

Three Charivari

At first, I felt like celebrating: I finally had my hands on a real accordion. But what I deserved was an old-fashioned Cajun “charivari”—a mocking, raucous serenade, when the neighbors gather outside the window of an ill-fated couple on their wedding night. It is a party for a pair that’s mismatched, or outside the bounds of propriety, like when an old man takes a young wife or a widow remarries with unseemly haste, or when an older couple gets together, second time around for both of them. Once the glow fades, there you are, stuck with the reality that falls short of your dreams.

I remembered how excited I’d felt, when Steve and I drove away from that music store. I’d cradled my new accordion on my lap, eager to get home and unwrap it. But now, after three months, I couldn’t deny the truth: this dance was not going smoothly.

My new accordion and I were definitely an odd couple. I saw the first signs the moment I got my new treasure home. I pulled the little black accordion out of the bag, extended the bellows—and sniffed. A musty smell filled the dining room. Hmm. Strange. How long had this new accordion been in storage, anyway? Or maybe I really had stepped out of time—back into the past, and then out again, with the atmosphere of that old music store still clinging to the instrument.

Even the sales receipt looked old. Yellowed paper, with the name and address of Walles Music stamped at the top, in sepia-toned ink. Below, typed in black fading to gray, I could read the details of my purchase:

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-One-	"Eagle-Brand" 1 row 2 stop	\$130.00
	2 basses accordion & book	
	Sales tax	10.40

-Thank You-		\$140.40

The brownish date stamp read simply "SEP 29 PAID". No year.

But I knew the sales receipt was new. The storeowner had typed it out right in front of me, laboring on her old typewriter. Besides, at the top I could see the complete date, including the year, along with my name, which had come out as: "Mr. Blair Kilpartirck". Such a mysterious transformation. On paper, I had become a man, and with a new last name with a vaguely eastern European ring. My Slavic roots were showing.

When I examined the accordion bellows more closely, I could see that someone had tried to repair the thin, papery surface with a clear lacquer coating in a few spots. And the fabric thumb strap had started to shred. It appeared that charming old-fashioned look might be more than skin deep. But I brushed my questions aside—easy to do, in the excitement of finally having an accordion in my hands.

I pushed and pulled, as I worked my way up and down the ten little white buttons on the right hand side of the accordion. It sounded like a do-re-mi scale—sort of. I

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pushed, then pulled—and went up a note on the scale. On to the next button, push and pull, and I continued up the scale. But then I’d hit a button where it turned around on me, and the push started to take me back down the scale. Sometimes a note appeared to be missing. A peculiar instrument, with a major catch: you got a different note when you pushed and pulled, much like playing the harmonica, when you inhale and exhale. Maybe it was time to look at the book included with the accordion.

The instruction manual reminded me of one those old-fashioned music books I’d used during my couple of years of piano lessons in grade school. Simplified musical scores for popular songs, children’s classics, and folk tunes—with a German twist, since the publisher was Hohner, that German company. Not very useful to an aspiring Cajun accordion player who could barely read music.

Luckily, I soon located a manual more to my taste, through one of my Cajun catalogs—“You Can Play Cajun Accordion” by Larry Miller, a Louisiana accordion builder. The straightforward title matched the booklet’s homemade appearance: spiral-bound, hand typed, partly hand-lettered, rough drawings.

Larry, an educator, had re-connected with his Cajun heritage at a relatively late age, in his thirties. He’d set out to learn to make—and play—accordions, following in the footsteps of a handful of established Louisiana builders, who had begun their craft in the post-World War II years, when the imported German-made accordions were no longer available.

So my accordion’s German roots were no accident. As I’d later learn, the very first accordion was patented in 1829 in Vienna. The sturdy instrument spread quickly throughout Europe—and beyond. It was loud, versatile, practically indestructible—a

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one-man band that found a place in folk cultures all over the world. It eventually showed up in Louisiana in the mid-to-late 1800’s—imported, some historians suggest, by German Jewish merchants. Although the accordion didn’t become popular in southwest Louisiana until the early 1900’s, it soon came to have a dominant role, reshaping the traditional Acadian folk music in which fiddle had been the primary instrument.

As Larry explained, the most prized instruments in Louisiana were the “tits noirs” —little black ones—manufactured by the Monarch Company in Germany. The Monarch factory changed hands over the years: to the Sterling family in the 1920’s, and then to another family, who changed the Sterling name to Eagle. That caught my attention: the same name printed on my little black accordion. Perhaps it had a distinguished pedigree.

Larry offered a minimum of music theory. He had developed a simple notation system: a number corresponding to each of the ten buttons, along with a symbol indicating whether the bellows were to be pushed or pulled. The book included a handful of Cajun songs, the bare bones of each translated into button notation, along with French lyrics written phonetically.

But Larry offered this as a temporary crutch. Cajun music, he wrote, was supposed to be played “by ear.”

At first concentrate on one or two tunes to be learned. This is very important if you wish to succeed. Commit to memory one or two tunes, no more, at first. Be able to whistle or sing musically correct with each note done on key before you attempt to play it on the accordion or any musical instrument. Use the push-pull patterns if you need them so as to find the correct order of buttons for the first one or two tunes. Then play these two tunes each 100,000 times till your family runs you out of town. But be sure to play the one or two tunes many times over and over in order to get the brain to begin to learn where to send your fingers to find where those sounds are located. THERE ARE NO SHORTCUTS TO THIS NECESSITY! You simply must take the medicine and spend the time!

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Playing by ear is more complicated than people realize. It means relying on a pattern you have inside you, a cognitive structure—an idea of a melody, internalized after listening to the music as it is played or sung by other people. Trying to play the music of another culture is even more complex, because of the challenge of learning unfamiliar patterns of sound.

If you grew up as an English speaker in the United States, you wouldn’t have to think twice about the melody for a children’s classic like “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” You would have absorbed it naturally, by listening, following along—and probably by matching your voice to the grown-ups.

If you tried to play “Twinkle, Twinkle” by ear on an unfamiliar instrument for the first time, the tune probably wouldn’t come right away. You might have to struggle, like someone using the “hunt and peck” approach to typing. But at least you’d already know what you wanted to say.

What I was attempting with the Cajun accordion resembled trying to type, without first knowing the language. Granted, I had spent many hours listening to Cajun music. But I hadn’t listened in a way that was truly focused, listening until I could hold the pattern of sound in my head. Then—the critical point—I needed to find a way to check the accuracy of my internal model. In other words, I needed to reproduce the sound with my voice, before I tried to find the matching sound on those ten white buttons.

Larry left no room for doubt about the importance of this last step:

THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON in learning to play by ear is that one must thoroughly memorize and be able to sing, whistle or hum musically correct a given tune before attempting to play on the accordion.

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It was the most fundamental piece of advice in the book—but I managed to sidestep it, as quickly as Steve and I might swerve on the dance floor to avoid another couple in our path. It sounded too simple—and deep down, I probably believed it was impossible for me.

Here was the problem: I could not whistle, though I had tried. I rarely hummed, and I certainly didn’t sing. Even though no one ever told me to just move my lips, I had absorbed this message in the course of growing up. I had built up layers of inhibition around the possibility of singing aloud, even when I was alone. I didn’t even sing in the shower.

So I disregarded this key bit of advice, not realizing how much of a barrier I was creating for myself. Day after day, I pushed and pulled, coaxed and squeezed, guided either by button numbers—the connect-the-dots approach—or by some vague idea of a tune I half-held in my head. Sometimes I tried to play along with recordings. But I quickly discovered I couldn’t do that. The ten button accordion is a diatonic instrument—in other words, limited to the notes of a single major scale. G, in the case of my little Eagle Brand. But the instrument of choice in Cajun music is usually a C accordion, with D as the runner-up.

My questions about my accordion kept growing. The sound didn’t seem to correspond to anything I was listening to—and not only because of the difference in keys, or even my lack of skill. The tone itself was wrong: thin and high-pitched. And I strongly suspected the instrument had spent more than a few years in the back room at Walles Music. Perhaps that old woman had sold me an antique toy.

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I found another clue at Christmas, when my parents gave me a book that was high on my wish list, Ann Savoy’s *Cajun Music: A Reflection of a People*. The book painted a loving portrait of the music and culture that Ann, a Virginia native, had embraced when she married Marc. It had everything: serious scholarship, oral history, profiles of musicians, interviews in French, photos, song lyrics, and discographies. As I pored over it, I came across an old photo of a young Cajun boy, barefoot and in overalls, playing an accordion that looked just like mine. So it seemed my little black Eagle, or something very close to it, had once been played in Louisiana.

I decided to write to Marc Savoy, who was a true Cajun Renaissance man: cultural preservationist, master musician, and the most respected of the Louisiana accordion builders. I introduced myself, described my accordion, and included a few photos. It was a bold step, not something I would normally do. But I was on a quest, and I figured Marc would solve the mystery, if anyone could.

Marc wrote back immediately. He explained that I did indeed have an old instrument, predating the famed Monarch accordions by ten or fifteen years. If I opened it up, I would discover something similar to a harmonica: just two sets of reeds instead of the usual four, with each set mounted on a single plate, rather than individual ones. My accordion was a curiosity, perhaps a collector’s item—but it simply wasn’t a playable instrument. I was disappointed, though not really surprised to have my suspicions confirmed.

Marc had written the letter on the back of a glossy flyer for the new Hohner Cajun accordion, a variant of the first model I had seen described in the music catalog, but customized to resemble the “tits noirs.” The new Hohner was available through his shop,

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at a somewhat reduced price, considerably less than one of his hand-built Acadian accordions.

But my resourceful husband was a step ahead. I had another birthday coming up, and Steve had been doing his own research. Somebody referred him to a mail-order music store with a fitting name: "Elderly Instruments."

"I've found you an accordion," Steve told me. "It's on order, but it might get here a little late, not quite in time for your birthday." I was thrilled—and the wait only added to my feeling of anticipation.

A few weeks later, just after my forty-first birthday, it arrived. Steve arranged to have the new accordion delivered to me at work, at the upscale suite of offices in the university hospital where I'd taken the new position a few months earlier.

"Blair, a package just arrived for you," our department secretary said. A few of the other therapists happened to be standing around her desk.

"Oh! That's great! I've been waiting for it. It's a birthday present from my husband." I paused, considered a moment, before I decided to let my staff in on my secret life.

"It's my new Cajun accordion."

If they were surprised, they managed to keep it to themselves.

"Well, open it!"

So I did. I cut open the box, pulled out the packing, then gently lifted it out: a shiny black Hohner accordion, Cajun-style, in the key of C.

The Hohner was bigger than my Eagle Brand accordion and heavier than I expected. It felt unfamiliar in my hands. But I knew that would change, once I got it

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home after work and started playing. Unfortunately, evening was hours away—and I couldn’t wait that long.

I didn’t even retreat to my office. Discreetly, since everyone was watching, I moved the bellows just a little, my finger depressing a single white button, one of the low notes on the treble side. I bent my ear close. There—I heard it! A throaty whisper that promised to turn into the real thing once I really let go. I could already picture it, and I could practically feel it: bellows pumping, air rushing, all four reeds vibrating in the thrilling growl and wail of a Cajun accordion in full voice. The accordion of my dreams.