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Accordions are not just a punch line anymore

Squeezeboxes rule at the American Accordionists' Assn. festival in Arlington, Va., where the once-popular instrument is part of a revival.

By Cynthia Dizikes
Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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ARLINGTON, VA — . -- When he was 5, John Moceo announced that he wanted to play the accordion. Chalking it up to childhood whimsy, his mother pushed him to play something else, anything else -- guitar, piano, even baseball.

"He came home from school, shoving this paper in my face, saying that a music teacher was offering lessons," Deanna Moceo said. "He had already checked off 'accordion,' and I said, 'No. What's an accordion?'"

But Moceo persisted, his kindergarten tenacity besting his mother's uncertainty. Now, a decade later, he is a rising star in a fringe group of young Americans who are trying to revive a part of musical history.

To some, picking up the pleated instrument -- perhaps best known as the backbone of polka bands -- may seem an eccentric waste of time. But to Moceo, who joined more than 100 of his compatriots at a national competition here last week, the accordion isn't a punch line or some strange contraption that Grandpa used to play. It's cool.

"The accordion was my first love for music," the Staten Island teenager said. "I wish more people would play. I wish I could go back to New York and jam with my friends."

Life as a young accordionist in the 21st century can get a little lonely at times. As Cory Pesaturo, 22, put it: "I had a musician's mullet and I played the accordion. And, no, girls where I'm from do not like the accordion."

But at the American Accordionists' Assn. festival, which ended Sunday, young people like Moceo and Pesaturo found themselves in rare company.

The conference rooms and hallways of the competition site -- a Holiday Inn -- vibrated with the hum of bellows moving air in classical undulations, staccato bursts of jazz and, of course, the familiar trot of polka. As the competitors milled from room to room, parents shouldered the instruments for children too small to bear their suitcase-sized load. All the while, the old guard of accordion players running the festival looked on with hopeful eyes.

"In order for an instrument to survive, there must be ongoing teaching and performance," said Faithe Deffner, who is a former president of the association and has been in the accordion business for more than 50 years.

Once among the most popular instruments in the United States, the accordion began its fall from grace sometime in the 1960s (depending on whom you talk to) and has never recovered.

"During the '50s, I mean, you picked up the Yellow Pages and any city of size had a dozen schools," Deffner said.

Accordion players like Dick Contino, Charles Magnante and Art Van Damme were the equivalent of the rock 'n' roll heartthrobs that would eclipse them in the following decades.

Contino "was one of the top 10 entertainers in the country," said Joe Petosa, chief executive officer of Petosa Accordions, which has manufactured the instruments since 1922. "He was going to concerts and girls were ripping off their clothes to be with him."

The nation, apparently, could not get enough squeezebox swagger. Then four lads from Liverpool crossed the Atlantic.

"Once the Beatles hit, everyone wanted to play the electric guitar instead," said Mary Tokarski, a professional accordionist and music teacher from Connecticut.

Whether it was the lure of that electric sound, the nature of the 1960s counterculture revolution, the introduction of the synthesizer or the 1980s economic slump, the accordion faded into the background. Many accordion schools closed, and the depiction of accordion-toting uber-nerds -- think Steve Urkel on the 1990s sitcom "Family Matters" -- didn't help the ones that remained.

"The instrument is made to accompany itself. It doesn't need any other instrument, but it does need an owner," said Alexander Chudolij, a U.S. distributor of accordions.

Despite a nostalgic resurgence of accordion enthusiasm, mostly by those who played as children and through ethnic music such as Tex-Mex/conjunto and zydeco, it remains somewhat of an orphaned instrument. But in recent years there has been a concerted effort to pass the instrument on to a new generation less influenced by old stereotypes.

"We want to turn the reins over," said Robert Paolo, who has operated a Rhode Island accordion school for about 45 years.

One success story in the outreach effort came about four years ago when Roland, the music manufacturing giant, began making accordions. Roland's instruments are digital, which initially caused a bit of a stir among purists, but they have been picked up by the likes of Madonna, Bruce Springsteen and Paul McCartney.

Compared with some traditional high-end accordions, which can cost as much as \$20,000, the digital models are less expensive -- about \$2,500 to \$6,000, depending on size and complexity. Like a synthesizer, they offer a variety of settings to create different sounds.

Last year, Roland began a pilot program in Europe, offering instruments and teaching guides to music schools, and it is planning on bringing the

program to the United States next year. The company is also working on plans for a model specifically tailored for beginners.

"The goal now is to bring it back," said Pesaturo, who works as a Roland accordion demonstrator. "We can reintroduce it to the world."

Until that happens, there is an element of allure in the fringe image that has helped recast the accordion in a hip light. Accordions can be found in the arms of indie and folk-rock bands such as Arcade Fire and the Decemberists.

"There is a recognition of it being cool again," Deffner said.

For some young accordion players, their skills have yielded some pretty decent perks.

Pesaturo became Bill and Hillary Clinton's unofficial go-to accordionist after playing at a White House Christmas party in 1997. In 2005, Moceo, then 12, performed Green Day's "American Idiot" on Ellen DeGeneres' television show.

"Growing up in New York, it's hard to be different," Moceo said last week. "That's what I love about the accordion. I'm doing something that no one else is."

cynthia.dizikes@

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