in big demand. Musicians could make more money playing a Saturday night dance than they could make all week long working in the fields from sun up to sun down. Accordions were everywhere, and every town had a store of some type that also sold accordions. Apparently Columbia's recording adventure was successful (especially since many Cajuns who didn't even own a Victrola would buy two or three copies just have have them in their possession). Because of Columbia's success, other companies followed in their footsteps and began recording material that would become the bulk of the repertoire that would endure into the next millennium.

The phenomenal growth of the popularity of the accordion continued until the outbreak of World War II. Trade was terminated with Germany, and new accordions were no longer to be found on the shelves of any stores. By this time, oil had been discovered in Louisiana, which brought in many oil field workers from Texas who in turn introduced swing band music to the Cajuns. Accordion players soon found themselves to be no longer in demand. People's taste in music was changing and the accordion did not have the same connotation it once did. Accordion players had two options - either learn another instrument, or quit playing and let the old accordions collect dust in the attic. After the war, young men who had survived the horrors they had witnessed, returned home to reconnect with all the things they had longed for while they were so far away in a strange land. They wanted their families, their food, their lifestyles, and, yes, their music. It was back to the attic to get the old accordion down, clean the cob-webs off, and crank up the Cajun band. The problem however was that these instruments were becoming old now - reeds had either broken or gone out of tune, mice and moths had cut holes in the bellows, springs were weak or broken, etc. Replacement parts were not available, the technology to repair and service an accordion was not available, and worst of all, the new instruments themselves were no longer available. All the factories that had been producing these instruments were located in Saxony (which was in East Germany) and all trade with the U.S. was terminated, however they continued manufacturing for many of the Soviet block countries. Unfortunately there was no demand in these regions for the single row diatonic, so this model was dropped from their production.

Many of the Cajun GIs, returning from Germany, would tell stories about how they would enter destroyed cities such as Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, etc., and find the remains of music shops that contained hundreds of damaged accordions. That information in itself was correct. Everything was destroyed. However, the word "music shop" eventually evolved into the word "music factory" and that part is inaccurate. All of the many factories producing musical instruments were located in a town in Saxony called

Klingenthal ( German for Valley of music). This was a very isolated area which did not contain any war machine factories, and as a result was not destroyed. These music factories were not retail outlets. The larger music companies throughout Germany would place commission orders with these factories for large quantities of musical instruments having certain specifications. American companies did the same. Bugleisen and Jacobson

of New York began importing, from Klingenthal , musical instruments of all types, such as violins, brass instruments, pianos, and the famed Monarch and Sterling accordions. They remained in business until 1976.

There never was a Monarch or Sterling or any other trademark factory. Instead there were many privately owned instrument factories making instruments to anyone's specifications, provided, of course, that the order was large enough. After the war, all private industry was abolished and East Germany was under communist control. All independent factories were merged together into one gigantic factory complex called "The People's Own Factory".

The first known attempts (late 40s) at minor repairs and tuning is credited to a black man in Cecilia, Louisiana. The simple repairs which he performed were accomplished by replacing the damaged part with the same but undamaged part from another accordion. The repair or replacement of a worn or damaged part by actually fabricating a new replacement part did not occur until about 1955 when a very fine musician and woodworker in Lake Charles by the name of Sidney Brown set himself up as a tuner and repairer of accordions. Eventually, after realizing that he was fabricating a variety of replacement parts, he had the intuition to realize that it was possible to build an entire instrument with a minimum of shop tools. The only German style accordion around at that time was the Hohner HA114, made in West Germany, which, by as early as 1930, had been stream-lined and retuned to the point that it no longer had the same criteria that had attracted the Cajuns to the Monarch and Sterling. Nevertheless, this stream-lined Hohner did contain parts such as reeds (which could be retuned) bellows, buttons, stops, reed mounts, straps, etc. that were needed to build an accordion. The fact that it was pretty much built around parts from a rather inexpensive accordion didn't really matter to anyone. It was retuned to sound like the Cajuns wanted, it looked like the old prewar accordions, and best of all, it was available.

To convert a Hohner HA 114 into an instrument resembling a "tit noir" required building bellow frames, treble and bass side frames with plates, and the more complex bass box and keyboard. The "Tit Noir's bass box design had buttons instead of spoons and though this was much preferred, it also involved a more complex internal valve system. By far the most disliked feature of the HA114 beside the tuning, was the keyboard itself. In all fairness the keyboard on the

H A114 was a fine example of German design and engineering. It was easy to mass produce, very close tolerance in the pivot system and since it was all metal, it did not respond to humidity as wood did, which in turn caused sluggish action and/or sticking keys. The drawbacks of this design were a noisy action and failing springs which were very difficult to replace. In comparison, the keyboard of the 'Tit Noir was all made of wood and consisted of over 40 individual pieces. Ten wooden pivot pieces rotated on a steel axle in a slot cut in the keyboard structure. This slot in which the pivot piece rotated was a fraction wider than the pivot piece itself so as to prevent any sideways movement of both the buttons and also the valve key. The treble button was attached to one end of the pivot piece while at the other end, a metal lifter rod was inserted which could then be connected with screws to the treble valve key itself. Pressing the button down, once a spring was connected, caused the pivot piece to rotate which in turn lifted the valve key. Making the keyboard, and all its moving components, required only a tablesaw with a set of dado blades to cut out the slots for the pivot pieces.

In rural Louisiana in the '60s and '70s many of the accordion players still possessed the same accordion, that, as youngsters, they had worked so hard to earn. The accordion became a cherished possession that only the tractor surpassed. The joy that both the accordion and the tractor brought to this labor intensive society developed into a love relationship. The accordion represented joy in their lives and the tractor made it possible to have more time to pursue this joy. The old-timers would lovingly refer to their accordions as "Ma Chère 'Tite Noir". For someone to ask a neighbor to borrow his accordion was almost as unacceptable as asking the neighbor to borrow his wife. This love relationship was very evident in the playing style that they developed. Barely extending the bellows while playing became the mark of a good player

If Cajun music exists today, it can thank the talent, efforts, and intuition of Sidney Brown. Without better accordions, Cajun music would probably have faded into obscurity and following in its footsteps would have been all other aspects of the culture because the music always was, and still is, the glue that holds the culture together.

Today there are about 20 people in Louisiana building accordions using imported reeds and bellows of the highest quality. With so many accordion factories today in Europe, China, and Brazil, it would seem that this type of

accordion could be mass produced in large quantities, making a handmade instrument too costly and not competitive on the world market. What prevents this from happening is that this "German style" accordion employed a system of building the interior which is very labor intensive and does not lend itself easily to a mass production assembly line. This is still the same system used by accordion builders in Louisiana today. The popularity of handmade accordions is based upon the fact that the tone and response resulting from this labor intensive system is not to be compared with the mass produced production line model.

The instrument which long ago was so very popular in Germany is no longer in demand in Germany today. The popularity of this accordion in Louisiana has become such that the old name "German style" has now become internationally known as "Cajun style". Cajun accordions today are being shipped back to Germany not for the purpose of playing German folk music, but rather to supply German musicians interested in playing Cajun music.

-- Marc Savoy