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A Celebration of the Squeezebox

By BERNIE BECKER
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ARLINGTON, Va. — John Moceo, now 15, still clearly remembers his confusion the day Frank Busso strolled into his Staten Island kindergarten class, lugging a large case. “I thought he was going to take out toys,” Mr. Moceo said.



Enlarge This Image
Susana Raab for The New York Times
Anthony Falco traveled from Rhode Island to Virginia for the American Accordionists' Association's annual festival.

Instead, Mr. Busso, a local accordion teacher, unveiled his squeezebox and wowed the class with nursery hits like “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” In an instant Mr. Moceo was hooked. He took a flier home to his mother and, to use his own word, nagged her until she let him take lessons.

This week, a decade after those first lessons, Mr. Moceo joined other accordion lovers from as far away as China for the American Accordionists' Association's 70th-anniversary festival and competition, which began on Wednesday and ends on Sunday in this Washington suburb. Mr. Busso, the festival's chairman, estimated last week that around 500 squeezebox fans would descend on the area for at least part of the gathering, which includes competitions, workshops and performances from celebrated virtuosos like Alexander Poeluev of Russia.

At Wednesday's festival kickoff, younger accordionists like Mr. Moceo, his hair gelled back and gold chains visible under his Adidas track jacket, stuck out in a sea of older faces. But the presence of Mr. Moceo and others in his age group also belied the stereotype of the accordion as an instrument used almost exclusively by the older set.

“There's such a wide variety of music you can play,” said Mr. Moceo, who, despite his young age, has already attended more than 20 accordion competitions. “It's not just one genre. It's jazz songs. It's polka and classical.”

Those qualities contributed to the original popularity of what was among the most fashionable instruments in the United States until shortly after World War II.

“Years ago you could find an accordion in every other household,” said Art Piel, a retired electrical engineer who came to the festival with some fellow members of the Connecticut Accordion Association Orchestra.

The accordion's popularity started to wane with the rise of [Elvis](#), the electric guitar and rock 'n' roll, which eventually banished it to niche-instrument status, popular during Oktoberfest and in polka clubs. Now rock and other popular music genres are helping fuel an accordion resurgence among the younger generation.

Take, for example, Benjamin Ickies, 28, who attended his first accordion festival this week. Mr. Ickies moved to New York in 2002, looking for professional rock gigs as a pianist or guitarist. He found the market saturated until he told people he played the accordion.

“I had tried to keep it a secret,” said Mr. Ickies, whose father taught him the instrument. “Then, lo and behold, I started getting more offers to play.”

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Now part of an 18-member rock group called This Ambitious Orchestra, Mr. Ickies sits in with other bands looking to add the accordion's versatility and also gives lessons to aspiring accordionists. He chalks up the instrument's newfound status to what he called the Pac-Man theory: The squeezebox had become so uncool in recent decades that like that video game hero, it popped back out the other side, becoming cool once again.

Accordions are currently being used by groups like the Canadian indie darlings [Arcade Fire](#) and the offbeat duo They Might Be Giants, while younger accordionists are starting to squeeze out their favorite radio hits. Mr. Moceo covered [Green Day](#) on "The [Ellen DeGeneres Show](#)" in 2005. Anthony Falco, an 18-year-old Rhode Island resident and a competitor at this week's festival, has translated guitar-heavy hits from [Guns N' Roses](#), [Maroon 5](#) and other bands to his instrument.

"A lot of our teachers, they're old-timers," said Mr. Falco, who, like Mr. Moceo, has been attending festivals since grade school. "It's up to our generation to bring in those rock songs."

But even though Mr. Ickies sprinkled in some less traditional compositions during his performance, including "Life on Mars?" by [David Bowie](#), rock was still more of an afterthought at this year's convention.

At Wednesday's kickoff, where the most modern hits squeezed off were written by the Beatles, an impromptu trio of Mr. Falco, Mr. Moceo and Mr. Busso held court in a small room off a hotel lobby. They serenaded fellow festival attendees with hits like "Sway" and "Where or When," both popularized by, among others, [Dean Martin](#).

That ability to bridge the gap between the Rat Pack and rock 'n' roll, Mr. Ickies said, is one reason for the accordion's rising popularity among his generation.

"The accordion's in our cultural past, so it sounds somewhat familiar," he said. "But for 30 years it's also been a complete outsider, so it also sounds new and fresh. No other instrument has that dichotomy."

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