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THE HISTORY AND SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PIANO-ACCORDION BY
ITALIAN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY
AREA

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

MUSIC

With a designated emphasis in ANTHROPOLOGY

by

Monica F. Ambalal

June 2025

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2025

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Abstract

The History and Sustainability of the Piano-Accordion by Italian Immigrant
Communities in the San Francisco Bay Area

by

Monica Francesca Ambalal

My dissertation concerns the continued development and sustainability of the piano-accordion in the Bay Area during the 20th century, with Northern California and the greater West Coast as considerations in my study. Unique to the Bay Area is the fact that the piano-accordion was further developed and continuously sustained by networks of Italian immigrants since the 1880s. The instrument was rebirthed in San Francisco as Italians in California developed new kinships through shared experiences of their voyage across the Atlantic, their loss of homeland, and their reliance on trusting family and those within their immediate community. In the early 1900s, the piano-accordion became the leading instrument in Vaudeville, and it was used for festivals and parties as a portable, low-cost option. During the 1940s and 50s, accordion orchestras and studios existed into the hundreds throughout California, and annual student competitions were held in Oakland and San Jose well into the 1960s until the decline of the instrument when rock and pop became the desired new sound. Currently, piano-accordion music is sustained through third and fourth generations of Italians who recognize the instrument as connected to deep ancestral ties. Accordion clubs further solidify those connections while offering a

performance space and community-building for amateur accordionists of all demographics. Today, local diasporas recognize the piano-accordion as a way to evoke nostalgia and memory, creating a shared and lived experience that unfolds as a California story.

Dedication

To my grandparents, Rina and Gino, for introducing me to the sound of the accordion and helping me to foster a lifelong appreciation for music.

Acknowledgment

I begin this section by thanking my instructor Lou Jacklich, for his mentorship and knowledge that I am lucky to have received in our past six years of lessons. I can only hope to live up to the standards he displayed in my time in his studio. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity given to me by the music faculty at UC Santa Cruz to pursue this great undertaking. Thank you to Dr. Tanya Merchant for helping to encourage my success in completing my path to the Ph.D. and to Dr. Leta Miller, who instructed me earlier in this project through independent study. I want to thank my committee members Dr. Russell Rodriguez and Dr. Dard Neuman. Their lens of music combined with theory and method has proved invaluable. I express sincere gratitude to the anthropology department for allowing me to participate in the Designated Emphasis. I learned methodologies included in the dissertation and was fortunate to work closely with Dr. Mayanthi Fernando, whose teachings of the intangible forever changed the way I think about past and present spaces. I express much gratitude to my advisor Nicol Hammond. Her guidance and confidence in my work is the reason why you are reading this text. I also thank the 2019 doctorate music department cohort (Joseph, Shireen, and Savanna) for listening to my rants and making seminars enjoyable with healthy discussions and snacks. Thank you to my favorite senior cohort members Ryan Lambe and Lisa Beebe, to Grijda Spiri, and to my writing partner and fellow graduate Alec Nunes. I appreciate my Merritt College colleagues who helped support my graduate school studies: Brad Balukjian,

Nghiem Thai, and Adoria Williams. A special thank you to Dr. Helmi Harrington for allowing me to tour and play with her at the World of Accordions Museum. Thank you to my entire family for supporting me in this journey and to my best friend Shannon McCarty for being my music partner in crime since our time at the conservatory.

I am forever indebted to my interlocutors as they are part of the reasons I was able to gain access to the spaces and voices needed to write this project. My acceptance as a member of the San Francisco Accordion Club (c. 2018) was the first step to advancing my work. Here, I met Pamela Tom, who first assisted me by answering a number of questions via email and phone calls for months in 2019. During the pandemic and ongoing to the present, Pamela sent me regular updates of accordion-related information via email, and we had a standing phone call each week. She helped me plan in advance for the Cotati Accordion Festival and was kind enough to send me music books when needed. She also helped me set up an interview with Mr. Steve Pizzo whom I interviewed at 101 years of age. I am thankful to my second interlocutor, Cory Pesaturo, who helped to facilitate a number of research contacts. I am grateful to all of the accordionists who sat through interviews, with special mentions for Lou DiMaggio and Ed Massolo, who offered much insight into how Bay Area Italian communities existed in the 1940s and 50s. I thank brand owners Joe Petosa Jr. and Francesca Pigni for allowing me access to their showrooms and workshops, and to the repair people who assisted me in this project, namely Skyler Fell and Valdet Jakubovic. Finally,

I want to express gratitude to the Bay Area accordion community, including the SFAC, and to our affiliate members in neighboring clubs. This project would not have been possible without their support and continuous encouragement.

Introduction

Question 2: What do you enjoy about the accordion?

“I grew up with it, and like the sound of it. My family had the records. It speaks to me now. I am not Italian, but I enjoy the songs.”

- Mary (72) - her answer from a survey and questionnaire handed out at the Cotati Accordion Festival in 2021.

As part of our human experience, we tend to grow attached to a past experience involving the senses. For hearing persons, a particular sound or instrument may affect one’s mood and how they experience it. The sound can connect us to a past moment in our life or remind us of important events and people. In this dissertation, I consider the piano-accordion as one such instrument that has brought meaning to generations of those within the Italian diaspora living in Northern California and beyond. As part of my project, I consider the piano-accordion and how it was advanced through networks of Italian immigrants in the Bay Area and later sustained through accordion club communities and newer generations outside of the Italian diaspora. I argue that the foundations of the accordion on the West Coast are due to a number of complex structures involving governments, local economies, race, mutual aid foundations, and Italian immigrant networks, primarily in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco.

To accomplish this project, I consider the past history of Italian immigration to California and address how the *Risorgimento* (the reunification of

Italy from 1848-1871) partly influenced the hiring of accordion makers in San Francisco in the early 20th century. The initial chapter establishes the settings of San Francisco, North Beach, and other Italian communities in Northern California and small towns in the foothills. I examine the shared experiences of such groups and study how they navigated the assimilation process and why their positioning is relevant and connected to the accordion players I interviewed later in this text. The content in this project spans six years of documentation. In my research, I employed standard field-based techniques and traditional ethnographic methods by using a microphone and field notebook. My notebook contains jottings from conversations at festivals and short phone calls. I often used my notebook in conjunction with the recording process to keep a good record of what I witnessed in the interview space. In this way, I could write about the intangible experiences and viewpoints that existed beyond the capability of audio recording. Anytime I was given a piece of ephemera, a photograph, or an article related to the dissertation, I immediately secured it on a notebook page with a piece of tape or placed it loosely in the back with the other items. In addition to the field notes, I created field recordings and added mapping as a research component. Since my writing verges on the creative and exploratory, I use vignettes and quotes at the beginning of each chapter to refocus the topic and allow the reader to glimpse an idea of the central themes. I also write in a style where I reflect on the past to inform the reader of the present.

Intended Audience

This dissertation is for anyone to read. While I hope that my interlocutors, along with all of the people who assisted me in this project, will want to skim a few pages, I think this will best be housed in a space of academic interest for those who want to understand more about the accordion in California and the reasons for its prominence among Italian communities. Outside of musicology and ethnomusicology, my project will be housed well in Italian American studies, American Popular Studies, and within projects that concern European immigrant histories on the West Coast. Likewise, I have written these pages in a way that is accessible to a variety of audiences and, therefore, will also serve hobbyists, those in accordion clubs, and young accordion talents. My hope is that I am adding to a large compendium of knowledge centering on this instrument while honoring the traditions and people that have come before me. Finally, my work will become the first source using academic citation standards that specifically centers on the development of a piano-accordion culture and economy in San Francisco, California, and the West Coast as it was developed, manufactured, and preserved largely by Italian immigrant communities in the 20th century.

Methodology to Deconstruct Feeling and Hearing

In my work, I also engage with Clifford Geertz's idea of thick description. While the original concept was borrowed from British philosopher Gilbert Ryle, Geertz approached the idea from that of an ethnographer's perspective. The term is used in ethnomusicology and anthropology to mean a style of writing where the

author considers factors in their documentation of events that go beyond the focus of topic. These minute details may include environmental observations, sounds, smells, and/or data about time and space. In this way, the writing encourages a total observation and offers a meaningful and complete experience for the reader. In his 1973 opus, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, the author writes that “the ethnographer inscribes; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted.”¹ Geertz challenges us to think beyond the words in our notebook, so that we are taking our collected qualitative data and truly synthesizing it in combination with the sound experiences, interviews, and our own experiences during the research process. In this project, I use the method to consider how I insert myself into the research and how to remain aware of any biases within my own experience as I am partially emic to my own study. Geertz's style of examining what he calls the “microscopic” and fourth characteristic of his method concerns part of this deeper dive into the data. These microscopic parts are the details of cultural practices. These are the secondary and auxiliary findings that scholars extrapolate from their data, and for me, the products of those processes are priceless for the rich content that I can study from various perspectives to help me understand new ways of thinking and processing my own research materials. In my own work, I use this method

¹ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books), 19.

primarily in my field notes when I document non-verbal cues and settings of space. I also read through transcripts while listening to the recordings of oral histories to find new meanings that are not always obvious in one medium alone. In my interviews, I allowed myself to listen more than speak, and I decidedly allowed participants to dictate the ways we would engage during our sit-downs. Sometimes I visited homes, while other times, we spoke over the phone in a series of multiple conversations. Most times, participants wanted me to play with them, and they wished for me to demonstrate a piece of music on their accordion - or mine if I brought it to the interview. The ideas and questions that unfolded throughout the series of repeated visits became the groundwork on which I noticed a series of thought patterns and practices emerging with each conversation and jam session. The choices in programming we made often considered specific songs that fell in conjunction with the mood of the day or the occurrences that recently transpired in the performer's life. I recognized those choices as a set of values for the participant and noted how those pieces functioned as part of their experience. Between considering surrounding acoustics and settings, I examine the spaces I visit through multiple lenses and my writing reflects as such in my vignettes at the beginning of chapters and through field notes that allow me to curate memories of space through time. In the vein of Small's "musicking" theory, the process of understanding the music, feeling it, and dancing to it is

recognized as a total process.² All working parts of a music practice must recognize equally the individual and the larger group. The process must be recognized in conjunction with the way that a piece of music acts and for the ultimate purpose that it serves. In this way, I understand the audiences that appreciate the accordion music they hear at festivals and parties. The listeners may not play the instrument, but they understand how the object acts in their surroundings and social settings. Many of the third- and fourth-generation Italian families in this project recognize the music as part of their past and immediately recognize audible cues to connect their experiences, thus initiating a programmed set of reactions they demonstrate through singing, clapping, dancing, and, in some instances, crying. For Italian families, the accordion is an instrument that becomes a tool for shared experiences across generations and within the diaspora.

As an investigative process, I used ArcGIS and Google Maps layers to recreate maps of spaces at specific points in history. For example, I created a map of North Beach as it stood in 1933 to better understand how that particular community lived. In recreating those streets, I pieced together the dynamics of that particular neighborhood and recognized how the economies of the area flowed. The mapping of North Beach allowed me to understand how in-groups of performers, teachers, publishers, and repairmen communed near to each other, thus encouraging a constant flow of students and output of accordion music. In

² Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998), 2.

my use of the Esri ArcGIS software, I was able to map out the Holy Cross Cemetery in Colma, CA. That platform assisted me in recognizing the types of Catholic communities that were linked to the 19th and early 20th-century immigrants of San Francisco. Based on the graves, I could infer the larger Catholic communities were comprised of Irish, Swiss, and German individuals. In this process, I recognized other local histories and connected them to my own work.

Shelemay and Memory

Nothing beats it. I can listen to him (Mike Marotta Jr.) all day. I will tell you this, when I was coming up right here by the Cannery Row in fact, my father brought us to the parties. We had a lot of Sicilian families here, and on Sunday, we would go around to visit with friends and have lunch. Usually, someone had an accordion, one of the small ones (motions) you know? Anytime I hear it, I just think of those Sundays and pa.

- Anonymous guest, age 71, at the Festa Italia in Monterey, CA.
September 8th, 2023.

Throughout the process of the project, I encountered memories of people who connected the live sound of an accordion to a past experience. For some, their witnessing of accordion music brought an altered meaning to their understanding of the music, while others were taken back to a specific time and space. In my study of California accordion clubs and accordionists growing up in North Beach, I recognize an immediate intimacy of their shared experiences and observe multiple similarities in their memories, including weekly lessons, the studios they attended, and glimpses into their family's home life. I also recognize that memory is dependent on a multi-sensory experience where many of the interviews reflected, in addition to awareness of soundscape, olfactory

recollections. Ethnomusicologist Kay Kaufman Shelemay asks that ethnographers be aware of their sensuous experience when writing about specific memories in music:

Music provides a particularly rich and complex case study for students of memory since its encoding process is almost inevitably multiple or elaborative, setting into motion connections that cross many different sensory modalities and enter into other aspects of experience.³

Many of the field notes documented for my project include the smells of accordion factories: beeswax, oils, freshly cut wood, and glue from horse bones. Many of the older performers reminded me of how so many of their gigs were surrounded by cigarette smoke. I am also acutely aware of how much touch comes into play in the intimate close quarters of theater pits and wooden platform stages. For example, being aware of how close your neighbor is sitting while playing in a quartet is an important spacial consideration to best execute a musical performance, so the player is best prepared and situated for the show. Touch is detrimental to the accordionist who cannot see their keyboard or their bass buttons. The player's experience is based on feel. To line up the bass rows, there is a memory method where the hands must know each position of every button and how far their elbow must move the wrist to reach an octave. This process is personal and intimate knowledge possessed by every player, and it is all part of the action needed to execute the instrument successfully. When I play at the accordion club circle with the San Francisco Accordion Club, our members are

³ Kay Kaufman Shelemay, "Music, Memory and History," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 15, 26 (2006): 26.

seated closely, so we have to know how to read music from a distance, allow our bodies to be aligned in low-seated chairs, and prevent ourselves from bumping into our neighbor's accordion.

Memory is such a large part of this project as it helps my readers to situate place and to understand the decades of knowledge that was transported with this instrument through memory and oral tradition. To better understand the lived knowledge of the people I worked with, I used the methodology presented by Kay Kaufman Shelemay in her seminal study of Jewish traditional hymns called *pizmonim*.⁴ To consider the way I examine memory, I use her notion of collective memory, which is “knowledge that is shared with others through various forms of expression, including speech, music, dance, and other expressive media, and that emerges in part from a common expectation that the moment or event is, in fact, memorable.”⁵ I also examine how the memory and reimagining of space works in the current day to create cultural sustainability of the instrument at local festivals, music clubs, and family gatherings. I use historical cartography to recreate and reimagine local spaces and to consider how communities thrived economically and in relation to other neighborhoods.

Chapter One focuses on the history of Italian communities in the Bay Area since the Gold Rush. I offer a small introduction that centers on immigration quotas, and then I consider the areas where Italians lived from the 1920s to the

⁴ Shelemay, Kay Kaufman. *Let Jasmine Rain Down: Song and Remembrance among Syrian Jews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

⁵ Shelemay, “Music, Memory and History,” 18.

1940s. In this chapter, I observe the local economies of North Beach in the early half of the 20th century and consider how those thriving businesses contributed to a developing Italian neighborhood, North Beach.

In Chapter Two, I write about the history of the accordion as an instrument and how it became a wondrous object. The accordion fascinated a number of people, so much so that it was included at multiple world's fairs and exhibitions on the West Coast and beyond. The basic organology of free-reed technology and how it functions for a musician is addressed, and I consider the piano-accordion repertoire and sustainability today. I then address the idea of the myth that the accordion was invented in San Francisco. This belief is untrue and I offer reasons as to how the myth came to exist. I also allow space to include accordions that are not included here but used in other diasporas within California. After a brief history of the accordion and the first patent, I introduce the history of the piano-accordion at expositions and fairs held on the West Coast. The instrument came about during the Industrial Age and was used by Italians in Northern California as a symbol of pride and accomplishment. The piano-accordion represented a contributing product made by Italians in San Francisco.

The accordion, with its many complicated parts, is an amalgamation of organic objects, beings, and histories combined into one item of technology. It physically represents a composite of histories: European, Italian, and American. As part of my study, I use physicality to explain the accordion's past and briefly discuss the use of ephemera and object sensation as part of my research. Next,

there is an included history of repertoire and performance of the piano-accordion and how it functions in an ensemble and solo instrument, with careful attention to the connection of the Neapolitan song repertoire and the *danzón* complex.

Following the repertoire section, I examine the attempts made to concertize the accordion and argue that the accordion was slowly omitted from American concert halls due to changing tastes and aesthetics. After considering the history of Italian and Italian American accordion teachers in the Bay Area, I offer an in-depth look at accordion-making from the past to the present by juxtaposing the history of the North Beach accordion factories with a visit to a modern-day accordion factory in Ancona, Italy. I conclude this chapter by offering arguments that led to the decline of the accordion into the 1970s, such as the popularity and accessibility of the electric guitar and the obsession with popular music by younger generations. It is also here where I enlighten the reader by adding in a caveat that the piano-accordion became the official instrument of San Francisco.

In Chapter Three, I center on the oral histories of those aged 80 and above. This was a crucial age group to work with first, and I sadly experienced the loss of three people whose oral histories I conducted during this project. In their stories, I found raw truths about the accordion industry from both the teaching and performing perspective. They provided me with firsthand knowledge of how they acquired their instruments and an understanding of how the neighborhoods of the Bay Area and North Beach existed in the 1940s. I learned about the Italian enclaves and the networking in their local communities that existed “off-paper,”

as it was quoted to me, meaning that many people exchanged food, goods, and services through bartering in their local areas. The accordion for the people in these generations was a large part of family celebrations, and those living in North Beach learned from many of the same teachers I researched, such as Angelo Cagnazzo and Cesare Pezzolo. The interviews informed me of the pricing, costs of lessons, and sales of accordions during the early half of the 20th century. I could recognize just how popular the instrument was from their experiences and stories, and it is in this chapter that I lay the foundations of the past through memory.

I also return to the early part of the 20th century and trace the neighborhood known for musical entertainment in the city once known as the Barbary Coast and later Terrific Street. The clubs in this part of the city hosted some of the accordion performers I mention in this dissertation, including Pietro Frosini, Guido Deiro, and my own teacher, Lou Jacklich - who was one of the last accordion players on the West Coast vaudeville stage. Lou passed away at the tail end of writing this dissertation and I tell his story and the importance of his presence in my life over the past six years.

In Chapter Four, I turn to the middle generation of people playing accordion. In this content, I cover the stories of participants aged 35-79 and consider some of their personal memory and experiences with the accordion as they witnessed the instrument falling from popularity. I originally wanted to observe how the people in this age group dealt with the lack of resources

surrounding their chosen instrument at a time when it was not as popular, but I instead found they had ample opportunities to play and were encompassed in an accordion club culture. In addition to an extensive interview with my interlocutor Pamela Tom, I also include a detailed field note of a San Francisco Accordion Club meeting so the reader may understand the typical layout of a gathering and consider the participant observation that is contained in the project.

In hearing an accordion, many of the people in my study often cited the accompanying activities they remember with the sound of the instrument, such as plates clinking at a dinner or laughter, for example. These are activities combined with memories that are deeply set in part because of sound. They are also part of Kay Kaufman Shelemay's concept of collective memory, where participants such as second-generation Italians connect deeply with and remember the accordion through their own past experiences. In addition to memory and nostalgia, I combine the process of thick description to help readers better sense the surroundings and experience when attending an accordion club meeting. The scholars Shelemay and Geertz inspire me to consider acoustemologies and soundscapes of the spaces I visit, and my writing reflects as such in my vignettes at the beginning of chapters and through thick descriptions that allow me to curate memories of space through time. I conclude this chapter with interactions and field notes centering on two accordion repair persons to examine local economies of the accordion in today's climate.

Chapter Five centers on the younger generation of accordion players in my project, where I interview three young performers from the San Francisco Accordion Club. In this chapter, I also write about the shift to performing during the pandemic and consider how the medium of virtual lessons via Zoom and Skype affected my playing and that of others. In this chapter, I conclude the oral history portion of the project and consider the future of the accordion by way of the younger generation and their interests.

Chapter 1: Italian American Immigration and History of Italians in the Bay Area

19th Century Italy

To contextualize the history of the accordion in the United States, particularly within the Italian immigrant communities of the Bay Area, it is essential to consider the social and cultural developments in 19th-century Italy. The movement for Italian unification, known as the *Risorgimento*, began in 1848 as a result of revolutions across the Italian peninsula culminating in Palermo.⁶ They set the stage for a broader nationalist campaign that resulted in the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861 -though Rome and Venice were not yet part of the new nation until nearly a decade later.⁷ They successfully won by assisting with efforts to solidify a newly-formed state resulting in the official name: L'italia. In addition, the nation soon adopted an official language: the Tuscan dialect.⁸ Overnight, southern regions like Calabria and Sicily were removed economically from markets in the north due to new inflation in tariffs and trade agreements, and their industries could not compete with the northern sources of funding and capital.⁹ Displeased with economic conditions, and

⁶ Marco Soresina, "The Italian Peninsula in the European Revolution 1848-1849," in *Italy Before Italy: Institutions, Conflicts and Political Hopes in the Italian States, 1815-1860* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2018), 92.

⁷ D.E.D. Beales and E.F. Biagini, *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2013), 157.

⁸ David Gilmour, *The Pursuit of Italy: A History of a Land, its Regions, and their Peoples* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 33.

⁹ Martin Clark, *Modern Italy: 1871 to the Present* (Harlow, England; Pearson Longman, 2008), 30.

searching for opportunity outside of their country, Italians began a great exodus beginning in the latter half of the 19th century, with over four million people leaving Italy between 1896 – 1905.¹⁰

Early Italian Arrivals

Prior to the waves of European and Chinese immigrants arriving to the United States in the 1880s, the foundations of early immigration law were largely based on the wording from the first Naturalization Act of 1790, which stated that “free white persons” could gain citizenship by naturalization. Only white, male property owners were permitted to receive citizen status.¹¹ Other communities could freely immigrate and work but could not gain citizenship. While documentation suggests some Italian immigration to the West Coast of the United States prior to 1800, smaller populations of Italians first began arriving in California as early as 1850 when the state was in its nascent stages of development.¹² While some of those immigrant communities came directly from Italy, there were a number of Italians who already settled on the East Coast prior.¹³ Once they moved to California, opportunities beyond prospecting such as entrepreneurship and trade presented itself, and a few of those early arrivals made a name for themselves as local *prominenti*, defined as “Italian immigrants who

¹⁰ Donna Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 58.

¹¹ Library of Congress, Law Library of Congress, and Library of Congress National Digital Library Program, “A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875,” *American Memory* (Washington, D.C: Library of Congress, 1999), 103.

¹² Kenneth Scambray, *Italian Immigration in the American West: 1870-1940* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2021), 231.

¹³ Carolyn Fregulia, *Italians of the Gold Country* (Mount Pleasant: N.C., Arcadia Publishing, 2007), 11.

experienced success in California.”¹⁴ Many of those family names dominated major businesses well into the 21st century. Some examples of *prominenti* include Ettore Patrizi, the editor of the San Francisco Italian-language newspaper *L'Italia*, and A.P. Giannini the founder of Bank of America.¹⁵

The California Gold Rush of the 1850s

In California, the population increase in the mid-19th century occurred mainly because of the Gold Rush. The California Gold Rush was a time when gold was being found and mined in the foothills of Northern California. It is typically centered in 1850 (with an overall range from 1848-1855). It created a boom of interest and expansion as over 300,000 people moved from the East Coast and abroad to California in hopes of finding gold and making a profit.¹⁶ The next wave of Italian immigration took place between the 1880s-1920s, when the US census recorded four million Italian immigrants.¹⁷ These communities sought better opportunities than their homeland could provide, often turning to industries that allowed them to develop practical skills and improve their economic prospects. In Northern California, logging and the lumber industry became a

¹⁴ Fregulia, *Italians of the Gold Country*, 21.

¹⁵ Tommaso Caiazza, “From the Prominenti to the Leaders: The Change in San Francisco’s Italian American Ethnicity,” in *Discourses That Matter: Selected Essays on English and American Studies*, ed. Maria José Florentino Mendes Canelo (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 251.

¹⁶ “From Gold Rush to Golden State,” Library of Congress, accessed April 29, 2025, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/articles-and-essays/early-california-history/from-gold-rush-to-golden-state/>.

¹⁷ “Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History,” Library of Congress, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/italian/the-great-arrival>.

significant avenue for employment in McCloud, CA.¹⁸ Winemaking, particularly in Amador, Mendocino, and Sonoma Counties, also offered Italians a chance to apply their agricultural traditions in a familiar climate and build lasting enterprises.¹⁹

Italian Immigration to California

Italian immigrants made up roughly 24 percent of the immigrant wave during the decade from 1900 to 1909, and “between 1901 and 1915, 40 percent of the Italian diaspora arrived in North America.”²⁰ Most of these immigrants were from the South; they left due to the drastic economic downturns in their regions, and most entered through the Ellis Island Port in New York. Even so, the majority of Italians who left in this era never intended to stay in the United States, and significant numbers migrated seasonally, thus being named “birds of passage.”²¹

A significant pushback against immigration emerged with the introduction of a federal quota system by President Warren Harding, prompted by an influx of 800,000 immigrant arrivals that led to the passage of the Emergency Quota Act in 1921.²² Additionally, the Immigration Act of 1924, rooted in xenophobic and

¹⁸ Maria Gloria Rando, “The Italian Connection with McCloud, California,” *L'Italo-Americano*, March 16, 2021, <https://italoamericano.org/the-italian-connection-with-mccloud-california/>.

¹⁹ Scambray, *Italian Immigration in the American West*, 249.

²⁰ Carol L. Schmid, “The Past Is Ever Present: Transnationalism Old and New – Italian and Mexican Immigrants in the US,” *International Migration* 55, no. 3 (2017): 21.

²¹ Thierry. Rinaldetti, “Italian Migrants in the Atlantic Economies: From the Circular Migrations of the Birds of Passage to the Rise of a Dispersed Community,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 34, no. 1 (2014): 5.

²² Kristofer Allerfeldt, “Rejecting the United States of the World: The Consequences of Woodrow Wilson’s New Diplomacy on the 1921 Immigration Act,” *European Journal of American Culture* 26, no. 3 (2007): 145.

racist ideologies, imposed stricter limitations on the entry of specific ethnic groups and established the U.S. Border Patrol to enforce these new restrictions.²³

Italian immigrants were also then affected by this system. Typical to new immigrant communities in America, many of these communities settled near their port of call, and a few made their way by train to settle in the Midwest (mostly Ohio) or later in California and Washington. The cost of train travel to the West Coast was an extra expense, so many early arrivals with funding or sponsorship by wealthy patrons or family members were able to make the trip out West. Even so, newly arriving immigrants were still pressed with unfair treatment and racist and classist divides by people in power.²⁴ Under those conditions, Italians were able to gain very limited momentum in the plight for social justice and for fair and equal treatment in a host country that deemed them as “dirty and menacing.”²⁵ In the 1930s, immigration policies continued to privilege the migration and establishment of workers with education and specializations in fields that were considered as contributions to building the U.S. economy especially after WWII where emphasis on skilled professionals in science and technology were desired.²⁶ While some attempts were made to reverse the existing system, it was not fully

²³ Ramón A. Gutiérrez, “The U.S. Border Patrol,” *California History* 101, no. 4 (2024): 12-13.

²⁴ Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, *Are Italians White? How Race Is Made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 30.

²⁵ Joseph P. Cosco, *Imagining Italians: The Clash of Romance and Race in American Perceptions, 1880-1910*, SUNY Series in Italian/American Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 26.

²⁶ Monique Laney, “Setting the Stage to Bring in the ‘Highly Skilled:’ Project Paperclip and the Recruitment of German Specialists after World War II,” in *A Nation of Immigrants Reconsidered: US Society in an Age of Restriction, 1924-1965*, eds. Maddalena Marinari, Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu, and María Cristina García 21, *Studies of World Migrations* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 145.

extinguished until lobbyists and groups like the American Committee on Italian Migration (ACIM) formed in the 1950s to help abolish the outdated policies of quotas based on sex, race, and gender.²⁷ By 1965, the quota system finally ended with the implementation of the Immigration and Nationality Act, and the only two itemized requirements were worded as “Western Hemisphere” and “special immigrant” (one who is outside of the Western Hemisphere).²⁸ To better understand the regional provenance of Italians migrating to California, see the patterns of Italian immigration flow (1880s-1920s) in the table below:

Fig. 1: Jennifer J. Helzer, *California Geographer* 42 (2002): 28.²⁹

Table 1.—Regional Origins of Northern California Italians

Region	Number of Individuals (N=1437)	Percentage
Toscana	327	22.8
Piemonte	222	15.4
Lombardia	221	15.4
Liguria	193	13.4
Veneto	145	10.1
Calabria	125	8.7
Sicilia	72	5.0
Canton Ticino	40	2.8
Emilia-Romagna	25	1.7
South America	15	1.0
Other	52	3.6
Northern Italy and Ticino	1203	83.7
Mezzogiorno and Sicily	219	15.2

²⁷ Danielle Battisti, *Whom We Shall Welcome: Italian Americans and Immigration Reform 1945-1965*, Critical Studies in Italian America (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 4.

²⁸ Michael LeMay, *The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965: A Reference Guide*, Guides to Historic Events in America (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2020), 97.

²⁹ Sources: Compiled from naturalization records and petitions for naturalization of Italian immigrants in the following California towns: Amador, Mendocino, Siskiyou, and Sonoma counties, and tombstone epitaphs from cemeteries in Jackson, Sutter Creek, Fort Bragg, Bodega Bay, Occidental, Sebastopol, Petaluma, McCloud, Mt. Shasta City, Weed, and Colma. Permission granted by the author to reprint.

As you can see in the chart above, the majority of Italian immigrants to Northern California claimed a Northern Italian regional ancestry but there were smaller groups from Sicily that dominated the sardine and fishing industries.³⁰ According to Anna Celenza, most of the Italians immigrating to California “set themselves up as artisans and proprietors in the burgeoning service industries.”³¹ The majority of the immigrant populations from Italy arrived in California from Toscana, Piemonte, and Lombardia (see Jennifer Helzer, *California Geographer*, 28).

Italian Accordion Makers in San Francisco

In San Francisco, one such group of artisans included a small population of accordion makers arriving from Castelfidardo in the Province of Ancona (located in the Marche region of the Adriatic Coast). Castelfidardo has been known as the epicenter of accordion since the first factory appeared there in 1863.³² Artisans from the village assisted with the advancement of the accordion on the West Coast by working for the Guerrini (est. 1903) and Columbo (est. 1927) accordion factories. The varied historical experiences of Italy during the *Risorgimento* (the unification process from 1848 to 1871) influenced the production of the accordion and its geographic centers in both Italy and the United States. When the modern country of Italy was being formed in the 19th

³⁰ Carol Lynn McKibben, *Beyond Cannery Row: Sicilian Women, Immigration, and Community in Monterey, California, 1915-99* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 15-16.

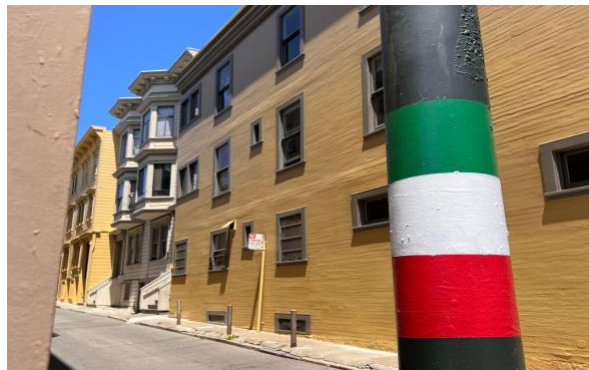
³¹ Anna Harwell Celenza, *Jazz Italian Style: From its Origins in New Orleans to Fascist Italy and Sinatra* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017), 22.

³² Elisabetta Povoledo, “An Accordion Epicenter Shrinks and Thrives,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 2011.

century, many of the resources were drained from the southern part of the country, leaving the only accordion industries in Castelfidardo (Ancona) and Stradella in Pavia (Lombardia).³³ The factories in Castelfidardo continued to thrive under the direction of the first accordion maker in the village, Paolo Soprani, and known accordion maker Mariano Dallapè who developed the market in Stradella.³⁴ Once the accordion market started to grow in the 1920s and 30s in the United States, companies like Guerrini in San Francisco hired Italian artisans to showcase their accordion-making skills to support the efforts of their factories in North Beach.³⁵ Through their migration and contributions, this group of Italian immigrants in California shaped the early development of the accordion and played a pivotal role in establishing the instrument’s lasting association with San Francisco.

A Brief History of North Beach

Fig. 2: A light post in North Beach (June 4, 2023).



³³ Bradley Voltz, “The Stradella Accordion from Stage to Stream,” May 28, 2024,

<https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/arts-culture/the-stradella-accordion-from-stage-to-stream/>.

³⁴ Joseph Petosa Jr., *Petosa Accordions, 1922-2022: An American Accordion Story* (American Accordion Press, 2022), 13.

³⁵ Ronald Flynn, Edwin Davison, and Edward Chavez, *The Golden Age of the Accordion* (San Antonio: Flynn Associates Publishing, 1992), 5.

Field note: A Walk Through Little Italy, San Francisco, CA. (October 2021)

I am walking up Columbus Avenue, making my way through the crowded sidewalks on a sunny but breezy day in the city. Children run by me, waving the tricolore, and I notice people wearing amusing T-shirts: “My husband is Italian. I am here for the pasta.” It is warm, and lunch tables are covered with red and white plastic checkered films set out on the parade route so patrons can enjoy a meal from nearby restaurants while watching the heritage parade. The noise of “family” is in the air. It isn’t just any family; it is the stuff of Italian families. As I walk, I discern the drastic dynamic changes in conversations: it’s loud. On one block, I observe two brothers filled with laughter while they sip red wine from small clear plastic cups, while on the next block, I see an older gentleman in a tan worn-out cap whispering into the close neck of a friend who acknowledges him with a few nods. A young boy cries in his mother’s arms. There is Puccini being sung as I continue to walk up the street by Washington Square. On the next block, I hear a Dean Martin song overhead as I pass a cafe. “Volare”...of course, it is always “Volare.” I jet quickly to the last block before the parade route, and I see a piano-accordion come into view.

The actual outline of San Francisco’s Little Italy covers less than a square mile. It is mostly confined to Columbus Avenue, which begins at Washington and Montgomery and ends around where Greenwich and Mason intersect. In the 1930s, the area was larger and extended from point to point (Bay Street to the Washington intersection). As part of my own memory process to consider the Italian past of San Francisco, I used digital mapping technology to recreate spaces and reimagine what North Beach once looked like.

Digital Mapping Process

Fig. 3: The author's recreation of a three-block section of North Beach as it stood in 1933. Each business on the map is Italian-owned, and the symbols represent various industries, including baking, dental, health care, music shops, and jewelers, realtors, and banks.

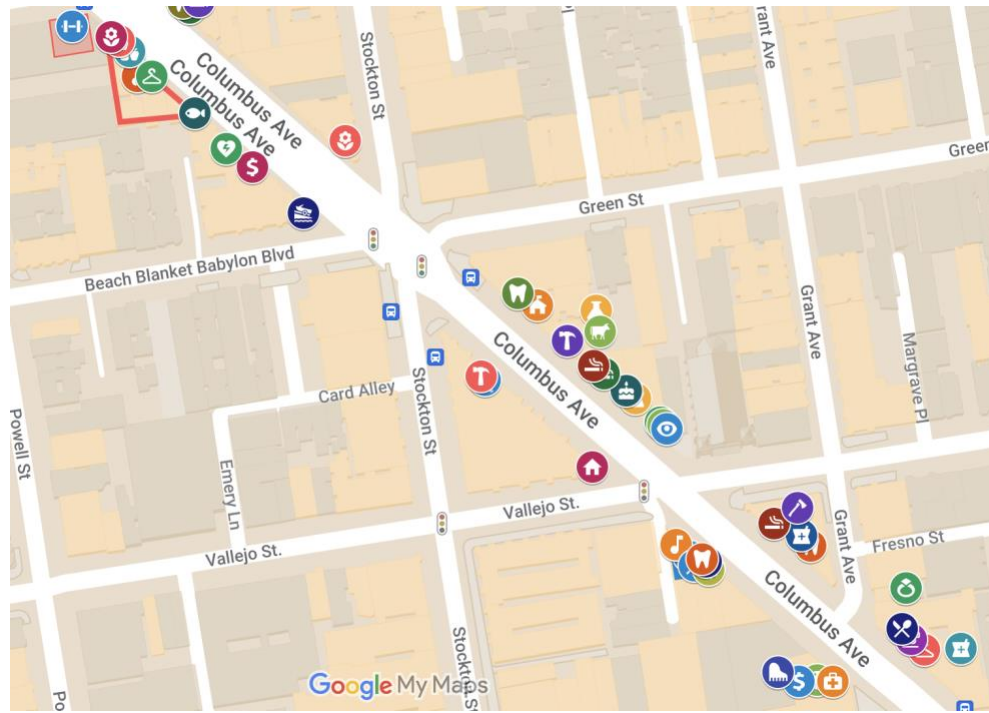


Fig. 4: Map of North Beach Area remapped by the author to represent the Little Italy area as it appeared in 1933.

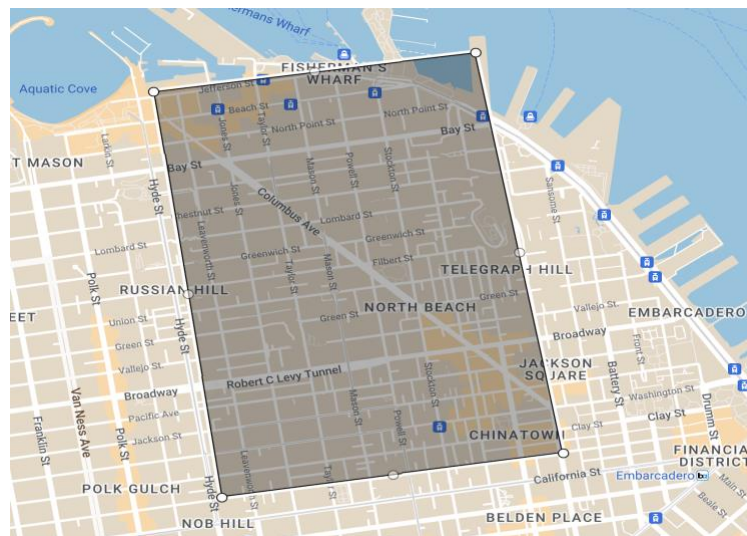
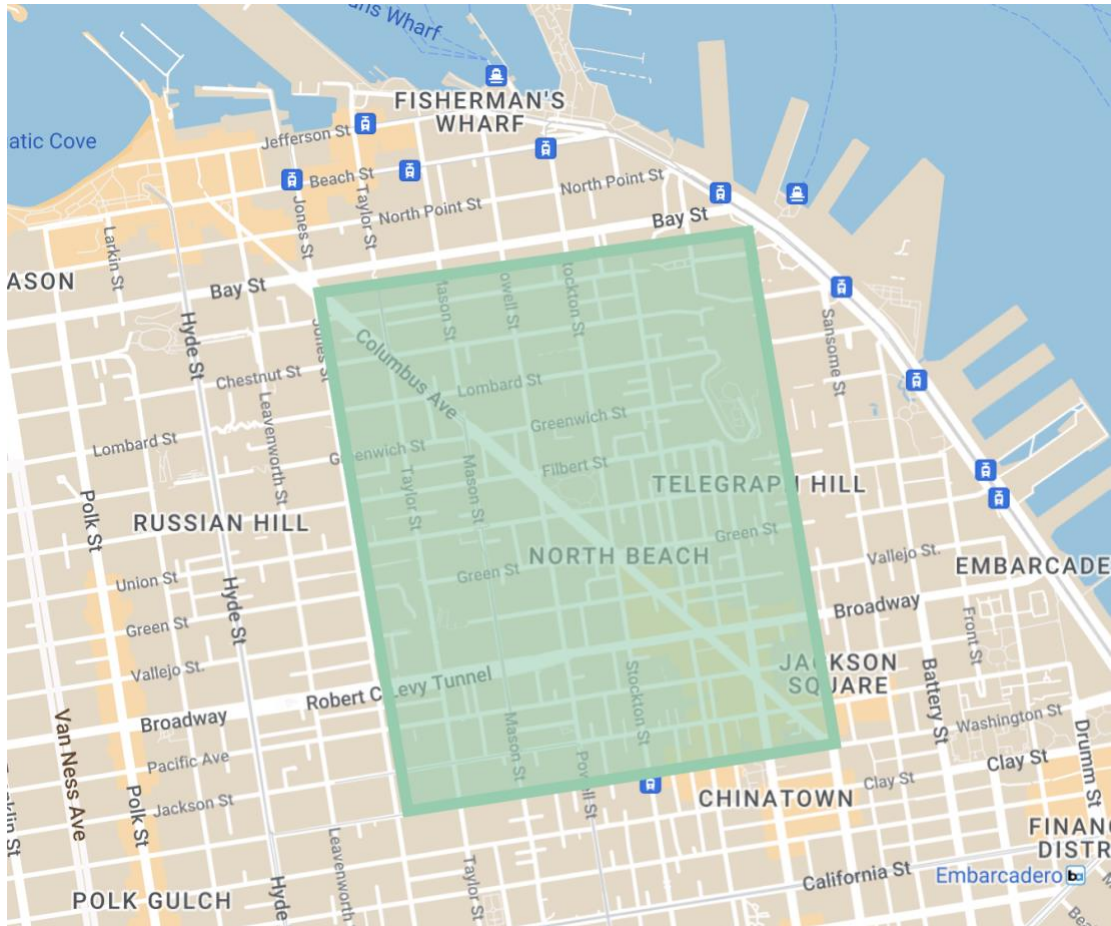


Fig. 5: Outline of North Beach area in the present day.



In 1873, the city of San Francisco approved the construction of a diagonal street at a 45-degree angle that cut across from Washington Street up to Beach Street between Russian and Telegraph Hills.³⁶ The named Montgomery Ave. was originally a nuisance in North Beach during the seven-year building process, and it remained unpaved until 1913.³⁷ By the 1920s, Italians made up the majority of

³⁶ "Notice," *The San Francisco Examiner*, advertisements, January 21, 1873.

³⁷ Anne T. Kent, "Revitalization of San Francisco's North Beach and its Impact on 19th Century Marin," newsletter, Sept. 14, 2020, <http://medium.com/anne-t-kent-california-room-community-newsletter/revitalization-of-san-franciscos-north-beach-its-impact-on-19th-century-marin-91c6cd3d755f>.

the neighborhood's population, and the area became widely known by the familiar American term for Italian enclaves: "Little Italy." Columbus Avenue, newly renamed in 1909, soon emerged as the center of the Italian community.³⁸

Neighboring and Shifting Communities

From the end of the 19th century until WWII, San Jose had its own version of Little Italy affectionately known as Goosetown.³⁹ On the far end of the Bay Area, Pittsburg also had, at one time, a large population of Italian Americans.⁴⁰ Over the course of multiple talks during our interview sessions, accordion player Lou DiMaggio conveyed that the city was made up of first and second-generation Italian families. Stockton and Lodi (located in San Joaquin County) were home to Italians in the early 20th century who began businesses in farming and agriculture.⁴¹ neighboring foothill towns, including Murphys, Mokelumne, and Sutter Creek also held larger populations of Italian families, as many second and third generations were involved in wine-making and farming in those areas.⁴²

Commerce and Kinship: Building Little Italies

(Accordion), I mean, that was the instrument of choice in my in my neighborhood.

- Dominic Palmisano (74), former president of SFAC and former resident of the Excelsior district in San Francisco.

³⁸ "Civic Commission Shuffles Names of Streets," *San Francisco Bulletin*, November, 9, 1909.

³⁹ Alyson Chuyang, "The History behind San Jose's Long-Lost 'Goosetown,'" *San Jose Today*, November 17, 2022, <https://sjtoday.6amcity.com/the-history-behind-san-jose-ca-long-lost-goosetown>.

⁴⁰ "Pittsburg Italians Change Name of Group to 'Civic Club,' *Turlock Journal*, June 14th, 1940.

⁴¹ Scambray, *Italian Immigration in the American West*, 242.

⁴² For a general overview of Italians in the foothills of Northern California, please see the following documentary: Gianfranco Norelli, and Suma Kurien. *Finding the Mother Lode: Italian Immigrants in California*. Eurus Productions, Inc., 2013.

By the 1920s, Little Italies were transformed into sustainable centers of commerce that catered to Italians who could purchase grocery items at the local market or visit artisanal or specialty-focused boutiques like a tailor or shoemaker. The bakeries, butcher shops, and newsstands of Little Italy became locations where Italians in the diaspora could affirm their belonging to a group and purchase goods to support their own community while carrying on with their daily business. In his study of Cuban communities in NYC, Norman Yetman argued that trust and reciprocity in the workplace were key factors in building unity among immigrant laborers in Queens. In the cases of his study, he found that trust was given in exchange for the purchase of goods and services. He noted that employers of such enclaves carried social responsibilities outside the typical job duties, where they became intermediaries to connect them to other businesses and families in the neighborhood. For Italians throughout the diaspora, this formula of maintaining reliable kinships was an important part of their social structure. Many early communities formed networks such as fraternal organizations, Catholic orders (Knights of Columbus founded in 1882), and mutual aid societies to establish communal foundations which also served as a setting for shared collective memory for Italians in the diaspora.⁴³ Institutions like the Order Sons of Italy, founded in 1905 (OSIA), were examples of groups that supported Italian

⁴³ Olivia B. Waxman, "How Christopher Columbus Became an Italian-American Icon," Time Magazine, October 8, 2021, <https://time.com/6104176/christopher-columbus-italian-american/>.

immigrants in America, specifically assisting with matters of citizenship and education.⁴⁴

Regional differences persisted for those living in Little Italies, and there was still a racial hierarchy within their workforce. Their direct link to a particular region in Italy often helped them secure gainful employment. In Monterey, CA. for example, the history of early Sicilian fishing communities immigrating there was tied to only three villages from the 1920s – 1940s.⁴⁵ The Sicilian and Southern Italians were a skilled working population that dominated fishing and fishmongering on the peninsula.⁴⁶ Notably, the Sicilian communities later took over the fishing industry from the Chinese workers in San Francisco.⁴⁷ Italian studies scholar Jennifer Guglielmo asserts that while Italians experienced xenophobic practices upon arrival, they were ultimately accepted as white by a number of American organizations and institutions.⁴⁸

In addition to San Francisco, Italian communities continued to form in neighboring cities and areas throughout Northern California. Oakland, San Mateo, South San Francisco, and San Bruno all included large Italian communities by the 1940s as many families moved to the suburbs. As evidenced in Dino Cinel's documentation of Italian families in the Bay Area, many third-generation Italians

⁴⁴ Biff Rocha, "Mutual Aid Societies." In *Italian Americans: The History and Culture of a People* (ABC-CLIO, 2017): 190.

⁴⁵ See *Intimacy and Italian Migration: Gender and Domestic Lives in a Mobile World*, eds. Loretta Baldassar and Donna R. Gabaccia (Fordham University Press, 2010), 145.

⁴⁶ McKibben, *Beyond Cannery Row*, 15-16.

⁴⁷ Eve Armentrout-Ma, "Chinese in California's Fishing Industry, 1850-1941," *California History* 60, no. 2 (1981): 144.

⁴⁸ Guglielmo and Salerno, "Introduction," 30.

were reluctant to take on their family business, and it was typical to see younger families move to the outskirts of San Francisco.⁴⁹ Post-World War II, second and third generations of Italian Americans were increasingly seen and accepted by others as white Americans -as well as presenting, at times, as white themselves.⁵⁰ This shift occurred in various ways, including language use changes (less dialect and standard Italian used) with a weaker relationship to vernacular religious traditions.⁵¹ Those generations could not fully grasp Italy or the voyage their grandparents endured, and in the post-war era, many of these generations attempted to grapple with their history, loss of memory, and identity. According to Stuart Hall, cultural identity is always changing through time: “the past is always constructed through memory and fantasy, narrative and myth.”⁵² For the majority of people I worked with in this dissertation, they knew Italy or Italian because of their parents and their respective neighborhoods. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing through the 1980s, Little Italy neighborhoods throughout the United States began to shrink (ex. New Orleans, Bridgeport, Omaha), and while the storefronts and street signs continued as markers of ethnic identity, there were no longer abundant visual signs of Italian communities actually living and

⁴⁹ Dino Cinel, *From Italy to San Francisco: The Immigrant Experience* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1982), 7.

⁵⁰ Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 171.

⁵¹ Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. Hall, D. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 8.

⁵² Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” J. Rutherford ed. in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990): 226.

thriving in these spaces (see Jerry Krase on ‘Little Italies’).⁵³ Much later, tourists and Italian Americans seeking nostalgic escape visited what was left of the original enclaves, in what Cinotto terms an “urban ethnic theme park.”⁵⁴

Bartering and Trading: The Worth of an Instrument

Another experience of living in these spaces was the way bonds were formed through trust and community. The bartering operation was one part of that trust, and the process became a key piece in sustaining the accordion and its relevance in the Bay Area.

Throughout the process of this research, I questioned if bartering ever occurred instead of accordion sales. Many of the participants in my interviews acquired new Columbo and Guerrini accordions in their younger years, and in the 1950s, those pieces were anywhere from \$700 - \$1,000 per instrument when the minimum wage was \$1 per hour in 1957.⁵⁵ Since all of the interlocutors’ parents of the participants in my research were working class and housed in industry and local businesses, I considered that bartering might have been necessary to purchase a luxury item like a hand-crafted accordion, especially for a child. During a phone interview with John Monteverde, he stated that his father (John senior), who worked for Columbo & Sons, would often barter and use his accordions as a trade:

⁵³ Jerry Krase, “Whatever Happened to Little Italy?,” in *The Routledge History of Italian Americans*, eds. William J. Connell and Stanislao G. Pugliese (London: Routledge, 2018), 536.

⁵⁴ Simone Cinotto, *Making Italian America: Consumer Culture and the Production of Ethnic Identities*, *Critical Studies in Italian America* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 227.

⁵⁵ “History of California Minimum Wage,” State of California Department of Industrial Relations, accessed April 29, 2025, <http://www.dir.ca.gov/iwc/minimumwagehistory.htm>.

They bartered all the time. I remember one time my dad showed up with a 1970 Pontiac Grand Prix. It had those wide fender skirts. It was used but he got it for trading an accordion. That's also how I got my first bicycle.

- John Monteverdi (78), Piedmont, CA.

In many of my interactions with the people in this project, I often asked them, "how much was your first accordion?" Most of the answers that were returned ranged in price from \$700 to \$2,000, and the participants often had to take pause and consider how their families could afford upwards of \$1,000 in the 1950s and 60s:

As tough a life as they were having, my father happened to find a 48-bass Hohner accordion used. I don't know how much he paid for it. It was more than he could afford.

- Ed Massolo (99), South San Francisco, former student of John Molinari Sr.

I don't remember how much they paid for the accordion either. That probably was a valuable thing in those years. My dad was a landscape gardener. He started his own business after he had been here a few years he worked, doing that kind of work. And then he opened up his little landscaping company. So he wasn't, you know, really well off but he made a good salary to take care of his family, which I appreciate, but I didn't appreciate it as much as I do now.

- Arleen Johnson (83), San Mateo, owner of an original Guerrini accordion

They (Stark Brothers) had an Excelsior accordion there that I really liked, but it was \$1,000. And we couldn't afford it. So my first accordion was a Patti Brothers accordion, and (they) were out of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and my dad paid \$315 for that, and I remember we paid, I think it was \$12 a month forever for paying for that accordion.

- Karl Kment (95), Redmond, OR., former American Music Company CEO

I don't know how I remember, but my Columbo accordion that I still have, I think that I paid \$700 for that, it was 140 bass. It was probably (from) the 40s. I did not appreciate that in those years.

- Frank Venterelli (96), San Mateo, owner of a Columbo accordion

With this information, I can see that bartering for accordions sometimes occurred in the area of Little Italy and likely within the few accordion factories and shops located there. The process of exchange, in this case, became an intrinsic practice to sustain the continuity of accordion learning and studies for the next generation.⁵⁶

Mutual agreements are an inherent part of Italian culture. They are used to seal a contract or to broker a deal. Also referred to as a “gentleman’s agreement” or a handshake, the agreement is binding according to the parties that participate, yet it is not written in a physical contract. In the economies of Little Italy, newly arriving immigrants to San Francisco sometimes used the bartering system as a means to assist in their adjustment process. Bartering agreements are also largely based on trust, providing a foundation for negotiations when trading. Trust is also needed for burgeoning friendships and to create kinship amongst community members. It is in these contexts that the means of bartering becomes a function of sustainability for various types of industry in this particular community where assimilation is a common goal. In enclaves, bartering often occurs with those who provide goods or services and can include various community members ranging from grocers to health professionals. Unlike gifting culture featured in the studies of Mauss (*The Gift*), bartering erases the need to pay back a debt and the desire to

⁵⁶ Today, it is more common to purchase accordions online and at much cheaper rates therefore alleviating the need for barter. Now, one can log into the eBay website and find hundreds of accordions for sale in various conditions. Most are from the 1950s and 60s, made in Castelfidardo, and in need of serious repair.

owe.⁵⁷ This process then creates an equal ground among the two involved in an exchange.⁵⁸ The accordion shop owners in the neighboring areas of San Francisco were familiar with each other through family connections, which likely supported the bartering economy. Many attended the same schools, they were directly related, or they lived in close proximity to each other. Vince Cirelli Jr. (whose father was a known repairman in the city in the 1960s) recalled a number of people who were referenced from other areas in my project:

Monica: I came across a name, Piatanesi

Vince: Faust Piatanesi.

Monica: And that is another thing, he was part of Columbo?

Vince: Well, they sort of all knew each other. All of the accordion factories were all kind of intertwined. They all worked for one another. There were a number of them. In fact, that accordion here, Galleazzi and Sons was in North Beach as well.⁵⁹

Similarly, my own Italian grandfather often bartered with his friends and neighbors in order to save money on goods and services. For example, my first car was purchased when he built a brick patio for a family friend. The next week, a beautiful sky-blue 1976 Buick Skylark was presented to me. Indeed, this gift was a labor of love but also part of a larger process in which Italian immigrants often participated to make ends meet and one that they continued to rely on even after they assimilated and had means.

⁵⁷ Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1954.

⁵⁸ Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones, *Barter, Exchange, and Value: An Anthropological Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11.

⁵⁹ Interview held on June 26, 2021, at the accordion repair shop of Valdet Jakubovic in San Jose, CA.

Chapter 2: History of the Accordion

Believe it or not, folks, the accordion was actually invented right here, right up the street.

-Emcee speaking at the Festa Coloniale Italiana. June 4th, 2023, North Beach, SF.

Scope and Themes

The scope of my historical research spans from the 1880s, when the first accordions arrived on the West Coast, until the 1970s when many of the accordion factories and schools closed in the Bay Area. Between 2019 and 2024 I conducted 27 interviews with members of the broader Bay Area accordion community to piece together the history of the accordion in this area. While much of that material is in subsequent chapters, in this chapter I consider California and the greater West Coast Italian American history mainly to contextualize my discussion of Italian accordion repertoire. I view the instrument as a historical object that has acquired new meanings over time. I consider the Bay Area places where the accordion existed at the turn of the century, and compare those spaces, and their soundscapes, to the present. I then discuss the changes over time to the accordion community, and the instrument as a symbol. A secondary goal of this chapter is to provide readers with new information about how the image of the accordion morphed from a complex tool of machine-age technology to a marker of Italian identity.

Accordion Literature

Since the invention of the instrument by Cyrill Demian in the 18th century, the accordion patent inspired a number of inventors to try their hand at creating versions of the free-reed instrument.⁶⁰ Because it uses reeds, the accordion sounds like a combination of an organ and a clarinet. The timbre is often thin, and the tuning can be straightforward or sometimes altered, so two or more reed sets are tuned off-pitch from each other, creating a vibrato effect (referred to as wet tuning by performers and those in the accordion community). It can be used for various entertainments, such as solo performances or accompaniment in a full ensemble.

The published history of the piano-accordion is dominated by DIY websites and trade books written for hobbyists and collectors. *The Golden Age of the Accordion* is considered to be the best representation of the West Coast accordion story by most members of the community.⁶¹ Written by three accordion performers who saw the instrument flourish on the West Coast, the book includes a number of primary source documents in the form of photos, posters, transcripts of interviews, letters, and programs, as well as the personal histories of its authors. There are many personal anecdotes and biographies that make up the book, and the authors include full documentation of manufacturers and accordion

⁶⁰ Marion Jacobson, *Squeeze This!: A Cultural History of the Accordion in America* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 16.

⁶¹ Flynn, Ronald, Edwin Davison, and Edward Chavez. *The Golden Age of the Accordion*. San Antonio: Flynn Associates Publishing, 1992.

sellers on the West Coast.⁶² While many amateurs and accordion club members, including my instructor, Lou Jacklish, accepted its histories and tales as fact, I was warned by a veteran researcher (who wishes to remain anonymous) that some of the stories in *The Golden Age of the Accordion* are like “often-told fish stories—growing and changing with each repetition.”⁶³ There are no citations or article dates, and the materials presented in the text were assembled from personal collections, interviews, and primary sources.

The second major book outside of academic sources was recently published by the Canadian author and radio show host Bruce Triggs.⁶⁴ His text is the most comprehensive and well-cited non-academic source regarding the accordion in North America to date, and he has generously shared his citations with me. Typical of most texts on the subject, he begins with a brief history of the accordion and how it established itself in the Americas. Although he includes the history of the instrument in regional genres (Irish, Tejano, Klezmer, Cajun/Zydeco, polka), I mostly draw on his chapters on the accordion in Blackface minstrelsy and Vaudeville, because many Italian performers (like Angelo Cagnazzo) worked in these early Orpheum circuits on the West Coast.

⁶² Flynn, Davison, and Chavez, *The Golden Age of the Accordion*, 75.

⁶³ Email correspondence with author, Feb 21, 2021, 9:29AM.

⁶⁴ Triggs, Bruce. *Accordion Revolution: A People’s History of the Accordion in North America from the Industrial Revolution to Rock and Roll*. Vancouver: Demian & Sons, 2019.

Henry Doktorski wrote *The Brothers Deiro and their Accordions*⁶⁵ and edited a collection of accordion scores by Guido Deiro.⁶⁶ He has also published three diatonic button accordion methods books,⁶⁷ and an academic article on the history of the accordion in classical music.⁶⁸ A self-published text by Count Robert Deiro Jr. called *Mae West and the Count: Love and Loss on the Vaudeville Stage*⁶⁹ considers the history of the noted accordion vaudevillian performer Guido Deiro and his supposed marriage to Mae West. This book is focused on the musician's stories, and not the instrument itself. Joe Petosa Jr., on the other hand, recently published a book focused on the 100 year history of the Italian American Petosa family of accordion makers.⁷⁰

The first significant academic writing on the accordion is a master's thesis published at the Catholic University of America (Washington, DC.) in 1952 by Toni Charuhas.⁷¹ It was later reworked and published as a book for a general audience in 1955. While the thesis includes citations, the book does not. Guido

⁶⁵ Doktorski, Henry. 2005. *The Brothers Deiro and Their Accordions*. Oakdale, PA: H. Doktorski Publications.

⁶⁶ Deiro, Guido. "The Complete Works of Guido Deiro." Ed. Henry Doktorski. Pacific, MO.: Mel Bay, 2008.

⁶⁷ See Doktorski, Henry. "How to Play Diatonic Button-Accordion. Vol. 1." Danvers, MA.: Santorella Publications, 2007.

Doktorski, Henry. "How to Play Diatonic Button-Accordion. Vol. 2." Danvers, MA.: Santorella Publications, 2009.

Doktorski, Henry. "How to Play Diatonic Button-Accordion. Vol. 3." Danvers, MA.: Santorella Publications, 2011.

⁶⁸ Doktorski, Henry. "The Classical Squeezebox: A Short History of the Accordion in Classical Music." *Musical Performance* 4 (2001): 136-46.

⁶⁹ Deiro, Guido Roberto. *Mae West and the Count: Love and Loss on the Vaudeville Stage*. Colorado, CO.: Outskirts Press, 2019.

⁷⁰ Petosa Jr., Joseph. *Petosa Accordions, 1922-2022: An American Accordion Story*. American Accordion Press, 2022.

⁷¹ Charuhas, Antoinette Diana. "The Piano Accordion." PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1952.

Deiro's son states in the foreword to the book: "Why no one has ever before thought of publishing such a treatise is hard to tell, perhaps our own faith has been lacking."⁷² Charuhas's writes a detailed history of the accordion, including a consideration of predecessor instruments such as the sheng, the portative organ, and the bible-regal.⁷³ The book includes in-depth descriptions of ranges, switches, reeds, and the basic organology of the instrument. The specifications of the standard Stradella are included with complete cent systems, measurements, and detailed material makeup. Although her initial opus on the accordion is a great contribution to the culture and development of the instrument, and is frequently cited by academics and enthusiasts alike, I cannot find any texts authored by her after 1957, and Charuhas herself is only mentioned in small newspapers and accordion club bulletins. Charuhas did not include any women in her research, and the only staff notation in the book indicates reed ranges. One chapter refers to the instrument's place in "serious music," which in this case means orchestral music and accordion music at Carnegie Hall. This chapter is particularly important because compositions for the accordion in the Western art music tradition were not prevalent, yet experimental composers including Pauline Oliveros were composing for the accordion. The Charuhas text remains a valuable source, but even the author states that there is more work needed in the future. She writes: "much depends on the efforts of those already in the field to bring the

⁷² Toni Charuhas, *The Accordion* (New York: Pietro Deiro Publications, 1959), forward.

⁷³ Charuhas, *The Accordion*, 16.

potentialities of the accordion to the attention of the many gifted and promising composers.”⁷⁴

In 1992, Steve E. Winkler submitted his Master’s thesis titled “Accordion Work: Stigma and Struggle” to the University of Arkansas.⁷⁵ The work is a commentary on the social response to the accordion in the modern-day and how the meaning of the accordionist has changed through time. Winkler uses the theories of semiotics and cultural production in his analyses, and the project is an examination of societal response to the instrument as a symbol and a practice. In 2006, Jerzy Wieczorek submitted a capstone project in the AHS area studies (Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences) for the Olin College of Engineering. Titled “Managing the Accordionist’s Identity in America: A Labeling/Interactionist Perspective,” the paper is similar to Winkler’s work in that it focuses on the stigma, identities, and social attributes of the instrument and those who play it.⁷⁶ While both of these certainly contribute to the accordion literature, the programs from which they are authored are housed outside of music departments, as Winkler’s text is in sociology, and Wieczorek’s is placed in the College of Engineering.

Music scholar Robert Walser has written about the accordion as a symbol of ethnic identity for Midwestern congregations, where accordion masses are

⁷⁴ Charuhas, *The Accordion*, 56.

⁷⁵ Winkler, Steve E. “Accordion Work: Stigma and Struggle.” Master’s thesis, University of Arkansas, 1992.

⁷⁶ Wieczorek, Jerzy. “Managing the Accordionist’s Identity in America: A Labeling/Interactionist Perspective.” Capstone project, Olin College of Engineering, 2006, <https://phoenixfiles.olin.edu/do/20b96ac0-1e46-43e2-af93-fccd27d2c68d>.

popular. In his article “The Polka Mass,” he reads polka masses through a postmodern lens, arguing: “genre boundaries can result from the activities of people whose remaking of their own culture is a refusal to submit to the disorienting effects of modernity.”⁷⁷ Helmi Harrington is the founder and curator of the World of Accordions Museum in Superior, WI. She received her education at UT Austin in musicology, plays the instrument, and with Gerhard Kubik wrote the article on the accordion in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*.⁷⁸ Marion Jacobson graduated with her Ph.D. in musicology from NYU and has been writing about the classicization of the accordion and how it moved regionally in the United States. Her book is one of the handful of texts that centers solely on accordion, written by a musicologist, and published by an academic press.⁷⁹ Jacobson has written about the accordion in rock music,⁸⁰ and the process of music globalization in the 20th century.⁸¹ She has also written about the accordion as a material object and actor in the repertoire of Valtaro musette.⁸² The genre of accordion-based dance music known as musette flourished in Paris beginning in the 1880s, yet it was disseminated to cities across Europe and in the United States.

⁷⁷ Robert Walser, “The Polka Mass: Music of Postmodern Ethnicity,” *American Music* 10, no. 2 (1992): 198.

⁷⁸ Harrington, Helmi Strahl, and Gerhard Kubik. “Accordion.” In *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane Root. Published online 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.46180>.

⁷⁹ Jacobson, Marion S. *Squeeze This!: A Cultural History of the Accordion in America*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012.

⁸⁰ Jacobson, Marion S. “Searching for Rockordion: The Changing Image of the Accordion in America.” *American Music* (2007): 216-247.

⁸¹ Jacobson, Marion S. “Notes from Planet Squeezebox: The Accordion and the Process of Musical Globalization.” *The World of Music* 50, no. 3 (2008): 5-14.

⁸² Jacobson, Marion S. “Valtaro Musette: Italians, Accordions, and a Pluralistic Vision of Ethnicity in New York City.” *The World of Music* 50, no. 3 (2008): 57-79.

She argues that the musette repertoire in 1930s New York City grew and changed to a cosmopolitan and continental style in dance hall music, thus separating Northern Italian identity and affiliation from the Southern. Finally, while Anna Celenza (Georgetown University, musicology) has published some information in her recent book on Italian identity and the significance of the piano-accordion, it centers mainly on accordion virtuoso Guido Deiro.⁸³

The most comprehensive ethnomusicological text on the accordion was edited by Helena Simonett in 2012, and contains fourteen essays by authors from the fields of music, anthropology, and American studies.⁸⁴ Unique to this text are the English-language articles about the accordion in South America and the Caribbean⁸⁵. These chapters discuss the instrument as it developed in Brazil, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic, including among the large Italian communities in Argentina and Brazil. The chapter that most directly relates to my research is by Christine Zinni, and focuses on the recording industry and the Deiro brothers on the West Coast.⁸⁶

⁸³ Celenza, *Jazz Italian Style*, 2018.

⁸⁴ Simonett, Helena. *The Accordion in the Americas: Klezmer, Polka, Tango, Zydeco, and More!* Champaign, IL.: University of Illinois Press, 2012.

⁸⁵ Bermúdez, Egberto. "Beyond Vallenato: The Accordion Traditions in Colombia." In *The Accordion in the Americas*, ed. Helena Simonett. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012: 199–213.

Hutchinson, Sydney. "No Ma' Se Oye El Fainfuan: The Noisy Accordion in the Dominican Republic." In *The Accordion in the Americas*, ed. Helena Simonett. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012: 249–267.

Loveless, Megwen. "Between the Folds of Luiz Gonzaga's Sanfona: Forró Music in Brazil." In *The Accordion in the Americas*, ed. Helena Simonett. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012: 268–284.

⁸⁶ Christine F. Zinni, "Play me a Tarantella, a Polka, or Jazz: Italian Americans and the Currency of Piano-Accordion Music," in *The Accordion in the Americas*, ed. Helena Simonett. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012: 156-177.

Regional studies of the accordion make up a large part of the ethnographic and ethnohistorical literature on the accordion. Mark DeWitt, for examples, writes about a musical genre (Cajun and Zydeco Dance music) that includes the accordion, and his work focuses on a similar geographical region to my research.⁸⁷ His fieldwork includes careful treatment of accordionists, and their voices are included in his text. He also discusses the trope of memory and longing, because his field site in Northern California is a space that has been inviting to immigrant communities since the Gold Rush: “a place one goes to reinvent oneself.”⁸⁸ T.M. Scruggs writes about Tejano musicians who blur the lines of multiple genres through Tex-Mex and conjunto styles. His work focuses on diatonic button accordion styles native to the Texas—Mexico border region.⁸⁹ Similarly, Erin Bauer focuses on the same tropes of blending and fusion of conjunto and considers how the styles morphed from a regional to a global style.⁹⁰ Jared Snyder, on the other hand, writes about the diatonic accordion as it was used in the blues. He discusses Leadbelly’s “windjammer,” and argues the artist’s stylistic traits on the instrument pre-dated the 20th century and were learned largely through oral traditions.⁹¹ While these approaches focus solely on the

⁸⁷ DeWitt, Mark F. *Cajun and Zydeco Dance Music in Northern California: Modern Pleasures in a Postmodern World*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008.

⁸⁸ DeWitt, *Cajun and Zydeco Dance Music in Northern California*, 210.

⁸⁹ Scruggs, T.M. “Squeezing the Audience From Both Ends: The Conjunto Accordion and the Musical Border Crossings of Flaco Jiménez.” *Musical Performance* 3, no. 2-4 (2001): 215–28.

⁹⁰ Bauer, Erin E. “The Participation of Flaco Jiménez on Ry Cooder’s Chicken Skin Music: Cross-Cultural Collaboration and the (Inter)national Discovery of Texas-Mexican Accordion Music.” *Rock Music Studies* 1, no. 2 (2014): 148–169.

⁹¹ Snyder, Jared. “Leadbelly and His Windjammer: Examining the African American Button Accordion Tradition.” *American Music* 12, no. 2 (1994): 148–166.

accordion in the American South, they are pertinent to this dissertation due to similarities in the ways local musical movements and the accordion itself affect regional and national identities. Graeme Smith, on the other hand, writes about the button accordion in the music of the Irish diaspora. He explores how meanings of performance in session music changed post-WWII, and how working-class ideologies were associated with the instrument and specific playing styles.⁹² I make a similar argument in my own work, that for many in the Italian community, the piano-accordion connected them to their diaspora, to their homeland, and to the past of their families living in America, who were majority working-class immigrant ancestors.

Most academic writing on the accordion mentions the instrument only in passing, or as one part of a multi-instrumental genre or musical movement. For example, in *American Klezmer*, the instrument is mentioned in Slobin's writings on wedding bands and on a few recordings, but it is not a focus of his scholarship.⁹³ This treatment of the accordion as a secondary element also occurs in *Balkan Fascination: Creating an Alternative Music Culture in America* (by Mirjana Laušević, 2007), and in *Romani Routes: Cultural Politics and Balkan Music in the Diaspora* (Carol Silverman, 2012). Although these texts are major contributions to a subject where the accordion is an active part of the genre in question, accordions are rarely mentioned. Much of the writing about Balkan

⁹² Smith, Graeme. "Modern-Style Irish Accordion Playing: History, Biography and Class." *Ethnomusicology* (1997): 433–63.

⁹³ Slobin, Mark. *American Klezmer: Its Roots and Offshoots*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

accordion music, and accordion in general, tends to happen in the respective countries where it is popular.

The only journal that regularly publishes about accordions and particular models or relatives is the *Galpin Society Journal*. While many of the articles in this journal vary in particular instrument topics (*bandoneon*, button accordion, English *concertina*), every author cites the history and material makeup, and they are sure to include the patent of Austrian instrument maker Cyrill Demian in 1757, which most authors claim is the first instance of what we know as the modern-day accordion.⁹⁴

Non-English Language Accordion Literature

There are several dissertations and theses, all published after 1980, that focus on the accordion in Italy, France, Germany, and Russia. In Italy, most of this writing is organological⁹⁵ or ethnomusicological, and not musicological, because the accordion is not considered a concertized instrument. Most Italian sources on the accordion have at least two to three authors, and they are published through conference proceedings rather than peer-reviewed journals. I have also found more method books and repertoire collections for piano-accordion in Italian sources than in any sources from other countries. In writings that center on Southern Italy, I identified a focus on *zampogna* (a type bagpipe in the reed

⁹⁴ Neil Wayne, "The Invention and Evolution of the Wheatstone Concertina," *The Galpin Society Journal* 62 (2009): 235.

⁹⁵ See: Jercog, Aleksi. *Organologia e letteratura della fisarmonica*. Master's thesis: Università Di Trieste, 1995.

aerophone category) along with *organetto* and *concertina*, which are similar instruments to the piano accordion.⁹⁶

In France, there are some dissertations produced at the Sorbonne Université in the 1980s, but general overviews of accordion history seem to be a focal point for accordion literature in that country.⁹⁷

Christian Pelinka wrote a German dissertation in 1987 debating whether the accordion was a “Squeezebox or Concert Instrument.”⁹⁸ German author Christoph Wagner has written two books on the piano-accordion in German literature and in global markets. He is knowledgeable as a performer and has also compiled albums of accordion recordings for world music industry releases.⁹⁹

Maria Dunkel wrote a dissertation on the Bandonion and Concertina, two

⁹⁶ Ferrarini, Lorenzo, and Nicola Scaldaferrì. *Sonic Ethnography: Identity, Heritage, and Creative Research Practice in Basilicata, Southern Italy*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2020.

-Leydi, Roberto. *Quattro strumenti popolari italiani: organetto, launeddas, piffero, violino*. Lipomo: CO., Cesare Nani, 1976.

-Mugnoz, Alessandro, Corrado Rojac, and Ivano Paterno. *I precursori della fisarmonica contemporanea: dalla civiltà musicale ottocentesca agli inizi del Novecento con uno sguardo al presente*. Macerata: Edizioni Ephemera, 2022.

⁹⁷ For dissertations, see:

- Deckers, Corinne. “L'Accordéon: Historique, Répertoire et Société au XXe Siècle en France (1900–1989).” PhD diss., Université Sorbonne, 1989.

- Gervasoni, Pierre. “L'Accordéon, Instrument du XXe Siècle.” PhD diss., Université Sorbonne, 1983. For texts, see:

- Billard, François, and Didier Roussin. *Histoires de l'accordéon*. Castelnau-le-Lez: Climats, 1991.

- Gervasoni, Pierre. *L'accordéon, instrument du XXème siècle*. Paris: Editions Mazo, 1986.

- Krümm, Philippe. *L'accordéon: Quelle histoire!* Paris: Parigramme, 2012.

- *L'accordéon: Les instruments à anches libres*. Courlay, France: Éditions J.M. Fuzeau S.A., 1987.

⁹⁸ Pelinka, Christian. “Das Akkordeon, Quetschkommode oder Konzertinstrument.” PhD Diss., Pädagogische Hochschule Weingarten, 1987.

⁹⁹ Wagner, Christoph. *Das Akkordeon: eine wilde Karriere*. Berlin: Transit, 1993.

Wagner, Christoph. *Das Akkordeon, Oder, Die Erfindung der Populären Musik: Eine Kulturgeschichte*. Mainz: Schott, 2001.

Wagner, Christoph. *Global Accordion: Early Recordings: 1927-1948*. Mainz: WERGO Schott Music & Media, 2001.

instruments related to the accordion, in the mid-1990s.¹⁰⁰ More recently, Alexander Braunschmid has written a dissertation in German on the international potential of the Italian accordion industry.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, one of the most organized and complete article entries on the history of the accordion is housed in the *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (“Music in History and the Present,” colloquially known as the MGG).¹⁰²

In Eastern Europe, there are very few sources on the piano-accordion since the button style is favored in that region. Alfred Mirek’s handbook on the accordion, which is focused on the *bayan*, includes some mention of the piano-accordion as it developed in Russia.¹⁰³

Accordion Mythmaking in San Francisco

With limited research to support a different narrative, it is unsurprising perhaps that myths about the origins of the accordion are pervasive. In particular, in my research, I regularly encountered the idea that the accordion was invented in San Francisco.

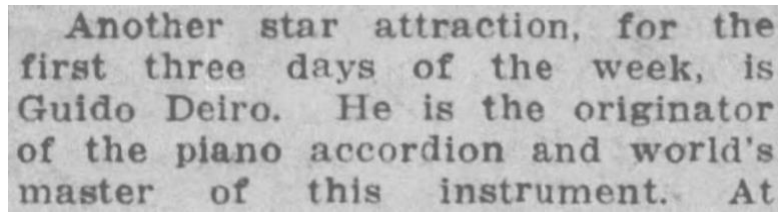
¹⁰⁰ Dunkel, Maria. “Bandonion und Konzertina: ein Beitrag Zur Darstellung des Instrumententyps.” PhD diss., Universitte Mnchen, 1996.

¹⁰¹ Braunschmid, Alexander. “Internationalisierung Potentiale der Fisarmonica-Industrie in Italien.” PhD diss., Universitt Passau, 2014.

¹⁰² Armin Fett and Maria Dunkel, “Harmonikainstrumente,” in *MGG Online*, ed. Laurenz Ltteken, accessed May 6, 2023, <http://www.mgg-online.com/mgg/stable/13324>.

¹⁰³ Mirek, Alfred. *Spravochnik: Nauchnoistoricheskie poiasneniia K. skheme Vozniknovenie I Klassifikatsii Osnovnykh vidov garmonik (accordeonov i bayanov)*. Moscow: Alfred Mirek, 1992.

Fig. 6: *Reading Times*. Reading, PA. 9 May 1916, p6. (morning ed).



Another star attraction, for the first three days of the week, is Guido Deiro. He is the originator of the piano accordion and world's master of this instrument. At

The predecessors of the piano-accordion already existed in some form for at least 200 years before it was further developed in San Francisco. I have discovered many instances where this fact is cited incorrectly, and it is assumed that the instrument was first developed here. For instance, the Alameda board document certifying the accordion as an official city instrument of San Francisco includes the language: “Whereas, the piano-accordion was first manufactured in the United States in San Francisco by Finau Piatanesi in 1907.”¹⁰⁴ Similarly, at an Italian festival I attended in North Beach in 2003, the emcee announced that the piano-accordion was “invented in San Francisco just up the street.”¹⁰⁵ Some texts written by Anna Celenza and Joseph Petosa Jr. cite a more accurate description of the history, explaining that the instrument flourished in San Francisco, and that many accordion manufacturers were established in the North Beach area. To better understand how the history may have been skewed, I consider the development of the instrument and identify multiple variants of the accordion as it existed in the free-reed category of instruments.

¹⁰⁴ See appendix IV to view the Alameda board document that cites the Accordion as the official instrument of San Francisco.

¹⁰⁵ Festa Italiana held in San Francisco’s Little Italy: June 4th, 2023.

Organology

Each year since the inception of the festival in 1991, attendees at the Cotati Accordion Festival are shown the inner workings of accordions at an Accordion Autopsy table. The table lays out the inner parts of various accordions and there is typically an enthusiast or repairperson on sight to help explain the parts to curious onlookers. I was also able to visit with accordion repairman Valdet Jakubovic of San Jose. He invited me to his shop on many occasions and allowed me to watch him work and open the grills of old accordions. Valdet invented a small camera that allows the user to peer inside a reed block and access spaces that are not reachable with a human hand. I think of this as a type of endoscopy for accordions. When he inserted the camera into the small square of the bass block, I was able to view the small “green guys,” as he called them. These green creatures are a pile of dust and mites that sit in the hidden areas of an untouched accordion, where, according to Valdet, they affect the sound of the instrument if not cleaned regularly.

Organology, which is the study of musical instruments, encompassing their history, construction, and classification, is important to this project because the accordion is a complex free-reed musical instrument. The underlying technology dates to the 2nd century and went through multiple transformations on the way to becoming the modern piano accordion. There is no patent on craftsmanship, and materials that are used to construct an accordion today may vary from metals to wood. In some cases, the types of glazes once used for the

outer shell are now banned.¹⁰⁶ During the Pignini Accordion factory tour (documented later in this chapter) with part-owner Francesca Pignini, we came across a series of ornately designed and colored accordion frames:¹⁰⁷

Chiara: What is this shell?

Monica: It's not polymer, it's celluloid?

Francesca: This is metallic covered by celluloid.

Monica: It's like a plastic?

Francesca: It's a plastic but made with natural camphor.

Chiara: And you make that here too?

Francesca: This kind of work...no. There's a supplier for everybody because this kind of work is dangerous. I mean not dangerous, but you can't do it. We make the design.

All of these decisions and work styles can change the sound of the instrument, thus creating a unique sound for each accordion. For example, thinner pieces of wood may create a more hollow sound, while poor metallic construction on a reed may result in pitch or tuning problems. The amount of reed blocks will also affect the sound. A double-tone chamber (double-*cassotto*) in an accordion has two sets of reeds in the chamber, usually a bassoon reed and a clarinet reed. These are often heavy, and some reed sets are mounted at a 90° angle to the other reeds, thus creating an adjustment of how the sound will leave the instrument. For

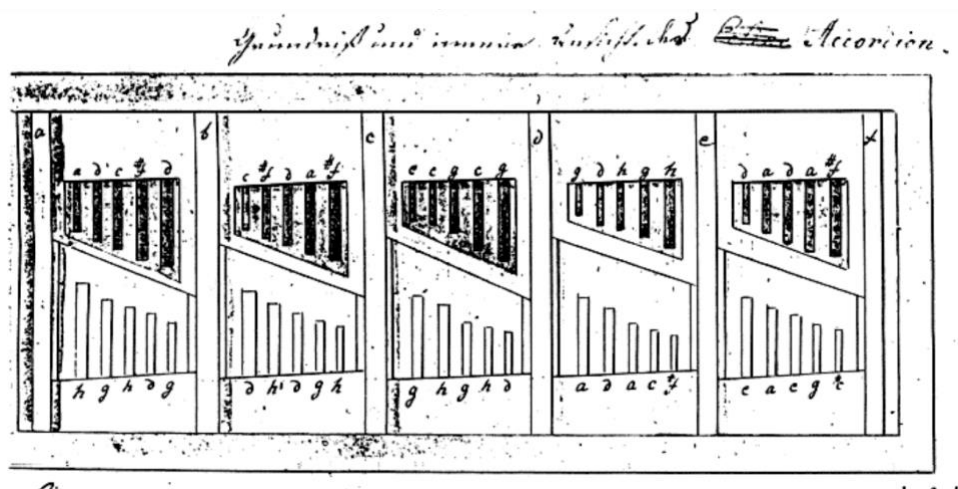
¹⁰⁶ Francesca Pignini (part owner of Pignini Accordions) informed me that it is impossible to put a patent on a technique that all the factories use, but instead it is with the style of the maker where the individuality is presented. She also shared with me the history of the specific glazes that are banned, and that only people who previously worked with those processes are permitted to work with those dangerous materials today.

¹⁰⁷ Pignini factory with Chiara Macciardi, myself, and Francesca Pignini, December 15, 2022

an accordion with a double-tone chamber, the harmonics are slightly muted. For those without any tone chamber, a thinner timbre is produced.

Cyrill Demian's diagram of a reed block shows a cross-section of a double tone chamber:¹⁰⁸

Fig. 7: A diagram from Cyrill Demian's accordion patent May 23, 1829, Vienna.



When I visited the Pignini accordion factory in Ancona, Francesca Pignini allowed me to take a small *voce* (reed) and blow air through it, so I understood how the registers are produced. Accordions produce registers by using switches (similar to an organ stop) to control different combinations of voices. Once pressed, those switches allow specific amounts of air to flow through each reed block to create what sounds like a piccolo or a bassoon, for example. Separately, each button on the right side of the accordion corresponds to a musical note and releases air flow through one or more reeds. The number of reeds that can vibrate when a key is

¹⁰⁸ For more information on the organology and layout of the reedblocks in an accordion, please see the entry "Accordion" in *Grove Music Online* by Helmi Harrington and Gerhard Kubik, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.46180>.

pressed is called the number of voices on the right hand. For example, a two-voice accordion has two individual reeds sound for each key press, while a three-voice accordion has three reeds that will sound.

The Curiosity of Free-Reed Technology

The origins of free-reed instruments can be traced back to the Han Dynasty and earlier, when music-making was prioritized by the Chinese imperial courts as a means of sustaining a continuous and deliberate musical practice.¹⁰⁹ Most accordion scholars cite the 2nd century as the origin date for the modern version of the instrument.¹¹⁰ The French missionary Père Amiot is often identified as one of the first people to bring the Chinese *sheng* to Europe. This type of mouth organ is widely considered the earliest examples of free-reed instruments and are regarded as precursors to the modern accordion. The *sheng* is considered an ancestor of the accordion due to its internal reed block structure. Reed blocks are small wooden or metal chambers inside the accordion that hold the free reeds - thin metal strips (usually steel) that vibrate to produce sound. Each block contains multiple reeds, typically mounted on either side of a wedge-shaped frame. These blocks are arranged inside the accordion in such a way that each one corresponds to a particular register or set of notes.¹¹¹ Even though the reeds extend upwards on

¹⁰⁹ Harrington and Kubik, "Accordion."

¹¹⁰ Charuhas, Jacobson, and Triggs each cite the sheng or various types of mouth organs in their work as foundations for the free-reed category.

¹¹¹ I recommend readers view the diagram of reedblocks in the following online article: Laura Stanfield Prichard, "According the Accordion its Historical Due," *Early Music America* (October 12, 2020), <http://www.earlymusicamerica.org/web-articles/according-the-accordion-its-historical-due/>.

the outer part of the *sheng*, the way both instruments function, by producing multiple sounds through the air flow passing in each reed, is similar in nature. As noted by Doktorski, Harrington, Jacobson, and Triggs, the accordion emerged from the same free-reed technology that underlies these traditional instruments. However, it is likely that the instrument also arrived through other pathways, given the portability of the mouth organ and the multiple trade routes that existed at the time.¹¹² Accordion scholar Henri Doktorski writes that Marco Polo may have brought the *sheng* to Europe in the 13th century and that the Tartars might have introduced it to Western Russia.¹¹³ While each of these scenarios are possible, none of them has been proven.

In addition to the *sheng*, the organ is also a close ancestor of the accordion. Virdung and Praetorius describe organs with bellows in some detail in their organology manuals, while mouth organs are pushed to the end of the texts with a mish-mash of othered instruments. *Musica getutscht*, published in 1511 by Sebastian Virdung, is the earliest known printed book in Western Europe devoted entirely to musical instruments, their performance techniques, and basic pedagogy.¹¹⁴ Written in the German vernacular rather than Latin, the treatise was designed to make musical knowledge more accessible to educated laypeople,

¹¹² Laura Stanfield Prichard, “According the Accordion its Historical Due,” *Early Music America* (October 12, 2020), <http://www.earlymusicamerica.org/web-articles/according-the-accordion-its-historical-due/>.

¹¹³ Henry Doktorski, “Birth of the Accordion,” *The Classical Free-Reed Inc.*, A Short History of the Free-Reed Instruments in Classical Music, accessed March 18, 2023, <http://www.ksanti.net/free-reed/history/birth.html>.

¹¹⁴ Virdung, Sebastian. *Musica Getutscht: A Treatise on Musical Instruments (1511) by Sebastian Virdung*. Ed. Beth Bullard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

amateur musicians, and students—rather than just scholars.¹¹⁵ Michael Praetorius wrote a similar treatise called *Syntagma musicum* between 1614-1619.¹¹⁶ In the second volume, *De organographia*, Praetorius provided detailed descriptions of the musical instruments of his time, accompanied by an illustrated section, *Theatrum instrumentorum*, where the portative organ received comprehensive attention. Praetorius’ drawings in *Syntagma Musicum* demonstrate the functionality of a free-reed system in connection to organ pedals and pumps. In the case of the *Virdung* text, the portative organ is grouped with bells and anvils to consider similar sounds but not because they work in similar ways.

Organologist Victor Mahillon reserves the terms “anche simple, libre” (free-reed simple) for *sheng* and organs, and classifies accordions and concertinas as follows:

Victor Mahillon’s classification of accordion and concertinas:¹¹⁷

French	English Translation
Classe III (Les instruments à vent)	Class III (Wind instruments)
Famille A (Instruments à anche)	Family A (Reed instruments)
Réservoir d’air, sans tuyaux	Air reservoir, without pipes

The term *accordéon* appears only twice in Mahillon’s original text. Although the author includes a brief section on both button and piano accordions, Mahillon continues to categorize the *sheng* separately from the accordion and harmonium.

¹¹⁵ Beth Bullard, “Virdung [Grop], Sebastian,” in Grove Music Online. Ed. Deane Root, published online 2001. Web access 31 May. 2025:

¹¹⁶ Praetorius, Michael and Crookes, D. Z. *Syntagma musicum II: De organographia: Parts I and II (1619)*. London: Clarendon Press, 1986.

¹¹⁷ Mahillon, Victor Charles. “Essai de classification méthodique de tous les instruments anciens et modernes.” *Catalogue descriptif et analytique du Musée Instrumentale du Conservatoire Royale de Musique de Bruxelles*. Gand: Annot Braeckman Publisher: Brussels, 1893.

Interestingly, while he acknowledges that harmoniums and accordions operate using the same basic free-reed mechanism as the *sheng*, he still assigns them to different categories. For instance, Mahillon reserves the term *anche simple, libre* specifically for the *sheng* and certain organ types. Yet only ten pages later, he lists accordions and concertinas under ‘air reservoir/without pipes.’¹¹⁸ I view Mahillon’s system as a springboard, which was later improved by Hornbostel and Sachs through their knowledge and awareness of their project and what it meant to categorize a world of musical instruments. While both of these systems are good for a basic consideration of how a free-reed instrument is made, there is still a lack of information regarding bisonoric, diatonic, free-bass vs. stradella bass systems along with the placement of electronic accordions such as the Roland FR digital series.¹¹⁹ These considerations are needed to help distinguish the ways in which various accordion models function and for which musical purposes they serve.

Other Types of Accordions

In the United States, accordions are typically either played alone, or in accordion ensembles, or they are used to support bands or accompany vocalists. The accordion’s design makes it naturally suited for music built on IV–V–I chord progressions, common in folk and popular genres. This is largely due to the

¹¹⁸ Victor-Charles Mahillon, *Catalogue abrégé du Musée instrumental du Conservatoire royal de musique de Bruxelles par Fernand-Victor Mahillon avec Extrait du Catalogue descriptif et analytique* (Belgium: A. Hoste, 1912), 51.

¹¹⁹ See Appendix I, Vocabulary, for a reference to these words.

Stradella bass system, which is organized according to the circle of fifths. This layout enables performers to easily access harmonically related chords, simplifying the execution of folk tunes and simple song structures while also providing a familiar bass pattern adaptable to a wide range of repertoires.

Although I am not directly concerned with the accordion outside of the EU and North America in my own work, I want to recognize the accordion as an instrument that has evolved and moved through time and space. In India, the harmonium is based on similar free-reed technology as the accordion, and the instrument facilitates sound with the support of bellows.¹²⁰ Helmi Harrington cites both the accordion and concertina (a small hexagonal-shaped free-reed instrument) used in some South African music.¹²¹ In Cajun and Zydeco practices in Louisiana it is sometimes referred to as a squeezebox or Cajun accordion.¹²² In China, the accordion remains somewhat popular from its time in a ‘golden age’ during the 1960s and 70s.¹²³ In North Korea, it is known as the “people’s instrument.”¹²⁴ Since I am dealing specifically with the West Coast, I would be remiss to omit the button-style accordion that is heavily associated with the regional music of Mexico. The diatonic accordion is more prominent within the

¹²⁰ Barbara Owen and Alastair Dick, “Harmonium,” in *Grove Music Online*. Ed. Deane Root, published online 2001. Web access May 28, 2025: <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.12395>

¹²¹ Harrington and Kubik, “Accordion.”

¹²² For further research in this area, please refer to Mark DeWitt and Marc Savoy’s work on the Acadian accordion.

¹²³ Sanchai Duangbung and Hao Tu, “The Role of Accordion Music in Guizhou Province, China,” *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies* (Doncaster, Australia: Australian International Academic Centre, 2019): 99.

¹²⁴ Min Chao Choy, “In North Korea, the Accordion Plays the Soundtrack of the State,” <https://www.nknews.org/2021/06/in-north-korea-the-accordion-plays-the-soundtrack-of-the-state/>

genres of *Tejano* and *Norteño* styles.¹²⁵ Much like the piano-accordion, in the Bay Area, it is typical to hear Hohner and Gabbanelli button accordions played at festivals, weddings, and restaurants, yet their respective repertoires are related to Mexican culture and identity.¹²⁶ I have noticed there are two camps of performers: those that play piano-accordion and those that play diatonic. The likely reason for this divide is that it takes twice as much study to be able to switch between both instruments, and the required skills of embodied memory and motor memory are not easily interchangeable. Secondly, the instruments lend themselves to specific repertoires that have been coded with the look and machinery of those instruments as a marker of identity. In my experience, it is rare to see diatonic button accordion players participate in accordion clubs or play with a group that centers on Italian, French, or German styles - unless they are centered in an Eastern European or Balkan repertoire - and similarly, you would almost never see a piano-accordion in a proper *conjunto*. The repertoire of *Tejano* music just does not allow for the functionality of a diatonic accordion, as the *bajo sexto* reigns supreme in the *grupo*, while the accordion typically provides melody for embellishments such as fills and motives - also known as *pasadas*. Moreover, it is a widely accepted practice among performers in *conjuntos* to remove the bass

¹²⁵ *Tejano* music is a popular genre in parts of Texas and northeastern Mexico that blend many influences. *Norteño*, also called *música norteña*, is a popular-music genre of Northern Mexico that developed in the late nineteenth century as a mix of influences from German, Polish, and Czech folk music.

¹²⁶ For more information concerning these styles of accordion playing, I refer the reader to the work of Morgan James Luker, Helena Simonett, and Erin Bauer.

reeds from their diatonic accordions. Finally, the makeup of the instrument is laid out in such a way that it facilitates the support of a group, with keys limited to major and minor scales without chromatic variations. These accordion key formats are typically made in F-B-E and G-C-F.

The Piano-Accordion: A Brief Early History

Today's version of the piano-accordion is a hold-over from the machine age. It was invention that invited creativity. The first types of free-reed models were created by German and Austrian makers, and included Anton Haeckle's *physharmonika* of 1818 and Friedrich Buschmann's *handäoline* from 1822.¹²⁷ Cyrill Demian of Vienna held the patent, and coined the word "accordion," deriving from the German word for chord: *akkord*. Along with his sons Karl and Guido, the family of piano and organ makers devised an instrument that made it possible to: "perform marches, arias, melodies...even by an amateur of music with little practice, and to play the loveliest and most pleasant chords."¹²⁸ His patent no. 1757 stirred innovations that led to the solidification of bandoneon and concertina.¹²⁹ Among numerous prototypes of free-reed mediums that appeared throughout the latter half of the 19th century, the concertina by British maker

¹²⁷ Laura Stanfield Prichard, "According the Accordion its Historical Due," *Early Music America* (October 12, 2020), <http://www.earlymusicamerica.org/web-articles/according-the-accordion-its-historical-due/>.

¹²⁸ Copy of the patent for accordion by Cyrill Demian (Vienna: 1829). Translation provided by Helmi Harrington.

¹²⁹ The bandoneon is a bisonoric free-reed instrument, popular in Argentina among other areas, with a square bellows cross section and a layout of bass buttons for the left hand and melody buttons on the right. The concertina features a hexagon bellows shape with the same layout of a bandoneon, except some are bisonoric and some are diatonic.

Charles Wheatstone in 1844 is most connected to the modern day piano-accordion by way of the original Demian patent.¹³⁰ The piano key accordion was further developed by makers like the father and son George and Constant Busson in Paris, and it also saw evolved as makers adjusted its measurements, structural styles, and frame designs in London and Vienna and later in Italy - specifically in Castelfidardo.¹³¹ Paris also became an early important center of accordion making, and Dr. Helmi Harrington cites at least ten French makers in the early to middle 19th century.¹³²

Expositions and Fairs

While the accordion and its prototypes were being developed, the instrument emerged as a symbol of both industrial ingenuity and scientific progress.¹³³ In Victorian-era England, its unique sounds were often linked to the supernatural, believed by some to evoke spirits or otherworldly presences.¹³⁴ Beyond its sonic associations, the accordion -with its intricate mechanics and multiple parts- embodied the rise of transnational manufacturing and trade networks. These shared economies in Italy, Germany, and Austria referred to the collaborative systems of production, distribution, and cultural exchange that developed across European nations. Materials, design innovations, and even labor

¹³⁰ Wayne, "The Wheatstone English Concertina," 132.

¹³¹ Beniamino Bugiolacchi, *Castelfidardo e la storia della fisarmonica* (Castelfidardo: Comunale di Castelfidardo e Della Provincia di Ancona, 1986), 11.

¹³² Helmi Harrington, "A Glimpse into the Early Piano Accordion Evolution," *American Accordionists Association Newsletter*, March-April 2016.

¹³³ Wayne, "The Wheatstone Concertina," 117.

¹³⁴ Carmel Raz, "Séances, 'Sperrits,' and Self-Playing Accordions: Musical Instruments in Victorian Spiritualism," *The Journal of Musicology* 38, no. 2 (2021): 238.

for accordion manufacturing were frequently sourced from multiple regions, making the instrument a product not just of one nation, but of a broader, interconnected industrial economy. This cosmopolitan identity made the accordion an ideal object to feature at world's fairs and cultural expositions, where it stood as a representation of modern craftsmanship and cross-cultural exchange. The purpose of expositions like the Paris Exposition of 1900 and the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 was to showcase the offerings of a nation and its achievements. They typically took place in a specific site over the course of a few months to a year, and include entertainment, music, and food as a means of cultural exchange. World's fairs also functioned as political arenas, where nations strategically showcased their industrial and technological prowess. These exhibitions placed national power on display, making the state of each country's economy highly visible to international audiences.¹⁴³ One of the earliest expositions connected to the accordion was the Great Exposition of 1851 in London where Wheatstone displayed his first concertinas and their inner parts.¹³⁵ That was the first year Busson displayed a *flutina*, (a type of free-reed aerophone featuring 1-2 rows of treble buttons and one precursor to the accordion) followed by the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1855, where he then displayed his own *harmoniflute* - a type of free-reed combination of accordion and harmonium

¹⁴³ Peter H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 21.

¹³⁵ J. Q. Davies, and Ellen Lockhart, eds. *Sound Knowledge: Music and Science in London, 1789-1851* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 259.

which he patented in 1852.¹³⁶ The team also displayed a double-played *flutina polka* (a new type of design for the existing *flutina*) at the Exposition Universelle of 1878, and George won a silver medal for his “organ accordion” at the 1889 expo.¹³⁷ In the United States, the accordion and variations of harmonium and *flutinas* were similarly on display and entered for adjudication at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893.¹³⁸

West Coast Expositions: Panama Pacific, Alaska-Yukon-Pacific, California-Panama

Just a decade after the peak of popularity of world fairs came the West Coast exhibitions that were meant to showcase the beauty of the national forests, new railway lines, the flourishing cities of the early 20th century, and the innovations of multiple immigrant communities living in the expanse from Seattle to San Diego. In an effort to showcase the accordion on the West Coast, manufacturers hired artists to perform at these world-fair exhibitions. They paid for musicians to tour in hopes of garnering the interest of onlookers who may have wanted to purchase the new instrument. Accordionist Guido Deiro was one of the earliest performers to play in the circuit of World’s Fair expositions. Guido came from Piemonte, Italy, and immigrated to Washington to play in one such exposition: the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909.¹³⁹ Held in Seattle on

¹³⁶ Harrington, “A Glimpse into the Early Piano Accordion Evolution.”

¹³⁷ Harrington, “A Glimpse into the Early Piano Accordion Evolution.”

¹³⁸ “Musical Instruments at the World’s Columbian Exposition,” The Presto Print Company (Chicago: 1885), souvenir booklet.

¹³⁹ “Timeline,” Deiro Collection: CUNY Graduate Center Archives and Special Collections, accessed April 29, 2025, <https://archives.library.gc.cuny.edu/repositories/2/resources/2>.

the current grounds of the University of Washington, the expo was meant to showcase the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest, the territorial expansion of the United States, and the development of industry particular to transportation and maritime advancements.¹⁴⁰ Here, Guido Deiro first debuted the accordions of the Ranco Vercelli company. This was the first documented appearance by Deiro on the West Coast, and according to his son, Count Guido Roberto Deiro Jr., the sole reason why his dad immigrated to Seattle.¹⁴¹ Upon arrival, Deiro Sr. lived in a temporary housing unit at 509 ½ Jackson Street, and according to his naturalization papers dated September of 1927, he arrived during the last month of the exposition.¹⁴² This would be the first of a few sponsorships where an accordion company hosted Deiro to showcase their instrument at a fair installation. Later, he showed Guerrini accordions at the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, followed by the California-Panama Exposition held in San Diego the same year.

Both were held to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal, but ultimately, each city used the opportunity to showcase individual accomplishments instead. In San Francisco, the fair was an opportunity to present

¹⁴⁰ United States National Museum and Smithsonian Institution, *The Exhibits of the Smithsonian Institute and United States National Museum at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, Seattle, Washington, 1909*. (Washington, D.C.: Press of Judd & Detweiler, 1909), 6.

¹⁴¹ Guido Roberto Deiro, "My Varied Careers and Rewarding Life in Las Vegas." Interview with David G. Schwartz, January 20, 2022, University of Nevada: Las Vegas, 4. <https://special.library.unlv.edu/ark:/62930/d17659n45>

¹⁴² The National Archives at San Francisco, San Bruno, California, *Petitions for Naturalization 8/6/1903 - 12/29/1911*, Records of District Courts of the United States 1685-2009, record group number 21.

the rebuilding of the city after the 1906 earthquake. In San Diego, the focus tended towards local port of call offerings, the natural beauty of Balboa Park, and the new Panama canal route which organizers hoped would strengthen ties across the boarder.¹⁴³ It was here that Guido Deiro won a gold medal for his performance on the main stage.¹⁴⁴

In larger cities like Chicago (World's Fair, 1893), Paris (Exposition Universelle, 1900), and San Francisco (Panama-Pacific International Exposition, 1915), the accordion was already familiar to fair audiences as the instrument was quite popular in Vaudeville theaters and with small acts at the turn of the 20th century.¹⁴⁵ While onlookers might not have been able to play, they had access to the instrument visually and aurally in their daily lives.¹⁴⁶ Experiencing the accordion locally became an experience that was suddenly accessible to the fairgoer, as it was now placed in front of them to focus on and, in some instances, to touch and play. In San Francisco, the accordion shops in the city displayed booths for the first time at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in 1915.

¹⁴³ Matthew F. Bokovoy, *The San Diego World's Fairs and Southwestern Memory, 1880-1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 37.

¹⁴⁴ Zinni, "Play Me a Tarantella," 163.

¹⁴⁵ Jacobson, *Squeeze This*, 93.

¹⁴⁶ Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 10.

Fig. 8: The Guerrini Company at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, 1916. Courtesy of the San Francisco Library.



To commemorate the opening of the Panama Canal, the city displayed its finest and most innovative works. The Guerrini Accordion company held a kiosk to perform and demonstrate their accordions. The site represented cultural and industrial production, both Italian and American, and the accordion became a symbol of advancement in the Italian community. The process by which it was acquired, built, and distributed showed the possibility of success for all entrepreneurs. Besides the process of showcasing the accordion at the fair, there was a larger goal here that focused on nationalism, industrialism, and American imperialism. For early Italians in North Beach, this was their way to contribute to and produce a national product while being new to the country. While the majority of imported accordions were made in Italy in the 20th century, the

Guerrini Company was able to offer the same craftsmanship and skill at a lower cost without import fees. In addition, during WWII, all of the factories in Castelfidardo, Italy, ceased to produce accordions, and the factories in San Francisco stepped in to become self-reliant and provide a needed service.¹⁴⁷ At one point in the 1950s, accordions made in America by Petosa, Guerrini, and Columbo, to name a few, were a strong contender to the instruments coming from the powerhouse that was accordion-making at the time in Ancona, Italy.

Based on my experience touring the Pignini and Petosa accordion factories, I noted that many of the materials used for accordion making are still processed in the same way as they were over 100 years ago. As part of my process to consider the materiality of instruments, I turn to ephemera and objects that remain on the periphery of the project along with some of the sources used in making the accordion.

Ephemera and Objects

In this project, I use my own sensory perception to gather information about the history of accordion manufacturing by touching objects that concern the accordion. When I hold an object, I can feel every indent and mark, observe the material makeup, and read the cues that are removed from it when viewing a photo. In holding an old accordion case, for example, I am able to smell where it has been. When I purchased Joe Vento's accordion after his passing in June of 2021, I viewed a number of accordions his niece was selling. Seven of them

¹⁴⁷ "Manufacture of Accordion Grows," *The Oakland Tribune*, June 16, 1940.

smelled like heavy cigar and cigarette smoke, but the Excelsior Symphony Gold model that I purchased was the only one that smelled like wood, and Jeanne gave me the reason for this:

My uncle used to work in Las Vegas, and he would stroll in the casinos, that is why the other accordions smell like smoke, but this one was only taken out for special occasions.

- Joe Vento's niece, Jeanne

Through Joe's accordions, I can smell the spaces where he played and visited. The smoke has left a permanence in the reed blocks, and accordion repairman Valdet Jakubovic confirmed that the smoke remnants "bake" into the blocks and chambers of the instrument. I can also feel the materials that were used to assemble an accordion as well. On Joe's accordion, I know it is dipped in a 24-carat gold overlay on the edges of the bellows. I also know there is felt and wax inside the accordion, or it would not play.¹⁴⁸ Through this feeling and witnessing, I am able to glimpse what an object has experienced. So many of the pieces collected for this project have continued through time and space. In using ephemera and materials, I am able to observe the various bumps and marks on an aged object that show me the possible encounters and spaces where the object has made contact. The grooves on an Edison Amberol cylinder indicate how many times that record was played, and I can actually feel the original imprint of sound

¹⁴⁸ Noted by accordion historian Paul Cain who was kind enough to notify me that Joe's accordion was for sale.

by an accordionist from 1912 in a way that cannot be paralleled through the digital format.¹⁴⁹ Much in the same way I feel my way through these histories of sound, I apply the same ideas to how the accordion can be felt and heard through time, due to the multiple and natural composites that are used to assemble the instrument.

Accordion Composites and Memory

Although an accordion may be observed as a machine made of mechanical and puzzle-fitted units of steel and polymers, it also incorporates numerous organic components such as felt, beeswax, steel (iron and carbon), wood, and camphor. These are materials that were born from natural processes and used in the 1800s just as they are in today's manufacturing. The style and development of how those parts are assembled are important in my project as I consider how organic composites come together to sustain a parallel memory of both the builder's knowledge through time and the actual physical parts that are being used. The piano-accordion has been built largely through the memory of builders whose acquired skills were gathered over time. Accordion makers sustained their knowledge by watching and working with their mentors. Their mentors introduced them to techniques and tools that were created by hand. As Francesca Pignini pointed out to me on my tour of the Pignini factory in December of 2021, the makers there are not held to a specific style of assembly, but rather, everyone

¹⁴⁹ "Edison Amberol Cylinders (1908-1912)," UC Santa Barbara Cylinder Archive, <https://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/history-amberol.php>.

has their own idea and manner of how to create their specific part of the instrument. Upon walking into the part of the factory where the sound chambers are created, we immediately noticed a heavy smell. There was a sound of a saw, and a large fan was audible. It was so noisy in that room that I had difficulty understanding Francesca.

Francesca: We don't use any metallic parts for the junction. It is a chemical glue but it came from, it's from the ... *collagene*.

Monica: Oh, the collagen, the bones...*ho sento*.

Francesca: Smell, it's the glue.. natural.

Monica: It's the feet for the bull?

Francesca: No bones. *Comme si dice* bones?

Monica: Oh bones! *Le ossa per fare...*

Francesca: *Si*, the connection.

The smell was incredibly overwhelming and it occurred to me at that moment how much of the accordion is made from organic parts. As Francesca was also trying to convey this thought, she simply added one word to the end of her sentence: "natural." In addition to the bones used to make glue, there is beeswax that is added to help in gripping the reed plates into place. The woods are typically from poplar, pine, and maple. The felts glued to pallets are made of natural fibers and furs. The celluloid plastic coverings are partly created from camphor and ultimately made from an evergreen tree native to Southeast Asia. As Francesca noted, the celluloid part is dangerous. These parts should not be

handled directly in the factory since it is made with camphor, which causes gastrointestinal, neurologic, pulmonary, and cardiac effects, but only the covers are assembled there.¹⁵⁰ Finally, I noticed a box of button keys made of mother-of-pearl. So many of the working parts become a composite of multiple organisms. In fact, my own accordion (my Excelsior Symphony Gold made in 1978) was made in Castelfidardo.¹⁵¹ It was also part of that factory process, and now I am also adding to the memory of that instrument through my own studies.

This process is a holding of memory through time and it is a composite process where there are multiple objects and spaces involved in the current iteration of what the accordion looks like today. In a way, this practice is symbolic of how the accordion story unfolds in the Bay Area. Much like the immigrants who arrived from Italy to the West Coast, the accordion, too, carries a number of pasts. The parts come together as pieces in a puzzle to create a new and unique object. Italian immigrants were regionally divided yet collectively endured the Atlantic crossing to arrive in America, where a land of possibilities awaited them. They created new enclaves and founded thriving economies. In a similar way, the composites of the accordion are arriving from vast corners of the world. Pearls from the sea, felt from cotton in India, and camphor from Southeast Asia all come together with a single goal. Both of these processes exist side-by-side

¹⁵⁰ Cynthia D. Santos, and Jennifer C. Cabot, “Persistent Effects after Camphor Ingestion: A Case Report and Literature Review,” *The Journal of Emergency Medicine* 48, no. 3 (2015): 298.

¹⁵¹ This statement is based on Francesca Pignini’s confirmation of the date and common knowledge in the accordion community since all Excelsior accordions were fabricated in Castelfidardo during the 1960s and 1970s.

and they are continuously changing. Today, when a person picks up an accordion to begin playing it, they are playing hundreds of years of history through a collection of materials that have contributed to the experience of making, handling, and performing on the instrument.

Accordion Factories in San Francisco

Fig. 9: Advertisement in *La voce del popolo* announcing the Piatanesi family opened their factory.¹⁵²



By the 1940s, San Francisco had at least nine accordion showrooms and three major factories.¹⁵³ Guerrini Accordions began in 1903, Columbo Accordion Company was then founded in 1907, and Piatanesi & Sons appeared in 1927.¹⁵⁴ Standard Accordion Manufacturing arrived at the latter half of the 20th century,

¹⁵² “Nuova fabbrica Italiana di fisarmoniche,” *La voce del popolo* (Dec 06, 1926), 4.

¹⁵³ Petosa Jr., *An American Accordion Story*, Petosa, 19.

¹⁵⁴ For a more complete history of Accordion companies in San Francisco, please see: Flynn, Ronald, Edwin Davison, and Edward Chavez. *The Golden Age of the Accordion*. San Antonio: Flynn Associates Publishing, 1992.

but all four houses were built and thriving in the city proper. Including accordion sellers and manufacturers living in San Francisco and the Bay Area from 1862-1980, I have identified twenty individuals and seventeen companies that made or sold accordions. Of those listed, all except six of the business entities are owned by Italian or Italian Americans.

List of manufacturers and business entities in the Bay Area selling and/or making accordions from 1862-1980s.¹⁵⁵

Almestad, A. Accordion Company
Cirelli, Vincent
Columbo & Sons
Galleazzi & Sons
Guerrini & Sons
Greub, Paul
Keane, C. C.
Kessler, H.C.
Meni-Ketti, Orlando
Miller, Louis H.P.
Pacific Accordion Manufacturing Company
Pezzolo, Caesar Accordion Company
Pucci's Accordion Center
Sahlein, J.M. Music Company
Sherman & Clay
Standard Accordion Manufacturing Company
Wurlitzer R. Company

In the accordion factories on Columbus Avenue, workers either came from Ancona with a preset knowledge of accordion building or they acquired their skills through observation and being in a space. Vincent Cirelli (December 21,

¹⁵⁵ The list begins in 1862 with C.C. Keane, as this name is the oldest listed in my research as it pertains to accordion sellers in the city of San Francisco, and he is mentioned as a seller of accordions located at 3 Third Street. Keane was also involved in an early minstrel troupe where he played accordion as a lead entertainer at the time.

1920 - September 29, 2012) was a first-generation Italian worker at Columbo

Accordions that learned about the trade by helping in the workshop:

He started as a janitor sweeping the floors. So he would clean up. His first job at that accordion factory was basically just to earn an apprenticeship, but he had to start at the bottom, so he immediately got connected with a number of the accordion builders there, and he perfected his craft all through high school. My father went to a high school in San Francisco - Galileo - and of course, his specialty was his woodworking shop at Galileo. So he was actually making nice pieces of furniture for his mother and grandmother and also perfecting his craft on learning how to build an accordion. He was learning a trade from the factory.¹⁵⁶

Vince acquired the expertise of his art through a combination of doing and witnessing. Today, the need for accordions in the home and for amateur enjoyment has dwindled, but in Italy, the businesses in Ancona are thriving. One of the more eye-opening parts of this project occurred during my visit to the Pignini accordion factory in Ancona where I was able to witness a modern-day example of how a factory can sustain such demands.

Accordion Making Today: Visiting Pignini

The shift and downturn of the accordion market notably occurred in the 1970s and caused several factories to close permanently. Columbo, Italo American, Standard, Guerrini, Pancordian, Bell, and Excelsior have either been dissolved or swallowed by other accordion entities. For example, Pignini owns the brand Excelsior. Although the last American accordion company, Petosa, still exists, production has completely moved to Italy since the 1990s and remains

¹⁵⁶ Taken from an interview with Vince Cirelli's son, Vince Cirelli Jr., on June 26, 2021, at the accordion repair shop of Valdet Jakubovic in San Jose, CA.

owned by third and fourth generations. It is not feasible to resurrect a single dedicated factory in America to build accordions because the cost of an instrument would be upwards of \$20,000 on average. Those costs would be more than double that of other competing countries. Moreover, the artisan workforce is no longer available in the US.¹⁵⁷ The sustainable answer to preserving accordion-making still remains in Italy at the center of Ancona, where the market has been sustained for nearly 150 years. In the winter of 2022, I visited the Pignini Accordion factory in Castelfidardo near Ancona, Italy. The team at Pignini allowed me to visit on a typical workday, and in the following field notes, you will see a great example of a modern accordion factory at work:

Field Notes: Reflections of the day in Ancona, December 15th, 2022.

The morning started rough. I wasn't sure that the bus would even be available. There were so many factors preventing success that day. The weather, for one. Italy had been experiencing cold weather fronts, and the day seemed colder than ever. I arrived with my mom at the bus depot. According to the schedule, there was an 8:22 AM bus, but I didn't see this information on the corresponding signs out front. I went to the counter to inquire about purchasing tickets, and I explained my situation, but the woman behind the counter was disinterested. I told her: "Devo andare all' Aquaviva," and she replied: "Non l'ho mai vista quella città." (I've never heard of it). Great! Here we go. I decided to try my luck and we eventually found the 8:22 bus, and the driver told me that his bus didn't go to Castelfidardo. So, at 8:52, I was on a bus that got us as close as possible. The drive to the factory presented an unexpected landscape. The rumbling and whirring of the small "pullman" increased in volume as I realized we were heading further into the hills. We swerved around each corner, and it seemed as if a non-stop loop of figure eights. There was nothing but lush green surrounding the roads, and it was cold and raining. Seated next to us was a well-dressed younger gentleman in a navy suit with a large suitcase. My mom commented that he was on his way home to see his mom for Christmas. The configuration of the

¹⁵⁷ From an email exchange with Joe Petosa Jr., May 20, 2024.

bus was such that Mom and I were seated backward, so people stared at us as they faced forward.

Fig. 10: A photo of the scenery through a bus window on the way to Castelfidardo.



The route is clearly winding further into a sparsely populated area. There are bright-colored three-story houses in pale peach, yellow, and beige that line the streets. The stops on this route are Ossima, Baraccola, and Camerano. Each town has a pizza place, cafe, and church tower, and all are small remnants of villages dating back to feudal times. As the road climbed to the top, I noticed the white rectangular sign announcing Castelfidardo. Suddenly, there are imprints of accordion everywhere. On the building in front of me, I see “Paolo Soprani” in bright white letters; these are his former offices and his accordion factory. There are small tabac and bars that use the accordion as a symbol to sell food and to welcome people into their boutiques. I see an advertisement for the local accordion museum. It occurred to me at that moment that without the existence and history of this town, I would likely not be playing the accordion.

Fig. 11: The Pignini Accordion factory in Castelfidardo, near Ancona.



As the bus winds its way to the Castelfidardo bus stop, I can see it is a small town in low season, and there is no way I will find a taxi to take me to Pignini. I am fortunate, for my mom takes the initiative and simply asks the driver how we can get to the factory. He says he will just drop us off directly in front. This is a benefit of being in rural areas, as the drivers understand the lack of access and are willing to help their passengers when possible. The factory itself is located in a small town called Aquaviva. Located roughly 3 km from Castelfidardo, the village lies on a two-lane road with little to no walking space on the sides. We reach a side of the road, thank the driver, and disembark upon a path of gravel. Soon, a thin patch of sidewalk rises from the ground. Upon arrival, I see the sign of “Pignini” in a square font with red letters on a white background. The gate is electronic and it is fast-closing, so I rush to step in to open it again. The entryway contains a bench with paintings of accordions on it, and upon arrival, I see Donatella, the office assistant, waiting for us.

She is of medium height with long blonde hair and a fantastic smile that welcomes us. “Ciao Monica!” She asks us to sit and wait while she brings us espresso. While waiting, I see Excelsior and Pignini accordions lining the sides of the room, along with accordion knick-knacks, books, CDs, t-shirts, and an accordion purse. The entry table is grey and smooth in a half-moon shape. This is the area where people come to play and discuss financing in order to make a purchase, but today, I am here to exclusively tour the Pignini factory.

Once we store our belongings safely in the office, Francesca Pigni comes outside of the factory door and welcomes us. She is a part owner, and when I ask about her position, she explains that there is no real CEO and that she and her family share responsibilities and ownership. The first room we step into is where the reeds are made. The “voci.” On the wall, I see the names of craftsmen and makers whose names are printed on the reed blocks attached to a plaque on the wall. This is the way they are remembered, since their name cannot be included on the instrument face. Placing the block indicates to visitors the value of their craft; the name is now placed on the outside. In addition to their names are also some known performers and friends of Pigni who have come through the factory. The top of the board reads: “Qui se realizza la più bella del mondo” (Literal translation: Here, the most beautiful in the world is created).

Fig. 12: A board of reed blocks and voci (reeds) signed by artisans.



Francesca has the warmest smile, and I want to tell her my middle name is also Francesca but I instead focus on our task - to tour the factory. She is the fourth generation of the most-known accordion family in the town. Upon the wall hangs a painting of her father. As she opens the door to the next room, I see a full factory floor at work. It is loud. The sound of industry and motion lives here. The thick metallic and fresh dirt smell permeates the space, and I take a moment and wonder if all accordion factories smell like this. Did Columbo carry the same air in San Francisco all those years ago, in 1925?

Fig. 13: The main floor in the Pigni Accordion factory.



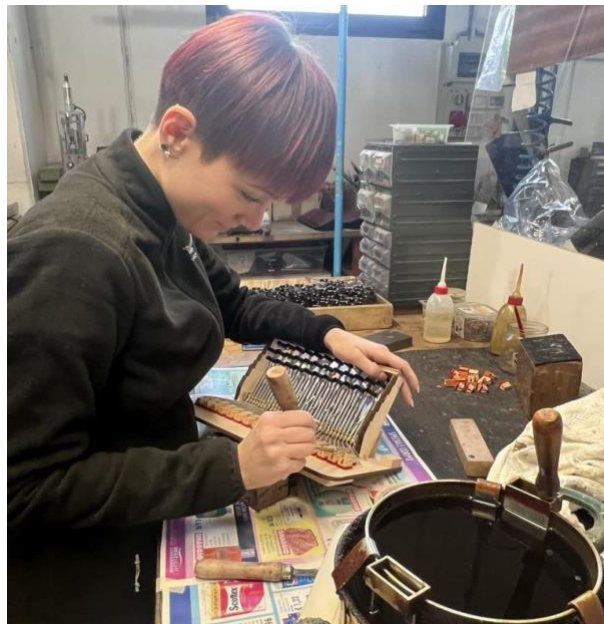
Employees are wearing plain navy blue shirts and jumpsuits with the Pigni logo. They also wear matching aprons or bright blue smocks, and some also wear jackets as it is colder on the factory floor. Each workstation is set up so one maker has a single function to complete their part of the assembly. There is no music, and nobody talks when I visit. All of the workers are focused. I am sure that my presence along with the family owner has affected a regular work day, but in my own awareness, I also sense that the employees here are very serious about the efforts they put into creating. I offer a quiet “buon giorno” to a few of them, and some return with a quick glance or smile of acknowledgment. As we travel through each of the stations, I learn that everything at Pigni is self-contained, and the only material they outsource is celluloid. One room is especially cold, and it smells like rotting plants. I am told that the room contains shards and bone fragments for a part that is used to make the accordion. Francesca also points me to two unique bulky iron cylinders which are used to weigh down the wooden bellows frames during the drying process. These were taken and repurposed by her grandfather, who removed them from a WWII-era tank.

Fig 14: Two return rollers from an Italian WWII tank used as weights to dry bellow frames.



There is a low overhead, and the materials for making accordions are accessible here. In addition to the bone parts, I remember all of the natural materials that are used to assemble an accordion: iron ore for steel reeds, wood, bone, wool for felt, beeswax, and leather for the hand and bellows straps. Witnessing the process of assembly allows me to see how my own accordion was made. My 1978 Excelsior Symphony Gold was, in fact, assembled and made at the Pignini factory. The Excelsior brand was officially swallowed up by Pignini in 2003, but the name and the style of the Excelsior accordion models are still unique and recognizable by design.

Fig. 15: Artisan Liutaia Alessia Ballarini applying beeswax at the Pignini factory.



It was nice to see and hear the business of the factory with people working on individual parts. I also observed there were many younger workers in the factory that day. According to Francesca, it was important that she keeps a model of hiring younger apprentices:

We are very proud because our factory are the most young because my father believed that we are always to teach every day even if they don't remain, but [at] the factory should be more young... you have to invest. You have to pay them while they are learning.

- Francesca Pigni, Marketing and Creative Development
Manager, Pigni Accordions (Castelfidardo, IT.)

For Francesca and her family, accordions are a generational business and the company has been strategic about their planning and pricing in order to continue their namesake through accordion making. In order to better understand the price fluctuations of the instrument over the last fifty years, it is important to consider sales in the United States and to observe market demand over time.

The Economies of Accordion Making Today

The shift and downturn of the accordion market notably occurred in the 1970s and caused a number of factories to close permanently. Columbo, Universal, Standard, Guerrini, Pancordian, Bell, and Excelsior have either been dissolved or swallowed by other accordion entities. For example, Pigni owns Excelsior, and Petosa is part owner of Bugari. Part of the issues with the sustainability of the accordion in the United States concerns the economic situation and the creation and support of raw materials that go into making the instrument. Today, the instrument is made up of felts, glues, beeswax, reeds, and

woods, much like it was 100 years ago, but there are new challenges that arise with building a single instrument today. While 50 years ago, America hosted over a dozen accordion factories, we are left with one major brand today. According to owner Joe Petosa Jr., in the United States, Petosa Accordions is the longest-continuing manufacturer of accordions, and smaller private companies like Martin Accordion company out of Lafayette, LA. exist in niche markets.¹⁵⁸ In Ancona, the majority of the factories share resources with each other to assist in costs, and brands distribute specialty work in Ancona and other parts of Italy to specific artisans. This model works for the roughly 20 factories in Castelfidardo as they are self-contained within a few kilometers of each other.¹⁵⁹ As Francesca Pigni told me, “in Castelfidardo, we can’t survive if everybody [is] in the same place because these are handcrafted, and all the details you have to check it and control and talk about it. So we survived because in Castelfidardo... everybody takes care [of each other].” Much like other economies, the market of the accordion and its interests fluctuate, and brands need to adjust in such a market. Joe Petosa Jr. is firm in his belief that using a localized model is best, even if that means his company is producing a smaller amount of accordions each year.

So we don't send our instruments out to be built outside the factory themselves because from a price point, that's what they do. So [for others] a lot of the part of the accordion is built, or assembled outside, and then brought back into the factory, and all the factories do that. And the more smaller you go, the smaller the factory, of course, the more that happens. And the difference between why it makes a difference is because when you go send something out to have done, that person, that labor gets paid by the piece -they don't get paid by the hour. And the reason why that kind of has grown up in the industry is because, well, you know,

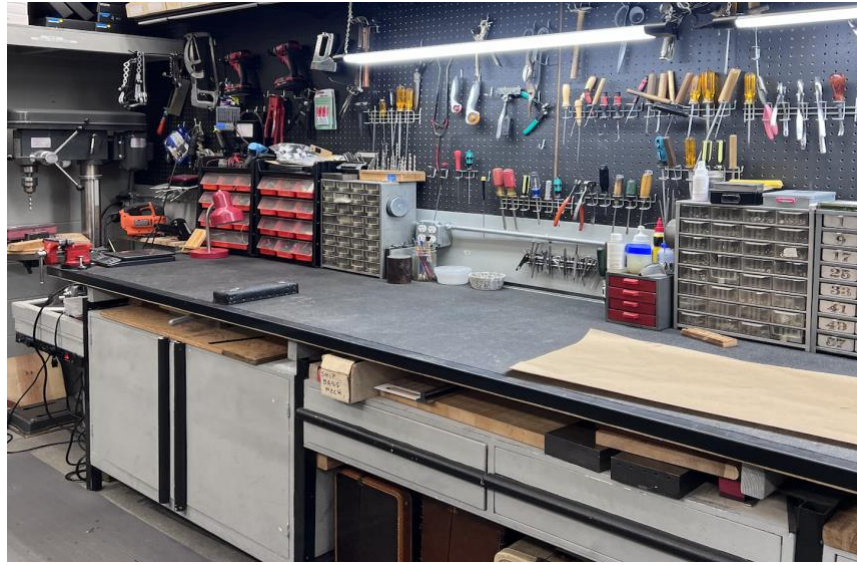
¹⁵⁸ Clarence “Junior” Martin specifically deals with Acadian accordions.

¹⁵⁹ Francesca Pigni mentioned the idea of specialized work in an interview.

when the accordion started to slow down, factory workers started laying off people because there wasn't a business.¹⁶⁰

- Joseph Petosa Jr., president of Petosa Accordions Inc.

Fig. 16: The workshop at Petosa Accordions. (January 24, 2023) Lynwood, WA.



Similarly, the same effects of distribution and sustainability concern repair persons. In an interview with Skyler Fell of Yucca Valley, she revealed that she even changed her business motto to correlate with a new vision of young people and amateurs who emerged to play during the pandemic:

As far as the future generations. I can't tell you what's going to happen. I changed my shop motto though from, you know, bringing the accordion to... what did it use to say? I used to have it be like 'bringing the accordion to this generation,' and now I'm saying 'bringing the accordion to all generations.' I realized that it's such a multigenerational instrument.

- Skyler Fell, owner of Accordion Apocolypse repair shop

¹⁶⁰ Transcribed from an Interview with Joe Petosa Jr., January 24, 2022, at the Petosa Accordion storefront in Lynwood, WA.

Through Skyler's interview, it is evident that shop owners and repair persons must adapt to changing economic conditions and demands of musical instruments in order to thrive. In Chapter Four, I will return to more of my interview with Skyler.

Performance and Function

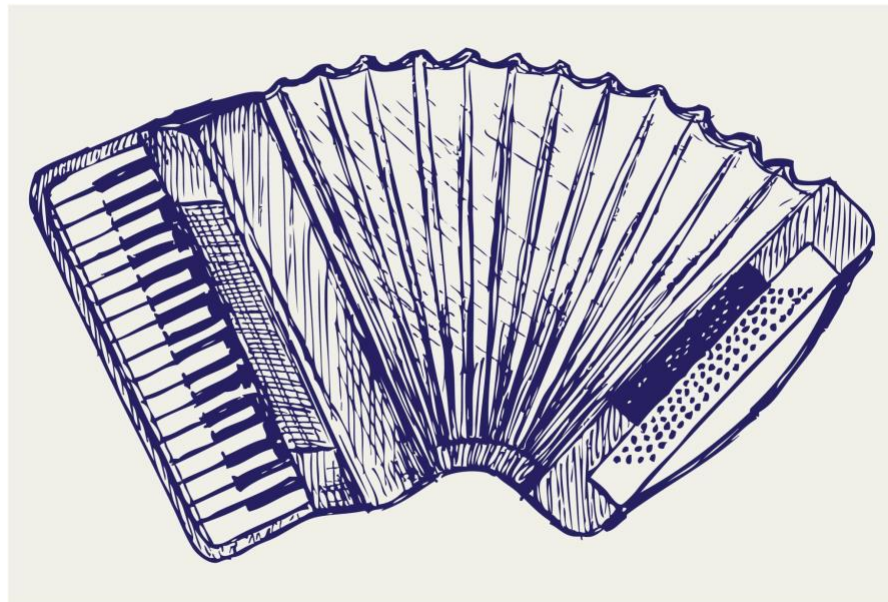
To convey how the accordion functions in a setting with a musical group or a solo, I share here a basic primer on how the instrument works. The accordion makes it easy to accompany vocalists and participate in a standard band setup. Due to the circle of fifths structure in the left hand, it is easy for any decent accordionist to sit in and perform a song from a lead sheet or chart.¹⁶¹ To engage with the circle of fifths chart on an accordion, the player focuses on the bass row on the left side, which is arranged in fifths. For example: C, G, D, A, E, B. Each row of the left-hand also includes columns that correspond to that particular bass pitch. The left side of the accordion features five buttons (ascending upwards to form a column): bass, major, minor, major 7th, and diminished.¹⁶² The right-hand features a piano keyboard with a 41-key standard, and in some cases extensions range to 45 keys. The right side acts as a treble, and the left side acts as a bass. In much of the music I studied, the two sides of the accordion come together to function and play in a homophonic texture (a melody with accompanying chords),

¹⁶¹ The circle of fifths is a learning tool commonly used by musicians and music students to help them establish common key relationships. It is usually noted in a circular or "wheel" shape and features relations of keys in ranges of fifths apart.

¹⁶² See Appendix II, Piano-Accordion Layout - Bass Reeds, for a diagram of the left hand.

yet the accordion is capable of also playing multiple types of textures. The keys on the piano-accordion are tuned diatonically so that the sound of the key is heard the same way in both a push and a pull fashion of the bellows. The bellows are a series of steel or wooden frames that lay onto each other thus creating an accordion folding effect. They are covered by a coated fabric that contains the air that is being pushed into the bellows.

Fig. 17. A drawing of accordion bellows by Aleks Melnyk through istockphoto.com¹⁶³



A faster push or pull of the bellows produces a louder sound, while a slight push or pull will create a softer sound. The manipulation of the bellows is equally important to the instrument's functionality just as much as the keys and buttons since the phrasing of musical compositions requires a natural air flow

¹⁶³ For use and purchase, visit <https://www.istockphoto.com/vector/accordion-gm156944471-22241608>.

similar to the voice or other reed instruments such as saxophone and bassoon. To demonstrate how the functions of the accordion are applied to sheet music, the following is a typical layout of how an accordion lead sheet will appear.¹⁶⁴

Fig. 18: A partial score of traditional Italian folk song “Cc'è la luna n menzu ô mari.”

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The first staff is labeled "Accordion" and has a treble clef and 8/8 time signature. Above the staff, the letter "C" is written above the first measure. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. The second staff starts with a measure number "6" above the first measure and has a treble clef. Above the staff, "G7" is written above the third measure. The melody continues with eighth and quarter notes.

You will notice the layout is in a “fakebook” formatting with the key listed above the bar, and the accompanying melody in the treble clef below.¹⁶⁵ In these types of formats, it is best for the performer to have a general idea of the song if they don’t know it completely since the rhythm is not clearly indicated in the music. Since this is an arrangement, the song has been reduced for accordion through the transcription, but the piece was originally intended for a solo voice. In the next example, we see an example of music that is composed with the accordion in mind.

¹⁶⁴ A lead sheet is a term used to refer to a type of skeleton structure in a piece of sheet music, so the performer can read the melody line and a shorthand version of left hand chords printed above the line.

¹⁶⁵ A fake book is a collection of lead sheets for musicians, especially jazz instrumentalists, that contains the melody lines of popular songs without harmonies.

Fig. 19: Handwritten leadsheet by Lou Jacklich of the song “Mamma,” an Italian popular tune from 1940.¹⁶⁶



In this free-hand accordion notation, the bass is indicated by a series of chords that play in a separate line with the keys placed above each downbeat, key change, or at the beginning of the bar. This type of writing is standard for accordion music, and the main difference in comparison to piano scores is that each new bass shift contains a general chord with letter representation instead of piano sheet music, where the chord is written out with all the notes of the chord included. The letter also facilitates the ability of the musician to identify the chord. In using these types of sheet music formats, the player is able to interpret and consider the melodic lines as an invitation for improvisation. The shorthand form above the melodic lines means there is a less rigid structure, and for practical reasons, much easier to transport or place on a stand. Finally, the added benefit of playing the accordion in an ensemble setting is that an able performer can utilize the multiple timbres and effects that are made possible with the various reeds and switches. While it is a fixed diatonic instrument (meaning that the keys

¹⁶⁶ From the personal library of Lou Jacklich. Written by Cesare Andrea Bixio with lyrics by Bixio Cherubini, arranged by Lou Jacklich.

play one type of pitch per key or button when the bellows are pushed or pulled), the bellows, in combination with the reeds, allow for subtle changes in timbres. The piccolo switch, for example, will create a very thin timbre, while the bassoon and clarinet have a deeper and more rounded tone. The musette switch (not featured on all accordions) contains two voices that are set a $\frac{1}{4}$ cent apart from each other, thus delivering a wavy sound similar to a church organ. If the performer understands the bellows shake technique, it is quite possible to emulate something that sounds similar to a tremolo.¹⁶⁷ It is an instrument that is adaptable to any repertoire. With the multiple options of switches, an individual is able to create unique combinations with each performance.

¹⁶⁷ The bellows shake technique involves the player pushing and pulling the bellows in a smaller range of a few inches rather than using a full extension to open the bellows. During the process, the player opens and closes the bellows in a double or triple time (sometimes referred to as a triple bellows shake) causing the appearance that the accordion is being shaken. The result in sound is a rapid repeating effect, and shakes are often heard in Zydeco music and also used to create accents.

Repertoire and Performance

Fig. 20: Women on a street car with an accordion player for the North Beach Fisherman's Fiesta.¹⁶⁸ (Courtesy of the San Francisco Historical Society collection).



Accordion Music at Festivals, Funerals, and Weddings

For Italian Americans, the accordion is a part of most festivals and celebrations. While collecting oral histories, I was told during multiple interviews that “someone always had an accordion out” during a party. In my own experience growing up, accordions were present at weddings and dance parties. In most of the Italian families featured in my interviews, there was typically a family member or close friend who played the instrument, and many of the people I interviewed had an old accordion sitting in their closet. Today at street fairs and

¹⁶⁸ “Come to the Party - To invite San Francisco to come to the Fishermen's Fiesta tomorrow and Sunday at Fisherman's Wharf, the Bay and Mason Street cars of the Powell Street cable carried pretty supercargo today. There were even accordion players to give that old Neapolitan jive,” (July 26, 1946), accessed July 20, 2023, <http://digitalsf.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A128521>.

Italian festivals, the accordion is a recognizable symbol of Italian cultural expression. In each of my fieldwork sites from 2017-2023 that involved festivals, the accordion was programmed on all of the weekend concert stages. The former Santa Rosalia Festival (now renamed the Festa Italia in Monterey), the Italian Heritage Day parade in San Francisco, and the Italian festivals of Pittsburgh (CA), Lodi, Stockton, San Jose, and Sutter Creek all featured accordions. Seeing it and hearing it in these spaces creates a sense of authenticity for many attendees, while others view and understand the instrument through a personal sense of nostalgia. It is also a portable instrument and more affordable for an agent to contract an accordion player rather than an entire band - so the use of the accordion seems to benefit both the audience and the host. At weddings it is usually heard during dinner as background music, and at funerals, I have heard it during the wake and celebration of life gatherings. When I attended Don Pandori's (1934-2022) funeral, there was an impromptu accordion playing during the lunch celebration.¹⁶⁹ I think it brings a sense of familiarity to audiences who attend such functions. In hearing the accordion for such celebrations, Italian Americans reaffirm their connection to past family members and to their identity through the unique timbres and rhythms of the instrument. For many people that I interviewed, a live accordion brings a sense of comfort in hearing the same songs that were heard and enjoyed by the deceased.

¹⁶⁹ I personally experienced accordion at Don Pandori's (1934-2022) funeral. Don was an amateur accordion player based in San Jose, CA.

Repertoire: How is it Categorized?

Since this project is based in California and the Italian communities that resided there, I turn to the repertoire I observed in my research and fieldwork. The majority of the repertoire, as it is connected to a European tradition, has existed through the process of transmigration. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this means “the passage or removal from one place to another, esp. from one country to another.”¹⁷⁰ The persistence of the repertoire I study has been maintained through the voyage across the Atlantic, and much of how it is heard today has similar tunes and, in most cases, lyrics have continued in their original form since songs were circulated in print form in Italy in the late 19th and 20th centuries. The music moved via water or by land to a new space, unfolding with new surroundings and generations of audiences and performers. All of the music somehow exists in a permanent way as it did prior but with new meanings acquired with each decade. A great example of this is the style that some refer to as a modern “French cafe” sound.

This is a sound and style that originated in France with the *musette* genre. The history of *musette* dates back to the 18th-century French court, where it first originated as a set of bagpipes.¹⁷¹ Later in the 19th century, the instrument became popular for use in Parisian music at cabarets and cafés and was soon replaced by the accordion when Italian immigrants arrived in Paris. Later, bass

¹⁷⁰ “Transmigration, *N.*, Sense 2.a.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, July 2023. Accessed August 18, 2024.

¹⁷¹ Paloma Leon-Villagra, “Pastoral, Dionysian, Unrefined? The Singular Courtly Role of the Musette,” *Archiv Für Musikwissenschaft* 80, no 1. (2023): 43.

and percussion were added for dance styles that then adapted to a new form called *bals-musette*.¹⁷² The sound was popularized early on by Émile Vacher and Gus Viseur, and later, the musette became an accordion switch that creates a thin and wave-like sound:

Musette tuning is where each key or button on an accordion is coupled to three reed banks; the middle one is tuned “pure” and the outer ones are tuned respectively sharp and flat to the main note, producing a characteristic wide tremolo.¹⁷³

The sound was made popular, so much so that new switches on the accordion were thus invented to accommodate the desired sound, and my own accordion comes specialized with two musette switches. It was used in films (both Italian and French) and then popularized as a sound rather than the instrument from which it first originated.¹⁷⁴ So many of the genres we hear at the Cotati Accordion Festival and in the SFAC (San Francisco Accordion Club) are part of this modern collection of genres that have come from other spaces.

The diversity of music that is played at the Cotati Accordion Festival includes zydeco, French, Italian, and Eastern European. Since it is a global instrument that was later housed in colonial spaces and became part of American culture, the number of repertoires affiliated with the accordion is vast. In the United States, a majority of the repertoire is affiliated with dance music, and it

¹⁷² From an Interview with Raymond Bussi eres, Jo Privat, and Marcel Azzola, broadcast July 14, 1999, on FR3, Paris. Jo Privat performed and helped to popularize bal-musette in the 1930s and 40s and played alongside Django Reinhardt.

¹⁷³ Robert A. Green, Anthony C. Baines, and Meredith Ellis Little, “Musette (i),” in *Grove Music Online*.ed. Deane Root, published online 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.19398>.

¹⁷⁴ For more information on accordion in French films, please see: Powrie, Phil. *The Fabulous Destiny of the Accordion in French Cinema*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2006.

reflects the number of immigrant communities that settled here: Italian, Irish, Polish, German, and Mexican, among others. Dances with multiple histories like foxtrot, tango, waltz, and rhumba are also included in the accordion repertoire and integrated into both Italian and American music by way of the 19th-century dancehall.

The Connection of Neapolitan Song to Rhythms in the Danzón Complex

In one lesson, I informed my instructor Lou Jacklich that I might want to play some pieces for my dissertation defense. Lou is a local accordion instructor and a known performer in the Bay Area. He agreed and said it would be good for me to have three or four pieces in my “back pocket” in case I was asked to play. We looked through my music folder and settled on the following: “Oh Marie,” “O sole mio,” “Sharpshooters March,” and “The Godfather” - if I could manage all five pages of it or at least the theme. I had been having many issues making it through the final page of the arrangement of “The Godfather Waltz.” Regarding “O sole mio,” I played a basic version of it in F major, and it is a piece I have had for two years but one that I rarely play now. I usually play this piece with a standard tango rhythm in the left hand: chord bass, bass, chord.

Lou: OK, try to put some expression.

Monica: (I play with concentrated effort towards phrasing).

Lou: Can you play it without the music?

Monica: That’s what I need to work on. (I swivel my chair 180 degrees away from the stand and play the piece again. There are parts I fumble through).

Lou: G and D.

Monica: I can hear it (but I am having difficulty finding my next chord).

Lou: When do you have to have this down?

Monica: Two more months.

Lou: Give it one more try and get your switches right. No music. You only got that one part wrong (after the B flat). Play the last part with that master switch. Alright, from memory then.

Monica: Part of my argument is that a lot of these Italian songs had tango, so with [this song] is there any other type of rhythm I could do?

Lou: You could play it in a beguine rhythm.

Lou: Un-daaah-dah-un-da-un-da

Monica: (demonstrating) Am I doing it right?

Lou: Go a little faster

Monica: Oh, that's weird.

Lou: No, no, back and forth twice. Go slow. Yeah, that's twice.

Monica: Am I doing it right?

Lou: Now you are.

Monica: (Playing) I would have to get used to it.

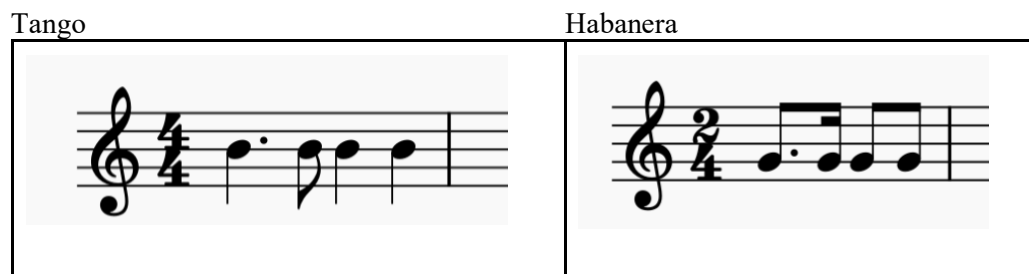
Lou: Keep playing. (Waits for me to play). Now play the other rhythm. (I play the beguine). Now, go back to the other rhythm. (I play it with a tango). Add "duh-duh-duh" (at the end). It would be good to play it through with both rhythms.

- Lesson with Lou Jacklich, February 27, 2024.

In playing both rhythms, Lou states that it will help add some variation for the performance. The audience will hear one round of the song as it is usually

played with the tango rhythm, and then in the second round, they will hear another style with the double-time of the beguine to make it interesting and uptempo. The audience may not know the difference between the two styles, but the connection here is that both rhythms are born out of the *danzón* complex, and there is a general feeling that movement is increased. In the case of Neapolitan song, the accordion repertoire for Italian music typically includes a mix of songs that have been transcribed for the accordion, but they keep a specific rhythm in the left hand and desired reeds and timbres in the right. One type of rhythm, in particular, is the tango or habanera.

Fig. 21 Personal notation by the author of tango and *habanera* rhythms.



In the figure above, you will note the differences in notated rhythms between a *tango* (with other examples of similar rhythms in the *danzón* complex) and a *habanera*. Besides the meter differences (the first is in 4/4, and the second is in 2/4), the notation of the rhythm appears differently when it is printed, but it sounds the same when it is played (just at a faster tempo). The histories between the two are varied and complex. The dances are felt by the player in the way they are interpreted. The *habanera* was traditionally a dance and a rhythm that originated in Cuba by way of influences that stemmed from the English country

dances of the 18th century.¹⁷⁵ Later, these dances morphed into *danza*, *contradanza*, and finally to the *habanera*, and eventually *tango* - all of which typically make up “the *danzón* complex.”¹⁷⁶ While this is a general term, it should be considered that not all of the dances in the compendium are similar – see writings by Leonardo Acosta.¹⁷⁷ At the turn of the century when the song was written, the *habanera* was already being danced in Europe, but this version of the *contradanza* was now diluted with the infectious dotted rhythm spurred by the Afro-Cuban influences placed upon the dance once it returned to Spain and later spread throughout Europe.¹⁷⁸ Cuban novelist and musicologist Alejo Carpentier also affirmed the evolution of the dance as it appeared as a tango-habanera both in Paris and Buenos Aires in his seminal text *La música en Cuba*.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Frances Barulich and Jan Fairley, “Habanera,” ed. Deane Root, *Music Online*, published online 2001, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000012116>.

¹⁷⁶ Hettie Malcomson, “The ‘Routes’ and ‘Roots’ of Danzón: a Critique of the History of a Genre,” *Popular Music* 30, no. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 2011): 264.

¹⁷⁷ Leonardo Acosta, “On Generic Complexes and Other Topics in Cuban Popular Music,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 17 (2005), 227-54. Translated by Raul Fernandez and Daniel S. Whitesell with an introduction by Raul Fernandez.

¹⁷⁸ Galina Bakhtiarova, “A Tale of Two Habaneras: Transatlantic Journeys of a Cultural Sign,” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 118.

¹⁷⁹ Alejo Carpentier, *La música en Cuba*, (Havana: Editorial Luz Hilo, 1961), 156.

Fig. 22: Example of “O sole mio” in printed sheet music with an indicated rhythmic marking of “tango.” Arranged by Pietro Deiro and uploaded digitally to MuseScore by user Nicholas Savin.

All Parts

'O SOLO MIO SERENADE

E. DI CAPUA
Arr. by Pietro Deiro

Andante

1st TANGO 8va alta

Master *mf*

2nd TANGO 8va alta

Master *mf*

Bass

The popularity of the dance in cosmopolitan Europe may have motivated di Capua, who wrote the original version of “O sole mio,” to set the song to a *habanera*. When di Capua was writing the song, he was performing in Russia, experiencing gloomy weather, and decided to write about the warmth of the sun in his hometown of Naples.¹⁸⁰ From the very start of this composition, the song carried an intertwined history and influences from various coasts. Like many songs in the Canzone Napoletana repertoire, “O sole mio” relies on storytelling as a descriptive device that invokes romantic images of Italy. It is traditionally sung by a tenor, and the original scoring indicates the accompanying bassline rhythm should be played in a *habanera*.¹⁸¹ The song contains three verses accompanied

¹⁸⁰ Julia Volpelleto Nakamura, “Canzone Napoletane: The Stories Behind the Songs,” *Italian Americana* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 151.

¹⁸¹ This is noted in most early versions I have seen in sheet music for piano, mandolin, voice, accordion, and ukulele.

by three refrains, and the initial verse describes an idyllic sunny day in the South that emerges after a storm. The air is fresh, and a woman is hanging her laundry as the sun shines on her face. At dusk, the sun descends to sleep, and the narrator is sad but not alone because the sun will ultimately rise again. The need for the sun to rise can also be viewed as an expression of hope that appears in many of the songs in the Neapolitan repertoire. In Simona Frasca's monograph on Neapolitan musicians in the early 20th century in New York, she reminds us of the ways Naples can acquire human characteristics through song text: "The recurrent themes of this song tradition generally revolve around the internal pain of the loss of love, a feeling identified with the beloved woman but often also with the city itself."¹⁸² These ideas of recognizing the city as human and female are common threads for scholars writing about Italy in times of distress, and these metaphors have been expressed through cultural understanding and language since the Renaissance era.¹⁸³ Similar to "O sole mio," the songs in the repertoire may serve a dual function as a means to comfort both those living in Naples and those within the diaspora. When the song was first published in 1898, conditions in Naples were dismal, and economic downturns spurred a number of food and bread riots throughout Italy.¹⁸⁴ The Canzone Napoletana repertoire provided all

¹⁸² Simona Frasca, *Italian Birds of Passage: The Diaspora of Neapolitan Musicians in New York*, (London: Palgrave, 2014), 2.

¹⁸³ Nina Treadwell, "Now Despised, a Servant, Abandoned": Wounded Italy, the Moresca, and the Performance of Alterity," *Acoustemologies in Contact Sounding Subjects and Modes of Listening in Early Modernity*, eds. Emily Wilbourne and Suzanne G. Cusick, 245.

¹⁸⁴ "Bread Riots Continue," *New York Times*, May 14, 1898.

members of the diaspora a way to engage in shared experiences of loss and longing for a place they once remembered.

Adding the *habanera* rhythm was a result of the popularity of Latin music styles at the time and the blending of music happening in festival settings. This is not a novel idea, as the formula for many of the Piedigrotta festival entries evoked a sense of exoticism through the inclusion of Spanish rhythms or settings in minor keys (“Marechiare,” 1886, and “Maria Mari,” 1899, also by di Capua). The *habanera* rhythm marks this song as both a popular (rather than a folk or classical) song and an international tune. Yet, there is an added extramusical component because the song sustained multiple histories that are permanently embedded into its framework. The *habanera* represents a compendium of local and shared West African, Cuban, and Spanish experiences, creating a musical *mestizaje* through the process of transculturation.¹⁸⁵ Transculturation was “coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1940, referring to a stage during colonial contact when distinct cultures converge and merge together.”¹⁸⁶

Pieces like “Spanish Eyes,” “La Paloma,” “O sole mio,” and “Marechiare,” all use these types of Latin rhythms and tempo markings, and it is the responsibility of the accordionist to be aware of the deep and complex histories of the printed sheet music on their stand. When I play a *beguine* rhythm

¹⁸⁵ *Mestizaje* is a Spanish word that refers to the mixing of ethnic and cultural groups, particularly in Latin America, beginning with Spanish colonization.

¹⁸⁶ Luis A. Vivanco, ed., “Transculturation,” *A Dictionary of Cultural Anthropology* published by Oxford University Press, 2018.
<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191836688.001.0001/acref-9780191836688-e-377>.

in my lesson, I notice my instructor simply taps the rhythm that he expects on my knee. He also expects me to understand how to properly execute it on the left hand by playing the bass chord two times at the end to reinforce the dominant/tonic foundation. None of these cues are written in the music, nor is the rhythm explicitly dictated. If not executed properly, a *beguine* can sound dry or “square.” The notes on the page alone are not enough to convey this level of desired sonic quality, and the responsibility owed to the music is shouldered by the performer.¹⁸⁷

Fig. 23: Example of “O sole mio” in a *beguine* rhythm with accordion notation

The musical notation for "O sole mio" is presented in a two-staff format. The treble staff contains the melody and chords: Gm7, C7, and F. The bass staff contains the bass line, marked with 'M'. The lyrics are written below the treble staff.

Italian lyrics: Che bel - la co - sa 'na iur - na - ta'e
 English lyrics: Be - hold the bril - liant sun in all its

The two songs I mention, “Marechiaro” and “O sole mio,” are also part of the Neapolitan song tradition, and acquire a unique meaning in themselves to Italian and Italian Americans who know the songs or grew up hearing those at parties and in the household. Dating back to the mid-19th century, these *canzoni napoletane* (Neapolitan songs) were first created as folk songs in the Neapolitan language but later spread throughout all parts of Italy through publication and

¹⁸⁷ Written by Eduardo di Capua and Giovanni Capurro. Arrangement published by Wisconsin: Hal Leonard, 2004. Excerpt printed from virtualsheetmusic.com.

transcription.¹⁸⁸ Today, the songs have been transcribed for accordion and remain popular for new students and as part of the general accordion repertoire. In my interviews, my interlocutors mentioned how the songs bring them back to a specific time and place. For Lou DiMaggio, he immediately remembered his neighborhood in Pittsburg when hearing “Santa Lucia,” and Steve Pizzo recalled his time stationed in the Aleutian Islands when he played accordion for an Army USO show in WWII. He connects his spontaneous wedding in Juno to the accordion:

You know I played there, you know there was after three or four months, they had one of those, what do they call that? An entertainment for the soldiers. They had an accordion, and I would go up there and play and I won a contest. That’s how I got married. I went to Juno because I won the contest and I came in second place.¹⁸⁹

- Steve Pizzo, age 101, accordion performer

Today, it is common to see the Neapolitan songbook transcribed for accordion. I have heard these songs in restaurants and festivals, jam sessions, and in my own lessons. When the accordionist takes up these songs, it is important that they understand the phrasing of the tune, the major to minor shifts, how rubato is used in particular parts of the songs, and the spaces where solos occur. They should also know (as previously mentioned) which type of bass rhythm to use - a *samba*, a *tango*, standard 4/4 time, and so on. If performed in a robotic

¹⁸⁸ Goffredo Plastino, “Echoes of Naples,” in *Neapolitan Postcards: The Canzone Napoletana as Transnational Subject* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 21.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Steve Pizzo on July 25, 2021, in Granite Bay, CA. Steve played the accordion when he was a teenager growing up in North Beach in the 1940s.

way, the songs lose meaning for the audience that understands such nuances. When played improperly, the performance robs the listener of the intended nostalgia and removes the desired effects of the song - especially for those who grew up with said works. When music teachers pass on their performance knowledge, there is an expected change and loss of the original work as they learned it since it is being reinterpreted by a new performer with each oncoming generation. When we play our accordions at the club, or when I learn a particular Italian song in a lesson, I also have to be aware of the style or rhythm and meter in which the original song was made in order to convey meaning as close to the source as possible. Part of that shift in learning is accompanied by intangible learning processes and part of what Benjamin Brinner refers to as “symbolic representation” where musical gestures and style are highly personalized by an individual in teaching settings.¹⁹⁰ A good amount of the way we learn as musicians, not just accordionists, is through such processes, as evidenced from my lessons. In my listening and observation, I am also learning in this way to grasp what exactly a *beguine* is and how I should feel it.

American Standards and Tunes for the Accordion

American standards, Tin Pan Alley tunes, and folk songs are common repertoire in my own research and some of the songs were adapted to the accordion thus creating sites of memory for Italian-Americans.¹⁹¹ Accordion

¹⁹⁰ Benjamin Elon Brinner, *Knowing Music, Making Music: Javanese Gamelan and the Theory of Musical Competence and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 49.

¹⁹¹ Marion S. Jacobson, “Valtaro Musette: Italians, Accordions, and a Pluralistic Vision of Ethnicity in New York City,” *The World of Music* 50, no. 3 (2008): 58.

teaching method books like the Palmer-Hughes series include pieces like “Repasz Band” (Charles C. Sweeley, 1901), “Little Brown Jug” (Winner, 1869), tunes written by Stephen Foster, Sousa marches, “cowboy songs”, and traditional military and holiday songs.¹⁹² Polkas and German folk songs and laendlers (an Austrian folk dance) tend to have a continuous presence in the repertoire, and in America, this is in part due to Midwestern accordion traditions, including the Slovenian styles. The “Cleveland sound,” as it is also known, is heard on piano-accordions and is featured in Slovenian-American repertoire in the Midwest. The sound is created by playing on a non-*cassotto* accordion (without chamber) with a musette switch that is “dry” tuned, meaning that it has less of a tremolo than the musette sound used in Europe.¹⁹³ Frankie Yankovic known as “America’s Polka King” also falls into this genre of the Cleveland Sound as he helped to popularize polka music and the song “The Beer Barrel Polka” in his hometown of Cleveland.¹⁹⁴ As part of this dissertation, one name that I do not include here is Weird Al Yankovic as his focus centers on popular and camp genres, and he was not directly involved in the California accordion club scene or the Bay Area. It

¹⁹² The moniker of “cowboy songs” or tunes is something I have heard often in my interviews, and those types of pieces include “She’ll Be Coming ’Round the Mountain,” (“When the Chariot Comes”) from Barton, William E. *Old Plantation Hymns: A Collection of Hitherto Unpublished Melodies of the Slave and the Freedman* (Boston: Lamson, Wolfe and Co. 1899), 44.

¹⁹³ Philip Nadvesnik, “Which accordion will give you the Slovenian Oberkrainer sound,” *Accordion Maniac* (November 24, 2018). Website hosted by Philip Nadvesnik. Nadvesnik is known in midwestern accordion clubs, and is a professional accordionist specializing in Alpine folk music from Slovenia and Austria. His website also features numbers of transcribed polkas and Slovenian tunes not typically available in print. Website accessed August 17, 2024.

<https://accordionmaniac.com/2018/11/what-accordion-will-give-you-the-typical-slovenian-sound>.

¹⁹⁴ “July 28, 1915: Polka King Frankie Yankovic Born,” July 28, 2020. West Virginia Public Broadcasting. Website accessed August 16, 2024. <https://wvpublic.org/july-28-1915-polka-king-frankie-yankovic-born>.

should be noted too that the pop-accordionist Weird Al Yankovic and Frankie Yankovic are not related. For anyone interested in learning more about his music, consider *Weird Al: Seriously* by Lily Hirsch.¹⁹⁵

Concertizing the Instrument

The Carnegie Hall Accordion Concert of 1939

The success and validity of an instrument can only be measured by the music written for it and the virtuosi who play it.

- Tony Charuhas, *The Accordion*, 55.

Certain symphonies are still snobbish about using it, but Arthur Fiedler of the Boston Pops has used it many times, and liked it too.

- Beverly Roberts, a young woman participating in an accordion contest. "L.V. Girl to Defend Accordion Title," *The Morning Call* (Allentown, PA.), July 11, 1964.

A simple search through the historical newspapers tends to yield findings that report that accordion programming was consistent throughout the 1930s and 40s. It is typical to see accordion concerts and presentations hosted at ladies' clubs, rotary club programs, community churches, and fundraising events. On radio shows throughout the United States, there were dedicated showtimes for accordion programming that lasted anywhere between 15 minutes to two hours, depending on the location. The majority of the repertoire listed in these concerts is typically made up of Sousa marches, folk songs, French and Italian tunes, and Tin

¹⁹⁵ Hirsch, L. E., & Dr. Demento. *Weird Al: Seriously*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020.

Pan Alley standards. Vaudeville music dominated a lot of concert programming, but there were spaces where classical music repertoire could be heard. The most typical of the day was Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, along with arrangements of opera overtures. For example, I have seen the *Overture to Semiramide* arranged by Ernst Gloe, and the *Overture to the Barber of Seville* arranged by Pietro Deiro. While small concerts and symphonies did indeed host the instrument as the main concerto, the most-cited concert in this accordion history is the night Charles Magnante (1905-1986) played his accordion recital at Carnegie Hall. The first accordion concert in America occurred at Carnegie Hall on April 18th, 1939. It was such an important moment for the instrument as the concert occurred right before the opening of the 1939 World's Fair and during a time when the U.S. government was sending aid to the allies for the impending war that we would enter nearly two years later. It was the first time an all-accordion program was heard by a famous performer in the United States at a major classical concert venue. Held on a Tuesday at 8:30 pm, Magnante, the virtuoso accordionist, appeared with his accordion quartet (Abe Goldman, Gene von Hallberg, Joseph Biviano, and Paul Prinz, bass) and played the following program:

Johann Sebastian Bach - *Toccatà and Fugue in D Minor, BWV 565*

Felix Mendelssohn - *Rondo Capriccioso in E Major, Op. 14*

Ernesto Lecuona - *Malagueña*

Frederic Chopin - *Waltz in C-sharp Minor, Op. 64, No. 2*

Frederic Chopin - *Nocturne in E-flat Major (unspecified)*

Fritz Kreisler - *Old Viennese Dances: 1. Liebesfreud*

Charles Magnante - *Perpetual Motion*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart - *The Marriage of Figaro, K. 492: Overture*
 Ludwig van Beethoven - *Contredanse, WoO 14*
 Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov - *The Snow Maiden: Dance of the Buffoons*
 Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky - *The Nutcracker Suite, Op. 71a: Danse des Mirlitons*
 Johann Sebastian Bach - *Fugue in G Minor*
 Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov - *The Tale of Tsar Saltan: Flight of the Bumblebee*
 Charles Magnante - *Paraphrase on Dark Eyes*
 Charles Magnante - *Paraphrase on Carnival of Venice*
 Ferde Grofé - *Grand Canyon Suite: On the Trail*
 George Gershwin - *Rhapsody in Blue*
 Pietro Frosini - *Jolly Caballero*
 Fritz Kreisler - *Old Viennese Dances: 3. Schön Rosmarin*
 Reginald Foresythe - *Dodging a Divorcee*
 Ferde Grofé - *Mississippi Suite: 4. Mardi Gras*
 Charles Magnante - *Accordiana*
 George Gershwin - *Somebody Loves Me*
 George Gershwin - *Porgy and Bess: Act I, Scene 1. Summertime*
 George Gershwin - *Mexican Dance (1920)*
 George Gershwin - *Girl Crazy: I Got Rhythm (1930)*

Reception History of the Carnegie Concert

Please see the following reviews of the concert below.¹⁹⁶

Accordionist Presents Carnegie Hall Recital, Charles Magnante and His Group Offer Familiar Music, *New York Herald-Tribune*.

“Mainly familiar music was heard in a medium unfamiliar to concert auditoriums last night at Carnegie Hall, where Charles Magnante, an expert practitioner upon the accordion, gave his first New York recital.”

“Mr. Magnante did notable work in illustrating the resources of his instrument from a technical and interpretative Point of view, displaying remarkable digital

¹⁹⁶ Henry Doktorski, “As Thousands Cheered: The 1939 Magnante Concert at Carnegie Hall: Part III,” *The Classical Free-Reed Inc.*, Articles and Essays Featuring Classical Free-Reed Instruments and Performers, accessed February 20, 2022, <http://www.ksanti.net/free-reed/essays/cheered.html>. Printed from *The Free-Reed Journal*.

dexterity, clarity of medium and detail and an ample dynamic range *and nicety* of shading. His colleagues also gave meritorious performances in a concert which suggested that the accordion has more possibilities than are generally realized, but left room for a certain amount of doubt whether the color and range of the instrument is sufficient to sustain interest at an even pitch throughout a complete program. Kelvin Keech, an N.B.C. commentator, furnished oral program notes for a good-sized audience.”

Charles Magnante Group Gives Accordion Recital, in *New York Journal-American* by Grena Bennett.

“Charles Magnante revealed to a large audience last evening that the accordion is not necessarily limited to "swing" music but is also a medium for interpreting the greatest of classical compositions. He and his associates achieved some unusual and praiseworthy results in tonal combinations resembling in quality and character those of a small pipe organ. The technique of the accordion players was surprisingly brilliant and facile and suggested that of well-equipped pianists. The event was a diverting and worthy experiment.”

In reading these reviews, we can observe that the critics doubted the lasting appeal of the accordion to concert hall audiences and likely did not place the accordion in the same category as orchestral instruments. Part of this lack of inclusion appeared in the ways publishing houses treated various genres of music as well.

A Note on Publishing and Canon Building

Some of the ways accordion genres have been separated are due to the music publishers and writers that print accordion-based teaching methods and transcriptions for the accordion. In the early 1920s, Biaggio Quattrocioche and Octavio Pagani helped to spread the popularity of American and Italian accordion

repertoire played by Guido and Pietro Deiro.¹⁹⁷ Later, in the 1950s, the Palmer-Hughes books were a popular series for teachers and young students.¹⁹⁸ Authored by Willard A. Palmer and Bill Hughes, the books are separated into ten volumes with added seasonal and specialty books that were released to support the methods books. The pieces vary between Americana and patriotic songs, European folk tunes, Romantic and Classical pieces, and regional Mexican and traditional music. Today, there are a handful of accordion publishers who specialize in accordion materials. Gary Dahl's arrangements and Mel Bay's publications are among the more popular accordion series, and they include a variety of genres like French folk and popular tunes for example.¹⁹⁹ Henry Doktorski and Don Quattrocchi should be added here as authors who have dedicated their time to bringing awareness to the instrument and creating well-edited accordion transcriptions and compositions.²⁰⁰ Some of the accordion teachers and performers I studied in this project were also known for their publishing of transcriptions as much as their teaching and techniques. These include Pietro Deiro, Dick Contino, and my own instructor Lou Jacklich.

¹⁹⁷ Zinni, "Play Me a Tarantella," 166.

¹⁹⁸ Hughes, Bill and Willard A. Palmer. *Palmer-Hughes Accordion Course: Book 1*. Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Company, 1952.

¹⁹⁹ Hallar, Larry. *French Music for Accordion Volume 1*. Saint Louis, MO: Mel Bay Publications, 2015.

²⁰⁰ Doktorski, Henry. *How To Play Diatonic Button Accordion, Vol. 1*. Danvers, Mass: Santorella Publications, 2007.

Accordion Instructors in the Bay Area

During the 1950s and 60s, accordion teachers existed in most major cities and small towns, and well-established studios were featured in a number of towns in Northern California alone. There were accordion competitions throughout the Bay Area, and the demand for instruction and instrument purchases were high. I identified 37 accordion instructors that were active between the 1910s and the 1980s in the Bay Area alone. All except three were Italian or Italian American. It is evident that the Italian communities had a hold on this niche of the accordion world. In the maps I created of Little Italy, it is easy to observe how the close proximity of these Italian communities living in that neighborhood helped to foster ties and build connections for families to gain interest in the accordion.

Fig. 24: Accordion teachers and performers identified in my project from the 1910s to the present. An *indicates they are alive today.

Benetti, Dino	Figone, Louis
Bernazza twins	Fortina, Carl
Bianucci, Mario	Frosini, Pietro
Boccaleoni, Guido	Galla-Rini, Anthony
*Borelli, Ron	Jacklich, Lou
Braghetta, Pat	Landucci, Etherine
Cagnazzo, Angelo	Louis, Allara
Canevari, Guido	Lucchesi, Emily
Capelli, Al	Maggiolo, Joe
Carlo, Joe	Massolo, Ed
Cervone, Anthony	Molinari, John
Civitta, Emiglio	Nunzio, Charles
Contino, Dick	Orlando, Augie
Corrino, Michael	Pandori, Don
Corra, Robert	Parsons, Norma
Deiro, Guido	Petromilli, Bob
Deiro, Pietro	Pezzolo, Eugene
*DiBono, Peter	Pezzolo, John
*DiBono, Reno	Pezzolo, Theodore
Felice, Ernie	

*Savant, Don
Seghieri, Bud
Silva, Albert
Sparacino, Angelo
Sinigiani, Henry
Tapogna, Bill

Toffoli, John
Venneri, Gabriel
Virincina, Joe
*Zampiceni, Mike
Zanini, Celso

Similarly, in my spreadsheet data for accordion teachers and performers listed above in figure 24, all performers were also Italian or Italian American. With this evidence, we can see that the Italian communities dominated accordion studios, theater acts, and sales in the Bay Area. Besides the teachers that provided musical instruction, the Italian immigrants coming from Ancona provided the knowledge of building the accordion as well.

Accordion Clubs

One of the ways in which accordion players in the Bay Area connect is through the accordion club setting. In this project, I actively observed and participated in the San Francisco Accordion Club (SFAC) led by president Ken Schwarz. The SFAC itself has been a longstanding organization in the Bay Area, and it is in the club circle that accordion players are welcome to join and share their music. The SFAC website offers information about the 501c organization and a few photos that invite the reader to come and participate in monthly meetings. In the “About” section, there is a note that the club in its “present form” was created in 1990, and it was originally called the Bay Area Accordion Club (BACC). The club itself is not affiliated with the original predecessor from 1916.

Throughout all of my research, I cannot find information about the former SFAC after 1930. From 1916 to 1930, there were a handful of informational articles for accordion club picnics in the Italian-language newspapers, and the club was mentioned in some advertising for accordion sales at Columbo regularly in *L'Italia*. The last advertisement in the San Francisco papers (including Italian-language circulation) appears in *La voce del popolo*, and it concerns the annual accordion picnic, “Il Pic-Nic di Domani.”²⁰¹ Then, in 1935, there is a brief mention of the Accordion Club of San Francisco that was “secured” for a community dance in St. Helena.²⁰² According to the business entities search on the California Secretary of State website, the final inactive date for the SFAC was November 18, 1949. Based on my interviews with former club members, I know the club was thriving until the war years, and it returned to existence in the 1990s when Tom Torriglia (from the band Those Darn Accordions) led the effort to resurrect the club.²⁰³ In addition to the history of the SFAC, it should be noted that other clubs existed alongside the San Francisco branch. I have found information about the following clubs from the first half of the 20th century. All are currently defunct:

- Pentalone
- Napa Valley Accordion Club
- Monterey County
- Enzian Button Box Club (San Leandro)

²⁰¹ “Il Pic-Nic di Domani,” *La voce del popolo*, August 16, 1930.

²⁰² “Upcoming Dance,” *The Napa Journal*, February 1, 1935.

²⁰³ The band from San Francisco was founded in 1989 by Linda “Big Lou” Seekins, and they are known for playing a mix of rock and popular sounds in addition to adding comedy skits in between sets. They play polka-punk music and currently still tour in 2024. Their music is available on Apple Music, Spotify, and YouTube.

- Sherman Clay (Sacramento)
- Sherman Clay (Santa Rosa)
- Accordion Club of Sonoma County
- Louie Carano's Accordion Club (Modesto)
- Campi Accordion Club (possibly San Jose)

These clubs appeared in the archives through newspapers, word of mouth, and accordion club newsletters. In the back of most club newsletters, it is common for people to advertise their businesses and to list names and contact information for those seeking accordion lessons. Robert and Elaine Cooperstein, executive board members for the SFAC, provided me with a file of San Francisco Accordion Club newsletters dating from 1991-2013, ephemera from handouts and booklets, and stacks of catalogs written by the American Accordionists Association (AAA). In addition to that collection, I read through old newsletters from the Good Times Accordion Club (Escalon) in digital formats online. In both instances, the clubs published other neighboring accordion clubs' meeting times and venues to help support the community. Through newspapers located both at the Doe Library (UC Berkeley), the San Francisco Public Library, and newspapers.com, I found invites for accordion clubs around the Bay Area in the advertising pages of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Examiner*, and *L'italia*. Those invitations were always listed in the back pages of the newspaper where music instrument sales and accordion teachers were listed. Today, the following clubs are active in Northern California, but note there are others throughout the United States in Brooklyn, San Antonio, Seattle, and Los Angeles, among others:

- Silicon Valley Accordion Club (San Jose)
- Good Times Accordion Club (Escalon)
- San Francisco Accordion Club (San Mateo)
- Accordion Club of the Redwoods (Petaluma)
- Golden State Accordion Club (Vacaville)

In a typical club meeting, members will gather at a local community space such as a church hall, library community room, or local restaurant. Meetings last about two to three hours, and most are held on the weekends or in the evenings. The SFAC for example is held the third Sunday of each month while the Silicon Valley Accordion Club (SVAC) meets the first Sunday of each month. The members will bring food to share during the break, and members are also encouraged to bring friends and family to their meetings. The meeting will begin with the president giving a welcome and introduction, followed by a series of performers and members who will then gather and play small pieces of music for each other. Sometimes, guest performers are invited for an entire meeting, or another member may give a talk about accordion histories and related musical events. During the intermission, the community gathers to partake in a snack time where specific members bring food in a potluck style. These gatherings are meant to bring together enthusiasts and amateur performers, but professionals, accordion makers, and repair persons often attend in order to maintain close connections with their clients and the greater accordion circles. These clubs are an integral part of the sustainability factor for the instrument, and most notably members of this in-between group were the ones who notably saw the instrument fall into decline in their younger years.

Accordion in Media and Pop Culture

In the blanket of American popular culture, the accordion has gained a stigma that it is the stuff of schmaltz and housed in unserious music. The instrument accompanies comic relief scenes in film, and it also appears in acting caricatures such as Steve Erkul and the parodies by Weird Al Yankovic. On the comedy screen, the accordion is associated with the unhip and uncool and relegated to the territory of nerd characters. In comic films, it provides a funny moment, in more serious films like *The Godfather*, the accordion represents Italian American culture.²⁰⁴ Then in films such as *Amelie*, the sound of the instrument helps to set a time and space for audiences to gain a feel of the environment and settings featured.²⁰⁵

The Decline

Accordions...you saw them in every music store in the 50s. But then slowly, but surely, no. They started going because people weren't taking up the accordion. They were taking up the guitar. So, the accordion started to lose its presence in music stores, to the point where some music stores wouldn't even have an accordion. Or they might have an accordion, but there was someone trying to sell it.

- Dominic Palmisano (74), former president of SFAC

²⁰⁴ Paramount Pictures Corporation., Francis Ford Coppola, Albert S Ruddy, Marlon Brando, Al Pacino, James Caan, Richard Castellano, et al. *Mario Puzo's The Godfather (1972)*. Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2001.

²⁰⁵ For a thorough review of the accordion and its placement in French cinema, see: Stilwell, Robynn. *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-Existing Music in Film*. Oxfordshire, OK: Taylor and Francis, 2017.

Various myths and stereotypes tend to swirl around the possible reasons as to why the accordion fell out of fashion. It seemed there was a gradual trend to move away from the accordion to the guitar over time. A great example of this is the little-known fact that the British music magazine *NME (New Musical Express)* was first called the *Accordion Times*, and later the *Musical Express incorporating the Accordion Times*. Established in 1935, the magazine was dedicated primarily to accordion festivals and performers, whereas the editors included articles about other musical events happening in London. By 1952, the NME dropped the accordion part of their name altogether:

The accordion coverage was gradually phased out: first reduced to a single column, it was then excised altogether, and the *Accordion Times* dropped from the name. By the end of the decade, Long writes, *Musical Express* had become Britain's largest weekly music paper—leaving the country's accordion fans, whoever they were, forced to look elsewhere for their windjammer coverage.²⁰⁶

Bob Dylan and the Fender Revolution

In my research, many of my interviewees made statements about the onset of the guitar in popular culture, and the advancements and changes in direction for rock and pop genres. Following is an excerpt from my conversation with Karl Klement, owner and CEO of American Music Company.

Monica: What do you think led to the decline of the accordion in the United States?

Karl: Well, I can say, The Beatles and the popularity of the guitar...it just was easy to handle and cheaper. So that's why the guitar was so popular.

²⁰⁶ Natasha Frost, "How a craze for accordion music gave us NME," March 7, 2018, accessed March 5, 2024, <http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/accordion-times-nme-craze-musical-express>.

Monica: Did you see that your sales in accordions went down for a specific time?

Karl: Yeah

Monica: And when was that?

Karl: Oh, goodness. I'm gonna' say this is a guess. Now. I'm gonna' say about 1960.

- Klement, Karl. Interview by Monica Ambalal, February 4, 2021. Zoom with transcript, personal collection, Oregon State.

The former SFAC president Dominic Palmisano also noted a drop in the popularity of the accordion in his interview:

Monica: Are there any other reasons why you think the accordion declines in the 50s? Or 60s?

Dominic: I think it declined in the late 50s. Once the guitar took center stage, because up until then guitar was not a real lead instrument. And then with the advent of, like I said, Bill Haley, Elvis Presley, Beatles, the accordion and Frank Sinatra went down at the same time. Yeah.

- Dominic Palmisano (74), former president of SFAC

In my experience, scholars and hobbyists alike tend to cite the 1965 Newport Folk Festival as a key date that led to the decline of folk music and a switch to electronic mediums in music.²⁰⁷ During that show in the summer, Bob Dylan famously used an electric guitar in his set - causing a bit of an uproar and controversy. The guitar was cheap, portable, and lighter than an accordion, and by the end of the 1950s, it was featured in bands appearing on television and in

²⁰⁷ For references, see: Lofton, Kathryn. "Dylan Goes Electric Religion and Race in Rock's Secularizing Event." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33 no 2 (2021): 31–50.
See: Wald, Elijah. *Dylan Goes Electric!: Newport, Seeger, Dylan, and the Night That Split the Sixties*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2015.
See: Davidson, Mark and Parker Fishel. *Bob Dylan: Mixing up the Medicine*. New York: Callaway, 2023.

concerts. There were aggressive marketing campaigns hosted by Fender, along with their variety of instruments, which included a range of base-price student models. In the 1960s, the standard type of band viewed on American television was a quartet or trio style with a bass, drummer, and guitars to support. The accordion was not typically featured on television as a solo instrument in a rock band, nor was it afforded the same air time as a guitar. According to Bruce Triggs, author of *Accordion Revolution*, sales and interest in learning the accordion also declined over the decades:

As late as 1960, there were still one hundred thousand accordions sold every year in the United States. By 1976, sales were down to thirteen thousand. The following year the industry journal *Music USA* stopped reporting on accordion sales at all, simply folding them into “miscellaneous other instruments.” There were still a million accordion players in the U.S., but by the mid-1970s they were older, with an average age of thirty. Meanwhile, there were ten million guitarists and rising, with a median age of twenty-one.²⁰⁸

While the decline was well in effect by the 1970s, the instrument experienced a slow resurgence in the 1990s. Then, in a remarkable turnaround, the accordion saw a small renaissance of sorts in the Bay Area as the accordion was made popular by local bands like Those Darn Accordions and Bella Ciao, and also voted to be the official instrument of San Francisco. Through my interviews and readings about the San Francisco board approval process for the accordion to be the official instrument, I observed the mistaken assumption that the accordion being invented in the city was heavily associated with the support garnered for the process by accordion aficionados and music lovers. In Dominic Palmisano’s

²⁰⁸ Bruce Triggs, reply in *The Accordionists Forum*, accessed February 13, 2020, <http://www.accordionists.info/threads/accordions-popular-again-in-all-of-usa-since-1950.5616/page-4>.

excellent recollection of the board meeting, he recounts the many contenders that came forth to persuade Mayor Art Agnos (mayor from 1988-1992) and the board of supervisors that their instrument should be approved:

Dominic: There was a lot of protests about making the accordion the official instrument. The foghorn players showed up. They wanted the foghorn to be the official instrument, and who is the guy in San Francisco, he represented the guitar, he thought the guitar should be the official instrument of San Francisco. And he was the guy... that famous name, all these events, all the rock and roll events of the 60s.

Monica: It's not Bill Graham, right?

Dominic: Yeah, it was Bill Graham. Everybody showed up. But we didn't realize that. We didn't realize that the cable car bell ringers were going to show up, we didn't realize that the foghorn people were going to show up. We didn't realize that Bill Graham was going to show up and ask that it shouldn't be the accordion. But we came there with a tremendous amount of history why it should be the official instrument because there were seven factories started [since] 1906.

Dominic: We were prepared because the one who really prepared the presentation was from Those Darn Accordions, Tom Torriglia was the one that really organized it. Wow. He came in and made a tremendous... about half a dozen of us spoke. Now that I just remember, we all spoke about, you know, playing the accordion and how it became an important part of my community and the Excelsior district. So I remember, you know going on the stand, it was like a court going up there and telling my story.

- Dominic Palmisano (74), former president of SFAC.
Interviewed via Zoom, April 17, 2021

According to Dominic, there was quite a turnout of supporters for the accordion to become the official city instrument. The board document was never actually signed by Mayor Agnos, but it was approved by the amount of "ayes" during the meeting, and according to local governing policies, the resolution would be official after 30 days. The initial whereas statements consider the significance of the Italian community in San Francisco: "whereas Finau Piatanesi was awarded

medals for craftsmanship in a musical instrument at the 1915 World's Fair," and "whereas Dick Contino, the most famous accordionist in the world today studied and began his career in San Francisco."²⁰⁹ In examining the board documents, I observed that the accordion was indeed recognized as a piece of art and, at the same time, as an instrument of cultural significance for the Bay Area and to some extent the local Italian community.

²⁰⁹ See Appendix IV to view the board document.

Chapter 3: Oral Histories of Persons Aged 80 and Above

In my quest to discover the ways in which the accordion and its popularity changed through time, I decided to interview a number of people in various age groups to better understand how their study of the accordion began and whether or not they received support to pursue their instrument of choice. In this project, I had originally thought to only interview people of Italian descent as this is an integral part of the subject matter, but later I also saw it was important to consider people from outside the Italian American community to receive multiple viewpoints. I began interviewing the oldest generations first since the age factor proved to be a matter of urgency to collect those oral histories first. The initial age range was people in their mid-to late 80s, but I soon realized I had a number of nonagenarians and decided the first target would be to interview people 90 and above, and then I would move to those aged 85, and so on. I was warned repeatedly by a known and anonymous scholar that I should not take everything shared by this age group as factual since they likely “forgot everything and will make it up.” I was also told that people’s memories are not very good past 80 and that I was going to be interviewing people who wanted to “rehash nostalgia.”²¹⁰ While I did take heed of those statements, what I soon realized was that the interviews of the oldest generations in my fieldwork provided me with details

²¹⁰ Both statements were made to me in conversation by a seasoned scholar.

about how the accordion community once existed in the Bay Area. Their memories were very intact and all persons interviewed had the capacity to speak and remember minute details that left me amazed. Their histories informed me of the economies of North Beach and the popularity and demand of the accordion as they grew up in Oakland and San Francisco. I was then able to connect a number of names they mentioned to my own research. Those names that had shown up in newspapers, music shop advertisements, and Orpheum theater reviews were discussed throughout most of my interviews, and it facilitated my research. In the next few pages, I share some of the interviews I conducted with people in these age groups to demonstrate how their experience of hearing and playing the accordion was unique growing up in the Bay Area during the 1940s.

Ed Massolo (1924-2024)

One of my older interlocutors in the project was Edward Carl Massolo. Ed grew up in an Italian family living in Oakland on 450 McAuley Street. His parents came from Italy. His dad Pietro (Pete) and mother Justina were from Piemonte. They arrived in Oakland in 1923. His parents farmed walnuts and pears on their 15-acre farm in Walnut Creek and later they moved to Oakland. He began playing the accordion at the age of nine when he started on a 48-bass model. By the age of 14, he was in a band with his father (The Piemonte Band) and he left to serve in the U.S. Air Force in 1941. In Ed's interviews, I was able to learn more about how the accordion and Italian families functioned in the 1930s and 40s in

the East Bay. To this point, most of my interlocutors grew up in North Beach, but Ed was working as a grocery store driver in Oakland, and playing accordion gigs at night. Below is a transcript from my interview with Ed in his home in South San Francisco.²¹¹

The room where we interview is upstairs in his house. The room contains two desks, and the one on the left has a black Sonola accordion resting on it. Above it is a large painting with a crocheted frame of a Boeing B-17 colloquially known as the "Flying Fortress." The other desk has a microfiber American flag blanket hanging above it. I see a shelf of military history books, the same Petosa Accordion book I have, an Italian dictionary, and his collection of campaign ribbons in a frame. I see a Purple Heart medal and a number of family photos. A separate backstory here is that Ed was a POW in WWII. His plane was shot down over Germany in 1945, and he shared with me a separate part of his life on a different occasion from the transcript you see here. I mention it here so the reader may follow up on Ed's journey as his family has plans to write a forthcoming story.

Ed: By the time he got to Oakland, and there were sections of, they were primarily Italian or French or Armenian or whatever. They seemed to form their own little groups and in Oakland where I was at, we were a group of maybe 18 or 20 Italian couples that had kids like us but it never failed that on Saturday, if you were free, we used to meet at one person's house or the next person's house. So we always gather and of course, when I learned to play the accordion (I played too) -first of all I played a lot of the Italian songs that now I don't know if I can still remember a lot of them- but a lot of the Italian stuff that I played.. and we formed that band. And for a number of years, we played at weddings or picnics. I made enough money playing that I bought me a new accordion from Colombo and Sons. At that time, I got this. It wasn't the professional model but it was full size and I only paid \$135 for it. But if you bought a Colombo, you know you had the jewel, which I didn't get until years after when I came back from the Air Force. Professionally, that was my accordion.

Monica: And I guess the part of this that I'm trying to understand is you were growing up in that Italian section of Oakland...

Ed: Every Saturday... or Sunday... depends on the people but while the rest of the kids are up playing ball with the girls, and everybody is outside I had that damn accordion and I had to sit there and play hour after hour. When it was all done they would pass the hat around, and the cheapskates put a quarter or four bits or something, but it was something.

²¹¹ I interviewed Ed Massolo on August 22, 2023, at his home in South San Francisco, CA.

At this point, I realized that Ed's \$135 Columbo accordion would likely cost upwards of \$2,000 today, and that is only for a base model. I also considered how his section of McCauley Street was not necessarily a Little Italy type of enclave, but that the area had multiple ethnic groups living in small clusters. For Ed, that is how he remembered his version of Oakland growing up, and it was similar to Lou DiMaggio's story (presented next) who mentioned to me about how everyone just sort of got along in one area. The neighborhood and community aspect is something that I notice has changed now in my own experience as someone performing. I do not have the accessibility of a familial neighborhood where I would be invited to play at someone's house, let alone expected to as part of a weekend. For the interviewees in their 90s, it seemed this community practice was commonplace. Ed continued below to tell me about his first accordion gigs.

As a teenager I got a steady job. Now I had this accordion already. And we lived in Oakland at 450 McCauley Street. in Oakland, California. I got a job playing a bar in Orinda, so at 15 or 16, I was already driving and I had a license. I drove like a truck. My family bought it, I didn't have a car, no. The reason I got to drive was because I got a job while I was in high school with the grocery store on the corner of McCauley Street there and he hired me to drive - this is 1937 - drive to all of the groceries to deliver them. I'd never gotten behind the wheel. So he put me in this brand new delivery car. And I drove that thing around. It cost him a transmission and many other things because I ground gears and everything else. At first he went with me, but my father wasn't a drinker, so he used to tell me "be careful." I used to love to drive that big car because it was heavy, and 60, 70, 80 miles an hour from Oakland to Orinda, and I hit the bar and I didn't make so much of wages, I figured what it was - \$8 or \$10 wages. But by tips, they would ask me to play songs and I would play and they would give you 50 cents or \$1. And with that I made a little bit of money.

As Ed continued to tell me about his first job, and the surroundings of his home, I decided to drive to the area and see what stands there now. Today, when you pass

by McAuley, his house still remains, but the grocery store is long gone and it is replaced by a security company on the corner of McAuley and Telegraph. Ed reminded me during our interview that it would be near impossible to have a job like that for such a young person today - especially in a bar that teens are not permitted to frequent. Still, once more I made the comparison as my own teacher Lou Jacklich had shared with me how he began his own bar gigs at the age of 14. Lou LeBrun had to be accompanied by her parents to some of her teenage gigs in the Los Angeles area. I have not personally heard of that kind of access today for a young person to play in a setting where alcohol is served, but this is another way in which the change in local laws prevents younger people from playing or earning money in a bar setting.

Monica: So you were kind of busking, you were playing some accordion on the side. So besides that bar, were there any other places that you played when you were young? Do you remember parties?

Ed: I can tell you this as a young student probably in my... 10, 12, 13 years old, I don't know how that came about but somebody was having a deal on the radio and they asked me to play on KYA.²¹² And I did, and I muffed it up so badly. That was my rare experience working in front of the public. I can remember the song I played... da da..da-da-da-da. It's still a standard now.

We could not come up with the song, but Ed continues onto a different topic about his teacher and the large studios he remembered being a part of in the early 1940s.

Ed: During my time in the early 20s, if you were Italian over here, you had to play the accordion. All the Italian boys had to play an accordion, and we did. These people like the Pezzolo brothers, I don't know if you have ever seen these big pictures of 140, 150 accordions?

Monica: I have yeah.

²¹² In Ed's time, the station was located in San Francisco. Today, it is known as KSFB 1260 AM and it operates as a Catholic-based talk and broadcast station.

Ed: Well, we went through all of that. John Molinari used to have his own students and the Pezzolo's had their own students. The one in Oakland was Ralph. And he's the one I knew well. I played some jobs with him. Filled in for him. We got along pretty nice. One of his brothers was in San Francisco here. His whole house was shaped like an accordion. I don't know if you have pictures.

Ed's retelling of his time reinforced the facts that I found in my own research about the large studios and the accordion club picnics featuring upwards of 200 accordion students. From Ed's story, I am able to discern some of the ways people were paid for their work, where they played, and who they studied with. Many of the same names mentioned in his interview appear in others. Much like Ed, in the majority of my interviews, subjects documented the accordion as something they heard in the neighborhood or within a specific space in their own home. They experienced the sound and attached it to a locality through their memory.

Lou DiMaggio

I met Lou through another friend in the accordion club community. When I was inquiring about Italian accordion players in the Bay Area, they immediately referred me to him and we hit it off through an initial three-hour phone call. Since that interview, I have had other opportunities to meet with Lou at picnics and club meetings. He would often ask me about my practice and inquire about the songs I was learning. Lou is a cousin of the famed baseball player Joe DiMaggio who played for the New York Yankees. During our interview, he made it clear to me that he sometimes encountered people who only spoke to him because of that connection, and in his younger musical competition years, the topic was brought

up as an advertising bit. I made sure to stay on task as I inquired about Lou's early playing and his time touring. In the transcript below, Lou shares details of his neighborhood which also became a space for collective and lived experiences among his families - similar to Ed's story. See Lou DiMaggio's interview below as he begins with his experience growing up in Pittsburg, CA. Located 40 miles northeast of San Francisco, Pittsburg is an industrial suburb, and today Lou currently resides there.²¹³

Lou: I grew up in Pittsburg, California. I was born and raised in Pittsburg, California, went to school, graduated from high school in Pittsburg, California. I lived here all my life although I traveled a lot due to my accordion experience but I'm back here in Pittsburg, and I'll probably die here, be buried here (chuckles) but that's okay.

I'm from an Italian family. We lived on the west side of Pittsburg and there was an Italian faction there. And everybody knew everybody. Everybody was very, very cordial and happy and we were poor in that neighborhood. We had different ethnic people living in that neighborhood. We had Spanish and Jewish and Puerto Ricans and Blacks and Italians, and you name it. We all lived happily in that neighborhood. We all helped each other. And I remember when I was a little kid, I used to hear accordion music in the air and it was a fella by the name of Jimmy Rizzo that played the accordion he was practicing and I could hear it, you know, I could hear the music. And on Sundays, usually in those days when I was a little fella we would go out visiting our relatives. And on Sunday, one Sunday, we visit my uncle and aunt, which we normally do, and then we visit other uncles and aunts and grandparents and so forth on a Sunday and while I was at my aunt's house, my cousin my first cousin, his name was Vince DiMaggio played the accordion and I was listening to him in awe and I go, "wow, that is, that's a neat-looking instrument." And I remember hearing that sound in the neighborhood. So after we visited with my uncle and aunt we went home, I said to my mom, I said, "jeez I would like to play that and accordion like cousin Vince does." So she says, "Oh, you really would huh?" So she looked up an accordion teacher in Pittsburg by the name of Emilio Cirita. He was from Italy, and spoke broken English and he taught accordion and in those days, accordion was very, very popular.

²¹³ Interview by Monica Ambalal, March 15, 2021, via phone recording.

Similar to Ed Massolo's recollection of his neighborhood, Lou was able to paint the picture of how he lived as a young boy into his teenage years learning the accordion with great detail. I also noticed that it was through his family members that he first found the desire to play, and he continued to discuss the mechanics of learning to play below:

Lou: (Cirita) had many accordion students. He started me off with a 12-bass, you know how they started the bass? You hit the C and you hit a chord and go 123,123 and on your right hand with you hit C and you go 123 on C and then you hit D 123, and D hit the base chord. You go down the scale as you push and pull, push and pull. And that's how I started with a 12-bass. And then we went to 4/4 time and we played C bass, C chord twice, and then we jumped up to G would get third finger and hit C chord twice.

Lou: And so then I was taught to play songs in 4/4 time, and so by learning waltzes and learning 4/4 time signatures, I started playing the accordion on a 12-bass. Well, that wasn't sufficient enough, so the accordion teacher told my dad, "you know, he's outgrown this 12-bass accordion, and you have to buy him a regular accordion." I was just a little guy, so my father went to San Francisco, we went to North Beach, and there were a lot of music stores there, and they sold accordions. Everybody sold accordions. Sears and Roebuck even sold accordions through the catalog in those days, it was very, very popular. And so my dad bought me a little white accordion. It was small enough for me to handle, and it had 41 keys and 120-bass. So I was able to play that, and I continued with my lessons with Emilio Cirita in Pittsburg, and I learned different accordion solos, he would tell me to push here and press here. (His way) that was called rote accordion teaching. He never taught me any harmony, never taught me any theory, never taught me any technique. So I really didn't know what I was doing. And I could play all the songs, and I played them very well, you know, but I really didn't know anything about the harmony or chord progressions. And I didn't know anything about arpeggios and scales or nothing. I just learned how to press the keys on the right-hand side, press the keys on the left-hand side, and push and pull, and out came music. Right? (Chuckles).

Monica: So, how old were you when you first performed?

Lou: I must have been about 10.

Monica: Okay, I have to ask these two questions. So you said you learned by rote which yes I'm aware and I like that system as well. Did you ever use any books in those early lessons?

Lou: No, no. What he did with my early lessons, he would write things out on his desk. Then he'd put them on the stand. He says, "okay, play this, play that." And then he would have a book of songs, different songs, you know. And some, some of them were classical things, heavy duty stuff. I just played by rote. I didn't know what I was doing. But I got through the songs and everything I did as well. And, and that's how I started with my accordion.

In Lou's retelling of his early lessons on the accordion, it is apparent that Mr. Cirita rarely used sheet music with Lou, and instead he taught him through methods of observation. Lou is unique to all of the other participants in my research as all other students in his age group played using sheet music and accordion book series. One benefit of being removed from the written notation is that Lou was able to advance through multiple songs and he felt comfortable performing at a younger age, and demonstrated a slightly more advanced level in comparison to others I interviewed. As Lou continued in his story, he told me about the opportunities he had to play, and how he began his journey as a young performer.

And then what happened was, people heard that I could play pretty good and so every time we had company over the house, my mother and father would say, "play the accordion." So I'd play the accordion for my relatives and friends and so forth. And there was a police officer in Pittsburg, that just loved kids who were talented singers and dancers and performers and so forth. So he started a little vaudeville show for the local talent in Pittsburg. And he called it the George Eastwood Troupe. His name was George Eastwood - he was a police officer. So he called my mother and father and says, "you know, I would like to have Lou join my troop and play, we play for the Elks clubs and the Moose clubs and service clubs and around and so forth. It'd be a good experience for him to play." So folks said "okay, fine." So I would play and there would be singers from Pittsburg and dancers and jugglers and cartoonists as matter of fact, there was a little kid that could really do fantastic cartoons, and the dancers and so forth and so on. So I got the experience of playing in front of people with the George Eastwood Troupe when I was 11 and 12 by that time, or 13. And then he decided he was going to take us out on a tour of Nevada, of the Elks clubs. Well, that was my first experience and signing autographs and performing on a road trip.

And then from then on, when I was getting older about 13 or 14, I started competing around the area to earn \$5 or \$10 and so forth. And I would always win and I was making money and I thought, “wow, this is pretty good.” And then there was a fella who had talent shows that would audition kids. It was called Eddie's Advert show. And he would make these trailers, what they used to call trailers, and they would use these traveling movie houses, between movies, they would show these advertisements, in those days that's how they would advertise in the theater. And so he would get these merchants from all over Northern California to advertise in theaters. And he would make a couple of bucks, I guess. And he would have these talent shows in different theaters. So, I started competing in these Eddie Advert talent shows in between movies when I was 14 or 15, I guess, and I kept winning \$16. If you were winning... boy, that was a lot of money.

For Lou, earning money was made through winning competitions. In Lou's memory he recalled practicing daily, performing solos, and still not being able to read at a good level until he met his teacher Angelo Cagnazzo (discussed later in this chapter). Still, he continued to achieve success because he was comfortable with his instrument, and he didn't see the need at the time to train more seriously.

I remember I didn't know how to play all these difficult things. But I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know one chord from another and didn't know progressions or anything. And I didn't know any other kinds of music. I played a little a couple of classical tunes when I was younger, and that went over okay, but all these other flashy accordion solos were better, you know, like “Lady of Spain,” “Dizzy Fingers,” and so forth and so on “Tico, Tico.”²¹⁴ Yeah, so those, that I learned because they're flashy, and they were very impressive if you played them well.

- Lou DiMaggio, Pittsburg, CA.

For most of the oral histories I conducted, the person always recalled more about their surroundings than they did the exact songs. The tunes instead became a springboard for us to discuss the buildings they visited, and the costs incurred

²¹⁴ “Lady of Spain” is a song composed in 1931 by Tolchard Evans. It was later popularized by Dick Contino for the accordion. “Dizzy Fingers” is a song by Armenian composer Edward Elzear “Zez” Confrey from 1923. “Tico-Tico no fubá” is a Brazilian *choro* song composed by Zequinha de Abreu in 1931.

for lessons, meals, or travel. On multiple occasions, I heard about why the person started playing accordion, and they almost always returned to the idea of family members playing and hearing it in their neighborhood. The interviews proved invaluable when speaking about the scenes and memories that the participants were able to recall. I was fortunate to hear from all of my interlocutors about how they learned to play, and why they were inspired. In most of the interviews, performers noted they were encouraged by their family members to play instruments.

You know, when they got here, they didn't have any money or enough to eat, let alone buy instruments. My dad says, "I want you to take lessons for the clarinet." What? I couldn't stand that licorice stick, and I just don't want this. So he put it down. (Later, Ed chose to play the accordion).²¹⁵

- Ed Massolo (99), South San Francisco, interlocutor and performer

My father played when he was a boy, and they took lessons. In school, I wanted to play and they had a band guy come, I wanted to play the clarinet, and I got dizzy. And I got sick. So my dad said [I should] play the accordion and I started. He took us for lessons to the Pezzolo brothers. Remember the Pezzolos? I went to John and he was in the Excelsior district of San Francisco, which was heavily Italian, and my brother and I started playing there. And we were like, 10, 11. We went to the studio on Mission of San Francisco. They had that house that looked like an accordion?²¹⁶

- Reno Di Bono (80), Cupertino, active performer and teacher

In addition to Reno, other performers such as Steve Pizzo and Dominic Palmisano also remembered the accordion studio of the Pezzolo brothers (see the house pictured in Appendix III). Ultimately, all participants remembered their

²¹⁵ Ed Massolo interviewed by Monica Ambalal, August 22, 2023.

surroundings and how it connected to their weekly lessons and they were able to recall their stories of how they began the process of finding an instructor as well.

Accordion Encounters: The Importance of Memory

For the ethnomusicologist, unraveling testimony about memory and affect helps construct a history of transmission and provides clues to conservation of tradition.²¹⁷

- Kay Kaufman Shelemay

Throughout much of my fieldwork process, I encountered audience members who remembered hearing the sounds of accordion when they were growing up and how the sound reminded them of their families or their teachers. The memories that were shared with me were so exacting in nature that I received detailed descriptions of how the sound provides a conduit for the listener to retrieve past experiences. When I asked SFAC member Don Savant about his first accordion, he remembered not only the accordion but his first instructor and the earliest recordings he played with his sister:

Don: I think it may have been a Hohner. You know, with a 12 bass, and then after getting one I'm sure the next thing was an Italian make which I can't quite recall. But I can tell you that my teacher was a woman named Mary Finley and she worked out of a studio in Oakland run by a guy with the last name of Meni-Ketti .

Monica: Orlando!²¹⁸

Don: Yes. Everybody knew Mr. Meni-Ketti. Yeah. And I could remember going to his - I think he had a place in downtown Oakland. And, you know, he played a song and we recorded it on an old (record player) and he recorded my sister

²¹⁷ Shelemay, "Music, Memory and History," 30.

²¹⁸ Orlando Meni-Ketti was a known accordion repairman and shop owner in Oakland from the 1940s-1970s. His name appeared throughout my research, and it was a nice surprise to hear him referenced in the oral histories.

singing with me on one of those old records, you know, so that was our introduction.

- Don Savant (84), Cupertino, SFAC member²¹⁹

Orlando Meni-Ketti's name appeared quite a bit in my research, but I was never directly tied to him as he had long passed away (1911-1997). Still, so many people referenced going into his shop in Oakland, taking lessons with him, and visiting the rows of accordions in the store. My own instructor Lou also recounted to me how he was hired by Orlando to teach lessons in the shop and earn a small commission when he was a teenager in the late 1940s. According to Lou, he would drive to Orlando's shop in downtown Oakland and teach accordion lessons after school in the shop. In a separate interview with Lou DiMaggio, he also referenced Orlando's name by mentioning he remembered Mr. Meni-Ketti's playing and that he also worked for him in the same capacity: "As a matter of fact, I worked for him, right out of high school. I worked for him selling accordions. He wanted me to show off the accordion, and then he would sell it."²²⁰ It seems that the model of representation worked for Mr. Meni-Ketti to boost accordion sales to a younger crowd in the 1950s and 60s. Hearing Orlando's name in a few of my interviews reminded me of the connections so many of the accordion students in this age group maintained, as they all were aware of many of the same accordion teachers.

²¹⁹ Interview via Zoom by Monica Ambalal, June 11, 2021.

²²⁰ Lou diMaggio of Pittsburg, CA. was interviewed via Zoom on March 15, 2021.

Beginning to Play

All I know is my father loved it. And he wanted me to play it so bad. And every Italian family that we knew, if they had a daughter or a son, (they) had to play the accordion. And so I was the chosen one as the oldest.

- Arleen (83), San Mateo, owner of an original Guerrini accordion.²²¹

We went to Caesar's on Columbus Avenue.

- Steve Pizzo (101), resident of North Beach, Sacramento, CA.²²²

One of the unique parts of speaking to people who had lessons during the Golden Age (1940s-1960s) is their memory of how lessons were conducted and how they acquired an accordion. In almost all cases, an instructor was already affiliated with a specific brand or they were sponsored by a manufacturer. Besides purchasing directly at the factory, the other route to acquire an instrument was to lease one. In the earlier days of studios in the Bay Area, the model of teaching and selling an accordion was through a leasing agreement. Although I have read about instances of door-to-door salesmen hawking cheaply-made student accordions, my interviewees all spoke of leasing instruments, often through department stores, which sold instruments and offered lessons in most major cities²²³

They (Columbo) actually made them, and so then it was the music stores that sold accordions, and most of the music stores on Columbus that sold accordions, taught accordion. They taught with somebody under the owners... either taught or they had a teacher that taught, and there must have been five that I remember.

- Lou diMaggio (91), former student of Angelo Cagnazzo. Pittsburgh, CA.

It was the teacher, one of his jobs, his or her jobs, and we had about six teachers - was to convince the parents that the child was doing well and they needed to buy

²²¹ Interview at Arleen's house in San Mateo September 22, 2022.

²²² Interview at Steve's house in Granite Bay, CA, July 25, 2021.

²²³ From Lou Lebrun's oral history depicting the Broadway Department store, Los Angeles c.1938.

a bigger accordion. And that's when we sold the accordions. And so the teachers, every time we sold an accordion, we got a \$25 bonus for selling your accordion.

- Lou LeBrun (89), former student of Anthony Galla-Rini. Springfield, MO.

According to the statements above, it was common knowledge for young accordion students that you could purchase an accordion through the shop or factory and then receive lessons with a teacher who represented the shop. Most of the accordions were offered for rentals or leases unless parents were ready and able to hand over a good sum of money for a full purchase. In the case of my own instructor, Lou Jacklich, his first teacher built accordions and sold them himself, thus removing any overhead or importing fees:

Monica: Do you remember your first teacher?

Lou: Sure I do. His name was Mr. Verwer. I was eight years old. He was in Oakland. He built me my first accordion, and it cost \$1000. That was a lot of money back in those days. He built probably fifteen to twenty accordions by hand.²²⁴

Most of the accordionists from that era that I interviewed remember having lessons for anywhere from \$1.00 to about \$2.00 for a half-hour lesson. For those who studied with someone known or accomplished, the fee was much higher. In Lou LeBrun's case, she studied with Anthony Galla-Rini (Italian American accordionist in the 1950s who helped to popularize the instrument on the radio and recordings), so her lessons were \$10 each. Since her parents could not afford to pay the hefty price, they sent her to study only once per month instead of the standard weekly lesson. In my interview with Lou DiMaggio, he mentioned a

²²⁴ April 13, 2024, during a phone interview with Lou Jacklich.

unique arrangement between himself and his teacher who saw such promise in the young student that he asked him to move in with his own family in San Francisco. In Lou's case, he was a young talent of extreme proficiency. He auditioned for the Horace Heidt show and won the local contest and \$50 and he was invited to be a permanent member of the show. He recounts his studies with Angelo Cagnazzo, one of the original members of the SFAC:

What he taught me was technique. But he didn't teach me harmony or theory, but the technique was fantastic. And so he told my father, he says, you know, your son has a lot of potential, he says, I would like to have him live with me. So that when he can practice during the day, and if he has any problems, he can come downstairs, and we can work out his part, go back upstairs, and practice. So, then my dad made a deal with them. I spent so much a month for my lessons and room and board, and they had a little room upstairs. At his house, he had a studio downstairs. And it was just a little room with a bed, a little tiny desk chair, and a window. And I would practice like from when I get up in the morning and have breakfast. And I would go upstairs and start practicing at about 8:30 or 9 o'clock to 12. And then came downstairs from lunch and practice from 1-5 PM, went down for dinner, and then practice from seven to nine. And I did that every day. Day in and day out. Many, many, many, many months. Whenever I had a problem, and I was just beside myself, he'd call me to come downstairs. I went downstairs, and he straightened me out, and I go back upstairs and worked out the problem and solved the problem.

- Lou diMaggio (91), former student of Angelo Cagnazzo.
Pittsburgh, CA.

For Lou DiMaggio, his style of learning was immersive. While Lou's experience with his instructor was unique compared to the more traditional weekly lesson format, he played on a daily basis and lived with Angelo in order to facilitate immediate questions and corrections in a tutor/teacher relationship. Being in that environment allowed Lou to develop rather quickly in his practice and he recounted to me that he enjoyed his lessons in that manner. Ed Massolo

also told me about how he switched his teacher in his teenage years as he had a different learning style and wanted to learn entire music pieces instead of work on them in parts:

Well, I started with teachers at age nine. Teachers only cost \$1 and a half for a weekly lesson, and I took from John Molinari Sr. who is a world renowned virtuoso. Later on, John Molinari Jr. was only maybe five or six years older than me. So he was young but he was a fantastic musician. He was known all over the world and he lived in the same area in Oakland then, I did too it wasn't too hard to take lessons. The only problem with John (junior) - and I got the basics of the accordion too - but he would give you a song say for instance, *Trieste Overture*, which is nine or ten pages long; he would give you a page at a time and until you could play each page, page six, page seven, by heart you wouldn't get a new page. Well, I was annoyed with that and of course, I wanted more American music standards. So I switched from John after several years. Ok, and I went to Meni-Ketti.²²⁵

Everyone in my interviews carried on a specific technique from a prior era that was taught to them. In a sense, the performers in my interviews embodied a memory and process of the teachers who came before them. Lou DiMaggio's teacher, Angelo Cagnazzo (1894-1955), was one of the founding members of the SFAC from 1916. He arrived in the United States on April 6, 1912, from Dogliani in the Piemonte region of Italy.²²⁶ Since he was 18 upon arrival, his learning of accordion likely began sometime at the turn of the century, and he likely learned or witnessed accordion performance from someone who personally experienced the *Risorgimento*. Today, when Lou DiMaggio plays, he is playing with and through that historical knowledge from Angelo that he gained from a young age

²²⁵ Interview with Ed Massolo at his home in South San Francisco, August 22, 2023.

²²⁶ Provided in association with National Archives and Records Administration California, U.S National Federalization records 1888-1991.

when he began playing. With each iteration of instruction comes a new adapted style, information, knowledge, and praxis. This is what Seremetakis refers to as “re-perception,” where memory is intertwined with the senses to create new iterations of each process.²²⁷ In my own experience, my instructor Lou Jacklich (1928-1924) handed down a personal knowledge to me: “You know, you were one of his last students, and you were fortunate to study with him and receive his experience and his teachings. He was one of the last vaudeville players, and he passed his knowledge onto you.”²²⁸ My interlocutor Pamela was correct in her observation. He began learning the accordion at the age of seven under the “guidance of his own father, Louis G. Jacklich, and his uncle Rudolph Jacklich, who both played the instrument.”²²⁹ When I play, I am now performing another type of Lou’s sound, and when I teach it to a student in the future, they will carry on his sound and my sound, too. The sound is being passed forward as an iterative history that combines to inform the current version of the accordion sound I play today.

Remembering Lou Jacklich

“Having lost our cherished member Lou Jacklich a little over a week ago, not surprisingly, we reminisced on his life and how we had all learned from this master accordionist and teacher who had had over 1000 students, all treated as if they were aspiring professional musicians. Joseph created and displayed a beautiful banner, which was to have celebrated Lou’s upcoming 96th birthday in August. During the intermission, we celebrated Lou’s life with reminiscences. I

²²⁷ Nadia C. Seremetakis, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 9.

²²⁸ Paraphrased from a conversation with Pamela Tom after Lou’s passing in May of 2024.

²²⁹ “MACR Honorees and Accordions Bought in their Honor,” *Innovative Accordion Music Productions (IAMP)*, accessed May 17, 2024, <http://innovativeaccordion.org/macr-honorees>.

noted how much we had been inspired by Lou through his music, wisdom, and generosity and how much we had all learned from him, including those of us who hadn't been students. Scott Anderson, a long-time student of 25 years, noted Lou had had a long, fulfilling life and that it was a privilege to have known him. Lou valued and generously supported the Club, desiring that it successfully continue its mission.”

- SFAC Newsletter written by President Ken Schwartz, June 2024

In early May when I had just finished typing my last sentence of the second draft of this project, I received a call from my interlocutor Pamela Tom that my teacher Lou Jacklich died. It was about 9:00 at night, and while she was focused on giving me the details of what transpired, I was so fixated on how I wanted him to remain with us just a few months more so he could see the result of all the work we put in during lessons and our talks. Lou worked in the Orpheum circuit, played at nightclubs, and worked extensively in Alameda, Oakland, and San Francisco. In his studio, a frame of an official letter from the White House shows a certificate of thanks for Lou's dedication to his country through his achievements on his 90th birthday. On the wall is displayed a black and white photo of him at age fourteen with jazz arranger Billy Strayhorn. He told me how he joined the Local 6 at fourteen years old and had twelve agents at one point in his career.²³⁰ He released an album on Columbia Records in 1962 and had enough demand as a performer and teacher that he lived off of his earnings as a full-time musician throughout his lifetime. His style of playing demonstrated an exact nuance where he carefully thought about how the dynamics affect the left hand and how the bellows' air can change one's sound. He was also excellent at

²³⁰ Musicians Union Local 6 is based in San Francisco.

incorporating musical jokes into an excerpt - another holdover from his time on the theater and nightclub stage. During my lessons, Lou told me stories of his time on tours and recounted life in the Bay Area in the 1950s. As an interlocutor, Lou was a valuable asset in this project in that his knowledge and experience helped to inform my scholarship concerning the Italian communities of San Francisco since he worked with or knew of all the major players in my own research.

Lou knew about my project, and he understood that I was in graduate school, but he still never reconciled the idea that I wanted to write about him, much less interview him. In fact, over the past five years, he often put off our interview and told me to take him to get a steak and an old-fashioned at a local restaurant in San Leandro, called Harry's Hoffbrau, instead. Rather than have a single interview, he always gave me permission to record our lessons, and he agreed to be quoted and posted on social media. It is through our weekly lessons that I was able to gather information about his accordion story. While there was not one specific set of questions answered, his stories unfold over 150 hours of taped lessons. In our lessons, I was told about Vince Cirelli's accordion repair shop and his first job at Orlando's in Oakland. I was also informed of how he was the first student in his high school to own a car because he was earning money from night gigs by the age of 12. Those lessons will always remain in my memory, and I am thankful for all of the information he shared, as it also contributed to the accordion story I retell here through other's memories. In a

newsletter written by SFAC president Ken Schwartz, he reflects upon the life of our teacher Lou Jacklich:²³¹

“Dear All – It is with the deepest heart that I must inform you that our cherished colleague, Lou Jacklich, passed away on May 6, 2024, after a brief illness. He would have turned 96 in August!

Lou Jacklich, affectionately known as “Mr. Jacklich” or “Maestro Jacklich,” was an extraordinary individual whose accordion career spanned a remarkable 80 years. He remained a vibrant performer and teacher to the end! A virtuoso and innovator from a young age, Lou starred with numerous bands, recorded as an artist for Capitol Records, founded his own accordion school, and was one of the first accordionists to master the new electronic accordions. Lou was a distinguished teacher, performer, and contributor to the accordion community and was recognized nationwide with multiple meritorious awards.

Lou was a valued mentor, teacher, and member of the San Francisco Accordion Club. He led the Club’s jam sessions, always instructing, of course. His many wonderful performances before the club were testimony to his mastership of the instrument, and his duets with his students were nothing short of riveting! Mr. Jacklich’s solo performance of “Holiday for Strings” has always been one of my favorites.

Mr. Jacklich recently made an extremely generous donation to the San Francisco Accordion Club to further its musical programs, scholarships, and outreach to the public (SFAC newsletter, April 2024).

Mr. Jacklich’s surviving family includes 2 children, Pam and Mark, grandchildren and great-grandchildren; his extended family includes over 1000 former students. Teaching was the joy of his life! In fact, his last formal teaching lesson was just 3 weeks ago; he was pleased with the student’s lesson!

Lou touched so many lives during his time with us. He will be deeply missed. May you rest in peace, Lou.”

Ken Schwartz

²³¹ Newsletter of the SFAC. June, 2024.

One part of the histories and stories that continue to come up in club conversations and various newsletters is the fact that Lou saw the need for sustainability with the accordion and wanted to ensure that the club would survive to provide a future space for young music enthusiasts. He often asked me what I was planning to do with the accordion when I was older. When I replied that I would like to spend about 15 more years learning it before I begin teaching one day, he would answer with a firm “that’s good.” He supported both the club and the Cotati Accordion Festival personally as a performer and financially as a donor. One of his favorite events was the Cotati Accordion Student Scholarship stage program (CASS), and he enjoyed attending the event to witness young people performing each year.²³² While he was conscious of the future and the importance of children learning the instrument and of me teaching it, Lou was also knowledgeable of the vast history of the accordion’s establishment in San Francisco. Lou was also keenly aware of its place in vaudeville since he was among the last accordion performers on the West Coast Orpheum circuit.

Memories of Past and Present: Juxtaposing Guido Deiro and Lou Jacklich

In the 1860s, the area that stretched along Pacific from Stockton to Montgomery was known as The Barbary Coast. The area was considered seedy, corrupt, and known for its criminal activity, gambling halls, and brothels. While there were some music halls in the neighborhood, they were soon destroyed in the

²³² Noted in general conversation with Pamela Tom.

1906 earthquake. The area was then rebuilt with the moniker “Terrific Street” for its affiliation with multiple vices and music halls like the Thalia (c. 1920s) and the Hippodrome (1900s-1930s). These theaters, included on the three blocks of the current Pacific Avenue, played a range of entertainments from orchestras, dance bands, and gramophones.²³³ This area acted as a precursor to the Vaudeville theaters that would come to populate the city in the early 20th century, and despite its connections to the underbelly of the city, “The Coast” managed to attract large names in jazz music like Jelly Roll Morton.²³⁴ In California, Vaudeville theaters had a heyday much later than their counterparts on the East Coast as the city had to contend with the interruptions of theater and music halls in 1906 due to the earthquake. Post-1906, San Francisco saw the construction of new Orpheum theaters, which meant more opportunities to host Vaudeville acts and attract new talent to the area.

He [played] to a crowd of several hundred people, and one of the people in that crowd was the father of the man who later built Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood, Sid Grauman, and he immediately booked Deiro, as he was known, popularized as Deiro, to the Vaudeville circuit. Dad had a huge Vaudeville career starting in 1910. He appeared all over the United States of America and was a headliner.

- Count Guido Roberto Deiro speaking about his father Guido Deiro in 2002.²³⁵

²³³ See the webpages assembled by FoundSF.org which contain a number of articles and photos donated by the San Francisco Public Library’s historical collection.

Daniel Steven Crafts, “The Barbary Coast,” in the *San Francisco Digital History Archive*, Shaping SF.org. Web access March 14, 2024, https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=BARBARY_COAST.

²³⁴ David Radlauer, “Jazz in San Francisco, 1916-1966: Pt. 1 From Terrific Street to Nob Hill,” *The Syncopated Times* (May 31, 2023), <https://syncopatedtimes.com/jazz-in-san-francisco-1916-66-pt1/>.

²³⁵ Guido Roberto Deiro, “My Varied Careers and Rewarding Life in Las Vegas.” interview with David G. Schwartz, January 20, 2022, University of Nevada - Las Vegas, 5. <https://special.library.unlv.edu/ark:/62930/d17659n45>

By the 1910s, Guido Deiro (first mentioned in Chapter 1) and Pietro Frosini were two of the largest accordion entertainers in the Bay Area. Frosini's name appears in many of the Orpheum programs posted in the Italian-language newspapers and he was featured on multiple Victor recordings at the turn of the 20th century.²³⁶ Throughout the literature, Guido was the highest-paid vaudevillian at \$600 when he was listed as a big-time act. Vaudeville was an attractive space for accordion players because their instruments were portable, and they could easily replace a band for half the cost.

²³⁶ "Pietro Frosini," Discography of American Historical Recordings, UC Santa Barbara, accessed April 29, 2025, https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/mastertalent/detail/112281/Frosini_Pietro.

Fig. 25: "Guido Deiro," *L'Italia* November 24, 1917. Translation by Francesca Macciardi Sharp.

<p>GUIDO DEIRO</p> <p>Il popolare artista dell'accordeon suscita il piu' vivo entusiasmo al Teatro Orpheum.</p> <p>Abbiamo già parlato che durante la corrente settimana uno dei numeri di quell'ottimo teatro di varietà che è l'Orpheum — forse il più ben organizzato teatro del genere in tutti gli Stati Uniti e forse nel mondo — viene eseguito dal signor Guido Deiro, il celebre maestro e potremmo dire mago dell'accordeon che da circa sette anni gira per gli Stati Uniti, cercato e ricercato dai primi teatri di varietà.</p> <p>L'Orpheum ha sempre dei programmi interessantissimi e quello della settimana corrente è indubbiamente uno dei migliori; si notano in esso delle vere celebrità che riscuotono calorosi applausi, ma constatiamo con piacere che il numero del nostro bravo Deiro è quello che desta il maggior entusiasmo e che crea un vero delirio nel pubblico che affolla tutti i giorni quel teatro. Sono tre le esecuzioni che il distinto artista dovrebbe fare; eppure quando ha finito scoppiano veri scricchi di applausi e si vuole un altro pezzo, finito il quale con nuovi insistenti applausi se ne domanda ancora un altro e così via finché il Deiro non abbia fatto altri quattro o cinque numeri oltre a quelli del programma.</p>	<p>Guido Deiro - The popular accordion artist is stirring up much enthusiasm at the Orpheum Theater.</p> <hr/>
	<p>We have already mentioned that during the current week, one of the performances at that excellent variety show theater that is the Orpheum - perhaps the most well-organized theater of its kind in all of the United States and maybe the world— is being performed by Mr. Guido Deiro, the celebrated maestro and may we say magician of the accordion, who for some seven years has been touring the United States, highly sought after by the best variety theaters.</p>
	<p>The Orpheum always has very interesting programs and this current one for the week undoubtedly is one of the best: there are real celebrities who are receiving warm applause, however, we are pleased to see that it is the performance of our good Deiro that is arousing the greatest enthusiasm and that is creating a real frenzy in the public that crowds that theater every day. The distinguished artist is meant to play three pieces, yet when he finishes, there have been big rounds of applause, and the audience has wanted another piece, and once that one is concluded, the audience has been asking for another with new insistent applause, and so on until Deiro has done another four or five numbers in addition to his program.</p>

The entertainment area thrived by the time of Prohibition in 1921, and in 1939, the area was named the International Settlement, so named with an arched sign that hovered over Pacific Street.

Fig. 26: International Settlement on the corner of Kearney and Pacific Streets, c. 1940s.²³⁷



The area continued as the center for dance halls, music venues, and bars until the 1950s when the entertainment hotbed of the city slowly shifted to the North Beach area. My own accordion teacher, Lou Jacklich, remembers his time working in these early San Francisco theaters as his agent contracted him out to work various nightclubs and restaurants in the area:

Monica: Did you ever play on that street that had all the bars and clubs? Terrific Street?

Lou: Oh, sure.

²³⁷ "International Settlement," the San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library, c.1940s, accessed July 17, 2024, <http://digitalsf.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A129010>.

Monica: There was the Hippodrome, and it was right near Columbus. There were seven or eight little theaters, so I just want to ask if you played or remember anything.

Lou: I played in a place on 20th and Mission. It was called the Hollywood Club. That was way back in the 40s. That would be one. We were there for a couple of months. There was a mess of clubs.

Monica: About how old were you?

Lou: About nineteen. It was a nightclub with entertainment, and there were three girls that were the Andrew Sisters or sang like the Andrew Sisters, there was a comedian on the show, and sometimes we had a magician. We had three acts, and the stage was above the public, it was like as high as that thing (Lou points to a shelf about five feet tall), that was the stage, and the public was down here, and the smoke was from up there to down here, you couldn't see the public sometimes. The smoke from cigarettes was that bad.

Monica: How many sets per day?

Lou: We played four hours, and we had 45 on and 15 off, is how it went. That was the union's specifications at that time. The Local 6. I had a clarinet, bass, or a drum (with me). Sometimes, we used a drum because we had dancers. The drum was a better background for the dancers. But the singers, we didn't want a drum, we wanted a bass for the singers.²³⁸

As documented in Lou's experience, the clubs were numerous, and he was an active member of a historical musician's union in San Francisco. His performances in these venues are significant in that his descriptions of spaces, patrons, and setlists strengthen the idea of how quickly neighborhoods in San Francisco changed and where accordion was and was not in demand by the 1960s and 1970s. According to Lou in a lesson on March 10th, 2023, he recounted to me how he would often change his setlists to adhere to specific parties and how his binders would be rearranged depending on the occasion of the party. For example, his binders for Italian parties and weddings in the 1960s soon became filled with

²³⁸ Documented April 9, 2023, in Lou Jacklich's studio during my lesson.

more popular tunes associated with American films. He showed me his “Moon River” arrangement, originally by Henry Mancini from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), and the arrangement of the “The Shadow of Your Smile” from *The Sandpiper* (1965). In his recollection, the wedding parties still requested many of the Italian songs to be played on the accordion, like “Santa Lucia” and “O sole mio,” but the younger generation at the wedding wanted to hear more popular songs, including tunes by The Beatles.

Chapter 4: Memory, Method, and Experiences of the Middle Generations, Aged 35-79

Throughout this project, I have maintained weekly accordion lessons since 2019. Although I had already had lessons and began playing over fifteen years ago, I felt that it was important for me as a writer of this process to fully immerse myself into the instrument to better orient myself with the practice and all of the experiences that come with hearing and movement of the body in an effort to create music. Being part of an accordion club and engaging in monthly jam sessions has only helped me to transfer the historical knowledge I learned in my research back to my informed practice and vice-versa. In doing and creating, I am able to become an active part of the community and someone who is making attempts to preserve the study of the instrument for future generations. In these meetings, I met many of the people in this section who were retired but also in an in-between stage where they remembered many of the people I spoke about from the 1950s, such as Orlando Meni-Ketti and Vince Cirelli Sr., for example.

In this next section, I consider the current group of performers, club members, and audience goes between the ages of 35 and 79. People in this age group grew up between the 1960s to the 1980s, and many began taking accordion in grade school and they returned to it later in retirement, or they picked up the instrument much later in life. The repair people interviewed at the end of this

chapter began repair by learning the accordion first. Their participation in repairing and caring for the accordion makes them an equally important part of the sustainability factor to help preserve the tradition of performance. They also help provide access to a number of people interested in accordion playing via care of the instruments they own and sell. I also visited a variety of festivals related to Italian Americans and accordions in the cities of Petaluma, Pittsburgh (CA), Stockton, Monterey, Lodi, San Jose, and San Francisco. During these festivals, I interviewed and surveyed attendees aged 35-79. I examine their experiences of accordion playing and accordion club membership here and in Chapter Five. These interviewees explained how they enjoyed the accordion at a time when the instrument lost its appeal and popularity on a mass scale. This group had different reasons for taking up the accordion in comparison to their senior counterparts in the accordion clubs. While some play because they like the sound or they grew up with it in their families, others desire community in the SFAC and enjoy the instrument in a group setting. I also include my own experience and how I picked up the accordion.

Considering Sound and the Senses

Often in my interviews, when I asked participants why they enjoyed the accordion, they responded with something like “because my grandfather played it.” Mostly, the instrument remained in families as one generation taught the next, or the younger generation witnessed family members playing, and so they

continued the tradition. The people in my interviews enjoyed the sound of the accordion because it reminded them of family. In some instances, families who had never visited Italy or were unaware of their true ancestral names enjoyed the accordion and the quality of its timbre, yet they could not pinpoint *why*. Many of the people in my interviews remember holding the instrument in their hands, they remember hearing it at parties, and most had memories of vinyl records in their household of Italian American accordionist Dick Contino or Lawrence Welk, the TV personality who brought accordion into the popular sphere with The Lawrence Welk Show. In the following transcript, a woman attending the Festa Italia in Pittsburg remembers hearing the accordion in her home and connects it to her family and their home:

Guest: I just remember my uncle playing in the living room at nighttime. He would play on special occasions. Usually, things like “Oh Marie” and “O sole mio.” My parents would just have wrapped up a nice dinner, and we would all move to the living room where the kids would - we would - sit on the floor, and the adults would drink some shots of limoncello or, wait, the almond one!

Monica: Amaretto?

Guest: Yes! That’s it. Anytime I smell it in the cookies or taste it, I remember those times, especially the accordion because the room would just smell like that on everyone’s breath. That and cigarettes.

Monica: Do you remember who taught your uncle?

Guest: I don’t know his teacher, but he later taught my brother. Oh, yeah, all of those songs my brother learned... because of Joe. Then, when he got older, my brother sort of took over unofficially playing for the family on Easter and birthdays. He learned the songs, but still not quite like uncle Joe. That’s the reason I know the songs, but I honestly have no clue what the words are. I wish I learned Italian and listened more to my grandparents.

- Woman, 75 years of age, at the Festa Italia of Pittsburg, CA, held October 22, 2023

During the interview, I noted her intimacy with the accordion was dependent on a multi-sensory experience where the olfactory system helped to inform her memory of sound. Other people in my interviews had a similar sensuous experience when speaking of hearing an accordion. In Vince Cirelli's recounting of his father's experience as an accordion player, I was told a similar story concerning the sound of the accordion and how it drew Vince Sr. to want to play it:

The beginning of my father's interest in the accordion... basically, he heard the accordion through an open window one day, and just the sound of the instrument. Just the polyphony coming from that instrument intrigued my dad. So my grandfather started my dad on the accordion lessons.

- Vincent Cirelli Jr., interviewed on June 26, 2021

In hearing the stories of these performers from the older generations, I was able to deduce that sound definitely became one of the contributing factors that drew people in that age group to the instrument.

Sound Studies

During my quest to be immersed in the sound of the accordion, I collected a series of 38 sound clips in various spaces, including restaurants, churches, homes, streets, and parks. While most of these spaces were centered in Italian culture, not all of them were. In considering how the sound of an accordion interacts in space and the acoustic setting of people's environments, I can examine how one's soundscape affects their playing and their choices of music when they create a gig setlist or decide on what to practice. The process also allowed me to see people's reactions to sound. As noted in the guest interview at

the Festa Italia in the previous section, many of the third and fourth generations in my interviews could not speak Italian, and they didn't know the meanings behind the repertoire or *canzone* heard at festivals or funerals, but they did know the tunes.²³⁹ The tunes are familiar to interlocutors, including Steve Pizzo (first introduced in Chapter Two), who recalled the sound of "The Sharpshooter's March" only after I played it for him during our interview.²⁴⁰ In the Italian accordion repertoire, while information such as chords, lyrics, and musical interpretations are subjective by the performer, the tune usually carries prominence and appears in its original form. Many of the participants would repeatedly tell me how grateful they were to hear specific songs because the sound brought back memories of their own families. The audible song reminded them of a time and place.

While I wanted to largely focus on the Italian community during my study, I soon realized that it was limited to the nature of the project to single out Italians, so I also conducted a few interviews with San Francisco Accordion Club members who either grew up in North Beach or were close to the accordion community that I discuss in this project. In this next section, you will read an excerpt from fieldwork conducted with my main interlocutor, Pamela Tom (age 74). She was born at Stanford Hospital into a Chinese American family and grew up in San Francisco. Her mom was born in San Jose, and her father arrived to the

²³⁹ 'Canzone' means 'song' in Italian; the plural feminine form.

²⁴⁰ Written by Richard Eilenberg and performed by Guido Deiro for Columbia Records, 1911.

United States from China. Today, she is an important force in the accordion club community, and her name is known in many accordion circles and boards throughout the United States. Her story is unique in comparison to others I interviewed in that she came to be quite serious about her accordion studies much later in life.

Monica: So you didn't play when you were a kid?

Pamela: I didn't have the opportunity to play as a child. It was not presented to me but oddly, I grew up 6-8 blocks away from Lou's (DiMaggio) and Dick Contino's super duper instructor!

Monica: Oh, Angelo Cagnazzo.

Pamela: Yes! I used to take a bus right by there. You know it was a cultural thing. My mom (Viola Yee) went to Francisco Junior High School, and the Italians they all played accordion. She herself took piano and voice lessons and liked Italian music, she was very musical, but the Chinese generally went for the violin and the piano but we have some impressive people now like Siyuan Donnelly - I remember when he couldn't reach the ground! But the Chinese didn't interact with the Italians and the Chinese couldn't buy real estate until the late 50s. There is a great book by Victor Low for you to read up on that history.

I will break here for a moment to consider some of what Pamela has recounted in her story and direct it back to some of the writing I did in Chapter One. For Pamela she distinctly remembers how Italians and Chinese cultures didn't interact much. I have often thought about this in my own writing and observation of Chinatown, given that Little Italy is set in close proximity to what remains of the area today. In my research, I know that the Chinese were assumed inferior in the hierarchy of race in the United States, and it is safe to say that Italians were able to access more educational privilege than their Chinese counterparts in the United States. In Low's text, he traces the history of the Chinese from their time

participating in California's Gold Rush in the 1850s and leads to the development of Chinatown schools in the 1950s.²⁴¹ The main focus is dedicated to the lack of resources given to Chinese children in educational settings and the barriers they face in gaining access to educational settings in San Francisco. Barred from the school board funding and unable to gain then-current learning materials, Chinese children were not afforded the same opportunities and learning models as their white counterparts. In Pamela's experience as a young Chinese American in the Bay Area, the accordion was absent from her personal experience even though she grew up near the same accordion instructors and performers mentioned in this project. See the continued transcript below:

Monica: Thank you for that citation. So, did you see the accordions in North Beach?

Pamela: No. The only place I saw an accordion was on Stockton and Market Street. I would get off the bus, and I would see this blind man playing all the time. He wasn't very good, but I remember that. The next exposure was a ship called the Lurline. It was one of the Matson line luxury liners (it was a passenger ship); that was in 1966 when we went to Hawaii.

Monica: So, what did you think of the sound?

Pamela: So I loved going on the merry-go-round, and I loved that reed sound as a kid. So when I hear that accordion that's what I heard, when I was 15 or 16, we passed by a pawn shop, and I think it was \$25 or \$30 - my mother was pretty penny-conscious. So I had a 12-button accordion, and it came with Sedlon

²⁴¹ Low, Victor. *The Unimpressible Race: A Century of Educational Struggle by the Chinese in San Francisco*. San Francisco: East/West Pub. Co., 1982.

books.²⁴² I didn't understand the books, but I could play by ear. I was taking German, so I learned the German beer songs. I was able to teach myself as much as I could to go to B flat. I didn't think to go to the minors, but I knew a little bit, so by the time I had a chance to get my hands on a 120 bass, I was 59 years old.

Monica: How did you find your first instructor?

Pamela: I didn't have any books. I was so confused and told myself I needed to find a teacher, and I talked to my mentor from Southern California. I found out she played accordion, and her name was Gloria Ensign, and she was one of the presidents of the Accordion Lover's Society International.²⁴³ She was very instrumental in getting me enthusiastic about getting me into it. My first teacher then was Sylvia Marie, but sometimes she went by Sylvia Marie Barber. She was a known accordionist in Northern California. She was the triple-shake queen! Lou, though, was my first sit-down teacher and my real teacher. I also had Sheila Lee for a little bit for one real lesson, but I needed lessons with someone close by. I was able to see Lou because someone would carpool with me to see Lou (Pamela is based in Davis). I took a train, BART, and AC Transit to see him. He often would come and get me at BART. For that, I had two-hour lessons, and I would take him to lunch all the time as a way to cover him, so lessons were approximately \$100 each time between the lunches and lessons.

At this point, I want to reflect on the fact that Davis, CA, is approximately 86 miles northeast of Millbrae, CA, where the SFAC meets. Pamela is living in a city that is primarily made up of college students, and their age group of 20-24 outnumbers the population that lives there year-round. The top three demographics claim German, Irish, and English ancestry, with Italian falling at

²⁴²A 12-button bass accordion is typically played by a young student aged 3-6. They range from cheaper models at \$200 to \$800 for the high-end Hohner styles. Please note that even though the bass is 12 buttons, the keyboard may be longer for adults who want to play a 12-button bass style. Since they are compact and lightweight, it is sometimes easier for a smaller-framed person to play. The 120-button mentioned here is considered the full-size accordion, and its capabilities to play a variety of music and timbres far exceeds the 12-button style. The Sedlon series was another type of accordion method books similar to the Palmer-Hughes series. Authored by J.H. Sedlon, they were popular in the 1950s.

²⁴³ The Accordion Lover's Society International (ALSI) is a San Diego-based accordion club headed by president Gordan Kohl. They run their club similar to the models discussed in my project, like those of the SFAC and the Silicon Valley Accordion Club.

3.7%.²⁴⁴ While there is the Golden State Accordion Club in Sacramento based thirty minutes away, Pamela prefers the Bay Area clubs as that is where she grew up, and the members are many of her friends.

Monica: When was this?

Pamela: This was in 2011, I started in March.

Monica: So, how did you decide to return to the accordion?

Pamela: I was nearing retirement. I was either going to take stride piano or honky-tonk style piano, but I decided on accordion. I kept seeing a couple of ads about the Golden State Accordion Club, but they met on Tuesday night, and that wouldn't work. They had a Christmas party in Woodland in the daytime, and that is how I met the treasurer, and she loaned me her student model 120 bass, and I played with it for a year. That was about 2009. So, during that year, I practiced. I used to watch Lawrence Welk, I think in my 20s and 30s, and maybe that's why I thought piano or accordion. That's where I got the idea. You know I got to meet Myron Floren's sister and she was also an accordionist.

In listening to Pamela's story, I recognized a very different side of North Beach, and I saw her own understanding of what it was like to grow up without access to accordions and teachers, even though she lived just blocks away from other people I interviewed. One thing I notice that is consistent across all of the interviews is how people bring up specific spaces. Just like Pamela remembers the "lousy player on Stockton Street," she also equated the sound of the reed block to that of a carousel. This comparison is through a child's perspective when Pamela would have been around 10 years of age and these are the memories she holds of connecting sound and objects. Pamela carries the accordion through sound and memory, unlike others in my project who carried it ethnically within their family.

²⁴⁴ "Davis, CA," U.S. Census Bureau (2024), retrieved from Census Reporter Profile page for Davis, CA, https://data.census.gov/profile/Davis_city,_California?g=160XX00US0618100.

While memory is the beacon to finding the instrument once more in their lives, nostalgia becomes an important basis and reasoning for why so many return to the sound of the instrument. In the timbre of these reeds, people recognize a past experience, and some are able to revive an interest in the accordion through their family's past. Cory Pesaturo (professional accordionist, age 36), one of my interlocutors on this project, has repeatedly mentioned the numerous accordion gigs on which he can survive from Italian festivals alone. The need for audiences to hear the accordion at such events is part of the experience of attendance. The accordion performer in those settings is usually tasked with a typical repertoire that includes a mix of Neapolitan popular styles, opera, and Italian American songs: “Marina,” “Volare,” “That’s Amore,” and “O mio babbino caro.”²⁴⁵ Upon hearing such pieces, I observed that audience members are fueled with reasons to emote through singing, crying, and sometimes sheer pensive silence. For example, at the 89th Festa Italia in Monterey, CA, on September 10, 2022, I noted that the majority of the roughly 120-person audience in the music tent was singing very loudly at the chorus to Mike Marotta’s rendition of “Funiculi, funiculà.”²⁴⁶ Mike is a known accordionist in the Bay Area and in Monterey. His father, Mike Marotta Sr. (1921-2019), was a powerhouse accordionist and a well-known figure in the accordion communities on the West Coast. The audience clapped along,

²⁴⁵ “Marina, Marina,” composed and written by Rocco Granata (1959), “Volare,” composed by Domenico Modugno (1958), “That’s Amore,” composed and written by Harry Warren and Jack Brooks (1953), and “O mio babbino caro,” an aria by Giacomo Puccini from the opera *Gianni Schicchi* (1918).

²⁴⁶ A popular Neapolitan song composed in 1880 by Luigi Denza. The lyrics center on the story of the funiculars on Mount Vesuvius.

thus pushing the tempo to increase. Towards the end of the song, some two-thirds of the audience was left singing and clapping, and the song ended with a roaring applause for the performer. As I looked around, I noted that that group of participants was made up of entire families wearing their Italian shirts and hats. They included children and older generations, too. Those who did not participate were sitting solo, or they did not display any gear containing the Italian flag or the word “Italia.” Everyone stayed in their seats until the end of Mike Marotta and Friends' performance. The accordion performance in the festival space offers a shared experience for every audience member in attendance. In my field notes recorded during San Francisco’s Festa Coloniale held on June 4, 2023, I observed the audience that was present for both Tatiana Semichastnaya and Mike Trucco’s performances.²⁴⁷ Mike’s father, Steve Trucco (1939-2022), was another known Italian American accordionist in the Stockton area located roughly 80 miles east of San Francisco. Mike is usually invited to play festivals in Northern California, and in my own research, I’ve seen him playing at a number of Italian festivals, including those in Monterey, Stockton, and the oldest and longest-running Italian Picnic held annually in Sutter Creek.²⁴⁸

Field Notes: June 4, 2023, 11:38AM (On the corner of Union Street and Washington Square Park, San Francisco, North Beach).

Mike Trucco stands on a rectangle-shaped makeshift stage. He is in the middle of playing “O sole mio,” and a dragonfly hums above his head, flying back and forth. The audience responds by singing loudly at the chorus, and I see many

²⁴⁷ Tatiana is from Kaliningrad, Russia, and she is an accordionist who has won multiple international competitions. She also plays in the Las Vegas Cirque Du Soleil show *KA*.

²⁴⁸ In my attendance of the festival on June 4th, 2023, the posters stated it was the 140th year of the celebration.

people smiling. It is a warm day, and the people around me are using their paper plates to fan themselves. Above him is a white banner with the event logo that was created by the San Francisco Italian Athletic Club (SFIAC) who is holding the festival. It is a red accordion with a gold cup in the middle. The sides of the open bellows feature green laurels, and two large salamis make an X behind it. The cup represents the winning cup for the annual Statuto Race. This year, it is the 103rd iteration of the club's race. The dates of the race and the festival coincide with Italy's Festa della Repubblica held on June 2nd.²⁴⁹

Fig. 27: Flyer handed out at the Festa Italiana, San Francisco, North Beach, June 4th, 2023. Permission granted to reprint by the SFIAC.



American and Italian flags fly behind the stage. There is a slight wind. There is a crowd of some 70 or more people sitting in white folding chairs. Some people stand, and others are walking by to stop and observe Mike's performance. A larger man with slicked-back dark hair calls out: "Gianna, here!" He hands her a champagne flute with orange juice which I surmise to be a mimosa. I see some of the runners from the Statuto Race displaying medals around their necks. Markers of Italianess are present in the space. I see children waving the tricolore flag (Italy's national flag), and there are signs on the umbrellas that line Union Street: Peroni, Aperol, and Lavazza. Colors of red, white, and green are wrapped around light posts.

After Mike wraps up, an emcee steps onto the stage to thank Mike for his song and begins to discuss how the accordion was founded in San Francisco. "Folks,

²⁴⁹ June 2nd commemorates the date when Italians voted to abolish the monarchy and form a republic in 1946.

can you believe it - the accordion was invented here just a few blocks away.” People respond with applause and excited hollers: “woooo, that’s right!” Next on the stage appears Tatiana Semichastnaya wearing a sparkly black and silver dress and holding a small black and white accordion. She is a Roland artist, meaning she is only permitted to play her official gigs by using her Roland digital model. I know her name because I have seen her play at the Cotati Accordion Festival, and the accordion players in attendance today all know each other. She plays through the main theme from *Amarcord*, “Libertango,” and “Quando, Quando, Quando.”²⁵⁰ The audience is appreciative of Tatiana, and they applaud between each song. The crowd favorite is “Quando, Quando, Quando,” which is a known Italian popular song. People in the audience sing it loudly in the chorus. I observe a woman in her mid-50s with tan skin, blonde hair, and thick black sunglasses, wearing a white dress, who stands up immediately at that moment and proudly sings: “Dimmi quando tu verrai/dimmi quando, quando, quando.” She begins swaying her arms in the air and looks down to grab the toddler boy sitting next to her. She holds him and begins to dance in a circle while Tatiana plays a solo in the song.

The people in my observations have different reactions, but they are actively participating in a shared experience where the accordion music at the festivals helps bring them together to listen and participate in music that may sound familiar.

Taking Accordion Lessons

In Chapter Three, I mention my instructor, Lou Jacklich, as part of the older generation of accordionists and describe some of his own personal anecdotes and experiences. Now, I turn to my own interactions with Lou and share some of the knowledge he provided to me during our lessons.

²⁵⁰ *Amarcord* is a film by Federico Fellini (1973) with music composed by Nino Rota. The “Libertango” is a tango composed by Astor Piazzolla in 1974. “Quando, Quando, Quando” is an Italian popular song composed and sung by Tony Renis in 1962.

February 7th, 2024. In Lou Jacklich's studio, learning how to add the 7th in a 4/2 inversion into the melody line of "All of Me."²⁵¹

Monica: Oh, that's so hard.

Lou: That's what the chord is.

Monica: What I am used to doing on this... see, I don't play the 7th. I never do.

Lou: Well, what's a d minor chord?

Monica: DFA. No, because I am overthinking. So I just go DFA(C).

Lou: Right.

Monica: That is so tough. I know how to spell them! How do you work on that?

Lou: You practice on the song until you get the right chord. But hang onto the chord when you come back. Hold onto the chord.

Monica: (Moving onto a new chord) So an E7/#9?

Lou: Right, that's why I tried to do an arrangement with you because it doesn't have the chords in it. You have to put a chord on every note.

Lou: What's the melody?

(Monica plays)

Lou: Now you have to create an octave higher - that's not the chord.

Monica: (Fixes)

Lou: Now that was correct.

Monica: (Playing by ear)

Lou: Now that was just cheating!

Perhaps the most important part of this study has been the accordion lessons that I began with Lou Jacklich in 2020. Prior to his studio, I worked with Gene Bartolomei of Stockton from 2012-2015. I first met Lou at the Cotati

²⁵¹ Song written by Gerald Marks and Seymour Simmons

Accordion Festival in 2019 when he was sitting in the SFAC (San Francisco Accordion Club) tent kiosk. My interlocutor, Pamela Tom, introduced us, and he asked me about my background in music and which instruments I played. Once he realized I had been to a conservatory and through MA programs in music, he agreed that I would be a good fit as he didn't have to teach me theory or rudimentary foundations. He shook my hand and said, "Give me a call." I attended lessons weekly on Tuesday mornings from the Fall of 2019 until his passing in the Spring of 2024. He used the Palmer-Hughes books in my lessons, and at the time of his death, we were in Book Seven. In addition, Lou gave me materials from fake books and his own charts from his days on the road. During the pandemic, we continued to work together through Zoom and Skype. In a typical lesson, we warmed up with a small exercise. For the first two years, we began with scales: inverted, harmonic minor, reverse, in 3rd, 6ths, and all types of variations. Later, we were warming up with 6ths, 7ths, 10th, and 12ths - jazz chords. As Lou's career began in the midst of the swing era, his style of playing is from a different time when the performer had to consider a variety of actors: dancers, novelty acts, the audience, and a full band.

I was fortunate to learn from Lou and continuously marveled at his ability to make his Sonola sound like an animal, an airplane, or a clarinet. Our typical lesson was one hour long, and after our warm-ups and book tunes, we would read charts from his numerous fake books and play tunes like "All of Me," "Misty,"

and “Stella by Starlight.”²⁵² Sometimes, we would duet on polkas. In doing so, Lou and I used to sit next to each other and read on a single stand. My favorite duet was the “Clarinet Polka.”²⁵³ Lou and I would read two sheets labeled A and B parts. They were the same melody but with different parts to play. In playing duets, I was able to lean closer to my instructor and hear the harmony that would accompany my run in the opening. I was also able to closely observe Lou’s hands and facial expressions as he would sometimes run into a solo and divert our sight reading. Being in close proximity to a duet partner facilitates the performance as we are able to better tune into each other through visual and acoustic cues. Due to my time as a student with Lou, I achieved so much on the instrument that I never thought was possible as an amateur player, and I now appreciate having had a true jazz performer to learn from in this medium.

²⁵² “All of Me,” is an American jazz standard written by Gerald Marks and Seymour Simons in 1931. “Misty” is an American jazz standard written by Erroll Garner in 1954. “Stella by Starlight” is an American jazz standard originally written by Victor Young in 1944.

²⁵³ Colloquially known as “Hupfata,” the Clarinet Polka is a late-19th century Polish tune.

Fig. 28: A photo of the members in Lou Jacklich's studio September 26, 2021 at Cotati, CA. Photo credit: Steve Mobia. Top row from left: Steve Marshall, Dr. Scott Anderson, Tibor Sárkány, Colette Ogata. Bottom row: author, Elaine Cooperstein, Lou Jacklich, Pamela Tom, Casey Ogata.



The San Francisco Accordion Club

For many people studying accordion, the addition of participation in an accordion club offers support to their learning and practice. The clubs also promote a learning environment where there is collective participation, and members perform together or for each other. When playing in the club environment, the musician is supported by others who are new to the accordion as well as by those who are seasoned players. The mix of ages and playing levels makes for a welcome environment in comparison to playing for an instructor. For

example, playing in the studio for your teacher during the lesson can be demanding if you have not practiced, but in the club environment, I have personally observed that mistakes are not pointed out, and instead, encouragement from onlookers is shared. Since the majority of the people participating in accordion clubs have also taken lessons or are currently enrolled, there is a kinship between players and an understanding of how we rely on each other to provide supportive gestures of applause and words of encouragement, as examples. In the following section, you will read about a typical club meeting of the San Francisco Accordion Club (SFAC). Meetings are held on the third Sunday of the month at the David J. Chetcuti Community Room near the city library in Millbrae, CA. The room is plain with cream paint and tan carpet. At the front of the room is a wooden podium and there are roughly 60 grey and black plastic chairs aligned in neat rows. There are two six-foot plastic folding tables where the treasurer sets up a money collection along with a name tag station. Members pay a \$5.00 entry fee.²⁵⁴ The club president, Ken Schwartz, sets up a camera and his laptop to allow participants to dial in with Zoom. Since the pandemic, the club has used a hybrid modality to facilitate access to as many club members and interested parties as possible. As people enter, they find a spot to sit and unpack their accordion. Accordion cases line the walls of the room. A typical gathering consists of anywhere from 20-50 people. In this meeting, we are gathered on May 12th, 2024. It is Mother's Day, and less than one week has passed since my

²⁵⁴ I attended club meetings August 2018-May 24, 2024.

teacher's (Lou Jacklich) death.²⁵⁵ We note the absence of our instructor and the longest supporter of the club. The first part of the notes centers on the opening of the meeting when we have a jam session, and the second part is after our break and snack time when volunteer solo performers come to the front to play individual pieces. On this day, we are lucky to have a mix of amateurs, a few regulars, and two working Bay Area accordionists in attendance.

Field notes from May 12, 2024: Speakers include president Ken Schwartz and members Scott Anderson, Joseph Martin, Don Savant, and the author.

Part 1: The Jam Session. There are 12 members who gather in a circle to play through our club gig books. We have roughly 40 selections, and members call out pieces at random. This week, Joseph Martin leads the circle for the first time since Lou Jacklich's passing.

Joseph: One, two, three, four...

Group proceeds to play "Spanish Eyes."

Don: Can we do "Ain't She Sweet?"

Monica: Which one?

Joseph: That's from the big jam book. It's in the beginning.

Don: 1926.

Joseph: This one moves a little faster with the note changes. It's in 4/4 time, and we'll start with our first note in a moment. Ok? I think we're good. One, two, three, four.

Group proceeds to play.

Joseph: Should we do it again?

Monica: (Interjects) Sure, it goes quick!

²⁵⁵ Lou passed on May 6th, 2024.

Joseph: Seems like we kind of got it that time. Here we go, one, two, three, four.

Group continues playing.

Joseph: Do we want to try “The Tennessee Waltz” from the short jam book? The very last one. Okay, we're gonna try the key change in this like we always do. So we're going to be going from C the first time through to F to G. That would be the third time, and the transition from C to F is C7, and the transition from F to G is D7 if you want to put that in. Well, it's not written that way is it? No, it is OK. We're gonna go 12312 and then come in with the first two notes 12312.

As the group proceeds to play this popular Patti Page song from 1950, I look around and observe how some people already know the piece as they are quick to absorb the introduction and Joseph's instructions, while others are learning it as they read with their face deep into the sheet music. The SFAC club and the accordion community alike create a sense of belonging for players at all levels. At this point, I think about the club's original iteration in 1916 and how the founding members were all Italian. To see us now playing a country tune in the same club over 100 years later indicates not only a change in aesthetics but also that of the demographics of the club.

Joseph: And I think we went through the whole small book. Does someone want to pick a song from the large jam book?

Monica: Let's do “La vie en rose.”

Joseph: Ok, “La vie en rose,” from the large jam book.

Monica: This is in a different key than I'm used to. Oh, I see there's an introduction.

(Other player:) Where is it?

Group has difficulty finding the page.

Joseph: Oh, “Vie en Rose,” filed under V!

Monica: I don’t know that introduction, but I’ll play it.

*We play through the piece, and it is unfamiliar until we get to the main verse.
After the last piece, the group begins to close up their cases and fold the stands.
We place our gig books in a big plastic tub in the center of the circle.*

Ken: Everyone did such a great job today. And I want to thank Joseph. (Maestro!) You had some pretty big shoes to fill here, but you did a great job. We will talk about Lou Jacklich in a minute. I also want to give credit to the Coopersteins. They're on the conference call today. These books here... are you there? Speak up? Everyone is using the book scans that have all of your annotations and fingerings. They've been terrific. So thank you very much for all these efforts. We have 10 of us here in the jammer's pre-jam session. And now, and of course, on a serious note, as you know, you see here that August would have been Lou Jacklich’s 96th birthday. Sadly, of course, we lost him, and he was a giant for us. Many of us, even though not all were students of his, we all learned something from Lou over the years. I had the privilege of knowing him for 14 years, and I was very fortunate to visit him in his final weeks. I know a number of us who were students were there and visited with him. And he really felt very special about this club, called me personally, as he was in his waning weeks, and said, “You know, I really love the club.” And, you know, he made a very generous donation to the club because he felt very strongly about what the quality of music means and what he wanted for the future of this club. So, the lasting legacy, that he had over 1000 students in his lifetime, and that's going to continue. If anybody has any other words, now is the time to say it. We are all sad.

After 45 minutes of group play, the president tells us it is time for a break. We then put down our instruments and began a short snack time. During this 20-minute interval, members speak to each other and catch up on the last few meetings. I overhear people talking about the upcoming Cotati Accordion Festival, and others are speaking of my teacher, Lou Jacklich. In his memory, the club assembled funds and purchased a chocolate fudge cake - Lou’s favorite treat. We eat cake and ice cream, and new members are introduced around the room.

After some time, the president calls us back to the main seating area and announces that it is the second half of the meeting. These moments of break time are typical to most accordion club meetings even outside of SFAC. The time allows people to commune and create kinship in their shared experience of accordion playing.

Part 2: Individual Solos

Ken: Alright, so Dr. Scott Anderson has graciously agreed to be our first performer today. Scott, the floor is yours.

Scott: Thank you Dr. Schwartz, Ken Schwartz, and what a fine job you do leading our club I must say. And we were talking earlier about Lou but I guess we should also remember today is Mother's Day. I'd like to get through a piece, if I can, from my wife's home nation where she grew up after being born here, the Philippines, called "Dahil Sa Iyo," it was made famous by Imelda Marcos, I believe. So, this is for my wife for Mother's Day. *Proceeds to play.*

Scott: Next, I will do "Besame Mucho," Kiss Me Much. *Scott proceeds to play.*

Ken: That was fabulous. Thank you. And I would say that Mr. Jacklich would be very proud.

Scott: Ah, thank you.

Ken: In all the years we've been watching, you clearly have learned your lessons. Beautiful.

Scott: I owe a lot of it, most of it to maestro Lou, so thank you. *Crowd erupts with applause.*

Ken: Next volunteer? Joseph? Joseph Martin? The floor is yours. And who will go after Joseph? Any volunteers?

Joseph approaches the front of the room.

Joseph: I'm always calm until I plan to play, and then I start going like this (demonstrates his hands shaking nervously while speaking): What note is that? I know that note! This song is "Ciao Ciao Palermo." *Proceeds to play.*

Crowd shows applause.

Joseph: Actually, that was written by Frank Marocco, that's one of his arrangements. Ok, I am going to try one that Ken inspired me to learn. I can do it. If I can't do it, I'm just going to stop... but I'm gonna' try. *Joseph stops playing.*

Joseph: Ok, I can do better than that.

Monica: What was the name of it, please?

Joseph: "Adios, Au Revoir, Auf Wiedersehn"

In the span of 15 to 20 minutes, we hear songs played from various countries: the Philippines, Mexico, Italy, and Germany. I reflect here for a moment to consider how, again the song choices represent the current blanket of immigrant communities in the Bay Area today and the aesthetics of preferred song choices for the performers and the audience.

Ken: *Ken nods in agreement.* We did play together. That was written by George Cates, who was the bandleader for the Lawrence Welk Show, so I know that very well because during grad school (what) I missed most 23 hours was spent studying, and the last hour was watching Lawrence Welk at 7 pm on Saturday night on my seven-inch black and white TV, that's all I had right? Everything was shut down for an hour at 7 pm, and they were like family. I know all the members of that band. Thanks, very beautiful. We have music for that. Maybe we can put that in the jam session because I have the music for it.

Joseph: Oh, and I have three different versions for it, so...

It is in these small moments that I realize how much the SFAC means for both the accordion community and those who rely on the club as a social outlet to share in the common interest of music.

Education and Repair: Preventing the Decline of Accordion

One of the greatest concerns for those of us who own an accordion is how to maintain and repair our instruments. In the 1950s and 60s, there were a number of vocational schools around the country dedicated to learning accordion and, more importantly, accordion repair. Al Trick is one such example. He was located in Dallas and ran a repair school in the 1960s and 70s. In addition to his institution, various colleges taught accordion repair work to, among others, military veterans studying under the GI bill.²⁵⁶ As the demand for accordions grew, the need for repair was equally in demand. The Mammoth Vocational School of Accordion Repair was located in California and had a tuition fee of \$9.99.²⁵⁷ H. Verwer was located in Oakland, and many local shops did their own in-house repair, like Best Music Company, located at Clay Street in San Francisco. In 1993, the last active accordion repair program in the nation housed in an educational institution closed up shop. It was located at the Winona/Red Wing campuses of Minnesota State College Southeast.²⁵⁸

Additionally, in my research, I have found that the accordion is not considered a traditional instrument of study at major universities and institutions of learning in the United States. In most American music major programs, the model is for the student to focus on a dedicated instrument of focus, so they

²⁵⁶ “Al Trick, Vaudevillian and Accordion Master,” Obituaries, *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, November 30, 1988, 26.

²⁵⁷ Advertisement, *The Modesto Bee*, August 11, 1989, 69.

²⁵⁸ Dave Berry, “Accordion Repair Industry in Danger of Being Silenced,” *Fort Worth Star Telegram* 4, April 1993, 109.

essentially major in that instrument. I have found few music programs where the accordion was a dedicated major written into their curriculum. Instead, most students play the accordion within a program, but they major in piano. For example, my interlocutor, Cory Pesaturo, studied Contemporary Improvisation (referred to as CI) in the contemporary musical arts program at the New England Conservatory. The area was originally developed by Gunther Schuller and Ran Blake with a focus on third-stream jazz, and Cory was able to play his instrument and complete his MA requirements using a Roland digital accordion. One more known example of a longer-standing program in the accordion community is housed at the University of Missouri in Kansas City. In 1961, Joan Cochran Summers grew the UMKC Accordion Orchestra and developed the accordion major until her retirement in 2001. Today, the program has been disbanded, but performance on the instrument continues with the UMKC Community Accordion Ensemble, which is now an elective in the department. While many of the programs mentioned here have dwindled or discontinued, the sustainability of the accordion in the present is not only in the hands of performers but also in those of experienced repair persons. In my interviews with repair persons Valdet and Skyler, I observed a great deal of hope because there are young protégés interested in carrying on the traditions of accordion repair.

The State of Repair Shops Today

Today, there are only a handful of certified accordion repair persons in the state of California. It is important to note the word “certified” as many performers

and amateurs have taken to conducting light repair work themselves in order to keep costs down, and I have heard horror stories about accordion DIY attempts that did not end well. Today, in Northern California, there are three major operators participating in accordion repair. Skyler Fell, Kimric Smythe, and Valdet Jakubovic. Skyler (age 41) is currently located in the Yucca Valley of Southern California, but before the permanent move, she was making a name for herself in the Bay Area since 2005. Her shop, Accordion Apocalypse, was located at 255 10th Street, San Francisco, CA and after her time learning with her first mentor, Ruben Boaz, she began her second apprenticeship with Vince Cirelli in San Francisco in 2005. Vince was a respected accordion repairman in the Bay Area, and I interviewed his son (Vince Cirelli Jr.). Skyler recounts to me her time as an apprentice, and how she is now in the process of searching for her own mentee in a time where finding skilled accordion repair persons is a challenge. According to Skyler, Vince allowed her to observe him in his repairs and use his tools while she, in turn, assisted Vince and dropped by the shop daily to learn as much as possible about the inner workings of the accordion. Skyler is thankful for the wealth of knowledge she learned and uses many of those techniques now in her daily work.

Dialogue from an interview with Skyler Fell on August 17, 2023.

Skyler: I started out actually in a farmhouse in Oakland. And then, as soon as I was able to, I moved (my shop) to San Francisco to more of a brick-and-mortar shop. And I happened to be right down the street from the San Francisco Accordion Club. And they and the Cotati Accordion Festival together introduced me to Vincent Cirelli who became my amazing mentor for about six years. And while I was working with him, I was also running my shop in the southern part of

San Francisco. Working with him, I'd say probably six to eight hours a day, working on repairs from my shop as well as repairs from his shop. And he was so patient and really took the time to explain everything to me while I was writing it down. So, I created a manual for myself. And, I've been really working off of that manual and the knowledge that he gave me ever since and, you know, working on instruments, the same instruments for the same type of instruments for over twenty years now, I am really stoked because I see a lot of patterns. I know exactly what materials are going to do what on different models of accordions, and there's a lot of knowledge that comes from doing it for a while.

Monica: Do you ever see any of Vince's accordions that you know he worked on? Do you ever get any of those?

Skyler: Yeah, so as accordion repair people, we kind of have like a signature on the bellows, and because you're gonna take the bellows off of the accordion, so you mark the top front of the bellows, and I personally have my own signature so I can always tell when I have worked on that particular accordion because of the marking on the top of the bellows. And I see that with some accordions from Vince as well, because I recognize his handwriting.

In Skyler's interview, I was reminded of the wall of reeds I saw at the Pigini factory in Chapter Two. Reed makers and repair persons, through the nature of their profession, often work silently and are not afforded a space to place their name or logo on an accordion, where the performer or brand name is often marked largely on the front of the accordion grill.²⁵⁹ In this way of stamping a name or a signature inside the inner parts of the accordion, Skyler and all accordion repair persons globally are able to communicate and imprint their own markers of history separate from the performers. When I inquired about her search to hire an apprentice, Skyler replied that there were a few people who showed interest but that she was waiting for the right fit.

Skyler: I always tell people, you know, that I'm looking for an apprentice. I had a guy that came and worked with me every weekend for, I'd say, the last year, but he just got a scientist job. He works for the national parks. And so he got a job up in Portland. So he left like a month ago. He was here up until I had my Hot

²⁵⁹ This is the decorative metal screen that covers the front of the accordion.

Summer Nights accordion jam. I started doing an accordion jam down here now. So I'm in again, in the position where I'm slowly looking for an apprentice, but you know, it really has to be the right person. I'm not going to teach just anyone. It has to be somebody that already has some ability to work with their hands. Somebody really patient, somebody that's dedicated to the accordion as an instrument - it's very important. And somebody that I actually want to hang out with, too. In the beginning, I was trying to find apprentices that were mainly women, but, I've just realized that I have to open it up and find apprentices that are just awesome humans. That's way more important.

To fully consider my arguments in this project that center on the continuity of the accordion, I specifically included this excerpt as it was important for me to hear both the performer's experience and the repair person's point of view. As Skyler recounted to me her search for an apprentice, I was reminded that at the current time of the interview in 2023, the desire to find a woman and someone she wanted to befriend simultaneously might be difficult to find, considering she is also located in the desert of Southern California. The need to sustain the tradition of teaching repair is crucial for Skyler and others in this story, like Valdet. When I spoke to Vince Cirelli Jr., he mentioned that he did not have a desire to work on accordions, but his dad needed the help in the early 2000s when the shop was closing, and it was hard to find someone to take over.²⁶⁰ At that time, Skyler was working with Vince Sr. to help learn the trade, and now she is able to carry on her own search for an apprentice, but with somewhat more difficulty than her predecessors.

A third repair person that I have not mentioned here is Kimric Smythe who opened an accordion shop in 1997. Located on Broadway in Oakland, Kimric

²⁶⁰ Interview with Vince Cirelli's son, Vince Cirelli Jr., on June 26, 2021.

Smythe purchased much of the remaining accordion inventory left by known and knowledgeable accordion teacher Orlando Meni-Ketti, who began his own shop in the 1930s. According to his website, Kimric did not originally plan on entering into the business of accordion repair:

I worked as a maintenance crew member on B-52s in the USAF in the early 80's and studied Solar and Industrial tech at Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz, CA. In the 1980's I worked at several companies that built parts for Seagate Technologies, and in the late 80's worked at Seagate as a quality control specialist. For most of the 90's, I worked at Munday and Collins AV services, where I was a tech and did projection and sound for everyone from Macy's to Apple computer. I also was a member at Survival Research Labs, where I learned machining and made use of my skills with jet engines, theater prop work and set skills along with the tech skills I had studied at Cabrillo.

I started Smythe's Accordion as a side business as the AV field was changing. I have always liked working with my hands and I had gotten into the accordion as a fluke and became interested in this piece of arcane technology and the challenges it presented. I have been doing this ever since.²⁶¹

The other repair persons, like Skyler and Vince, were repairing accordions very early on in their careers, whereas Kimric came into it through the ideas of technology and fascination. Meni-Ketti's accordion shop and Smythe's differed in that they existed between the times of popularity and decline. By the time Kimric purchased Orlando's inventory, the accordion had fallen well out of popularity, and all accordion factories in San Francisco were closed. Many of my interlocutors in their 90s knew and played with Orlando at his shop, and some (like my own teacher Lou) were fortunate to work for him. After a brief move to Pinole in 2021, Kimric is currently settled in Petaluma, CA. where he runs Smythe's Accordion Center and remains close to the Cotati Accordion Festival

²⁶¹ "Smythe's Accordion Center," (Weebly) website accessed March 3, 2021. <https://www.smythesaccordioncenter.com/kimric-smythe.html>.

grounds.²⁶² While I did not work with him during this project, I am familiar with others in the SFAC and personal acquaintances who have had work completed at his shop. I am also fortunate to have spent much time with Valdet, as he often allowed me to visit and watch him while he worked. In my experience, both Skyler and Valdet encourage their customers to spend time getting to know their work, their shop, and the customers who frequent their establishments. Skyler, in fact, runs a small Airbnb next to her shop so people may spend time there while their accordion is being repaired.

Similar to the time I spent in Skyler's former shop, Valdet's garage had the same inviting feeling where in his backyard, you were expected to spend some time with your repair person and get to know them a bit rather than drop off an instrument and leave. On one particular occasion, I sat with Valdet and two of his good friends and customers. They were from Calabria and belonged to a prominent family of accordion makers in Castelfidardo. We drank coffee prepared by Valdet's wife Nadya and talked for thirty minutes about family, their time growing up in Italy, and some of the types of instruments their cousin's business in Italy sells. In these exchanges, accordion repair people build community, and it is a way to help sustain their businesses by building trust in their customer base.

²⁶² In addition, after nearly a decade of working from his home in San Jose, Valdet moved his shop to Hayward as his business was overtaking much of his backyard and garage.

Valdet: Play a little bit for us, something.

Friend 1: A tarantella? (Proceeds to play a short piece on his concertina at a medium up tempo in 2/4).

Valdet: Very good, thank you.

Friend 2: The people, we used to have so much fun with that song.

Monica: What's the name of that piece?

Friend 1: Just a tarantella.

In the meantime, Valdet answered a phone call, and the three of us spoke in Italian for a few moments. It was difficult to capture what was being said in its entirety, as there were five voices in the air - including one on speaker phone - but we spoke mostly about our families. Soon, Valdet hung up, and we began.

Friend 2: To make a long story short, do you have a bill prepared? We've gotta get going.

Valdet: Thirty bucks. I'll give you a discount. Seventy percent because of you.

Monica: What did you do for him?

Valdet: So the air switch was not functioning, and bass... it sounded no good.

Person 1: Three hundred!

ALL: Erupt in laughter

Valdet: No, thirty bucks is ok. That's ok. I don't need checks, cash is ok.

At that moment, I realized that Valdet's friends could possibly receive a discount because they were from such a prominent accordion family. Their last name is printed on an accordion model that we have seen used at the SFAC, and Valdet said he had known them for twenty years. In this instance, being part of an ingroup creates a sense of trust for both Valdet and his two customers. This

process reminded me of the bartering that occurred in John Monteverdi's experience in Chapter One when his dad brought home a family car by trading it for an accordion. In developing such relationships in his repair shop, Valdet creates a trusting customer base and the patrons also return the exchange by frequenting the shop. In the same vein, it could be observed that newcomers and outsiders may not receive such a privilege.

The experience of watching one's accordion being fixed and reassembled by someone like Valdet or Skyler offers additional community building and it allows one to observe the total experience of what takes place in removing the inner workings of the instrument. Spending so much time at the shop initially took some getting used to, whereas I could not understand the process of spending two hours in the shop space when I thought I was just dropping off my instrument. The idea of the repair becoming a teaching moment and a time to become acquainted didn't become apparent to me until a few months after I first visited Skyler's or Valdet's shop. Before this project began, I can remember spending time in the shop spaces and remembering how I felt worried that I would knock an accordion off of a shelf or find my hair tangled in a hanging grill. Being in tight spaces with reed blocks and parts carefully placed in all corners of shelf space, I was always made aware of just how many working parts go into making the instrument and how much of those parts can be reused. I soon came to understand that what I saw as junk sitting in corners and shelves of their shops were actually valuable parts that perhaps no longer existed or those that could be

added to other accordion builds from different years and models. The accordion parts acted sort of like Legos where they could be mixed and matched, and both Skyler and Valdet recognized the importance of recycling older parts and models. My time with these accordion repair persons has proved invaluable as I was able to understand the sustainability factor of the accordion from their personal point of view. It also made me happy to see their desire to carry on their knowledge of the accordion through those small moments spent in their shops and on Zoom.

While I have demonstrated and considered the state of decline with the accordion, the most hopeful part of my project occurs in Chapter Five, where I speak to young people who are carrying on the traditions and have an active interest in playing the instrument. It is in their stories that I realize there is a chance that the instrument will be successfully sustained through the help of encouraging parents and the continued support of accordion clubs meeting both in-person and on Zoom.

Chapter 5: Oral Histories of Young Performers

Today, I observed a handful of children playing accordion locally. At the San Francisco Accordion Club (SFAC), there are about five young people in the group of 40 who attend regularly, and at the Cotati Accordion Festival, there are upwards of 30 who play in the young people's contests each year. Over the past four years, I have also seen children attending clubs outside of California via Zoom.

Accordion Clubs Shift to Zoom

Like many other communities that gathered during 2020, the accordion clubs around the country were forced into meeting through Zoom. The Napa Valley Accordion Club, The Silicon Valley Accordion Society, and our own San Francisco Accordion Club moved into the online space. I can personally attest that all of the clubs were shifted to Zoom, and we did not try to gather publicly until 2021. People who never used such technology adapted to learning the Zoom platform to communicate and share music across cities and states. One benefit that I myself gained was that I was soon introduced and invited to accordion clubs throughout the United States. By the end of 2020, I attended the following accordion club meetings: San Antonio Accordion Club, Brooklyn Accordion Club, Central Oregon Accordion Club, and the San Diego Accordion Club. In these meetings, I met people across the country who played accordion and soon understood that they also knew people from the SFAC. I recognized the same

performers who would pop into different clubs, and I was invited back to these clubs when the pandemic concluded. One unique part of building a community on Zoom is the accessibility factor for people who could not attend meetings otherwise. I quickly noticed that young people were more inclined to join meetings as they were featured on the camera, and the clubs were welcoming to young faces in the Zoom boxes. Children were also supported by their parents in both the San Antonio and Brooklyn accordion clubs. Since younger people are generally savvy with technology, the Zoom medium afforded them a space where they could participate and engage in meetings like others in the general club membership. Zoom opened up a number of opportunities for children, amateurs, and professionals to witness and perform for a wider audience in the same virtual space. Having those connections and opportunities offered further consideration of how the accordion was being heard and engaged with in parts of the country outside the West Coast. While Zoom created access, it was not necessarily the best means for transmitting the sound and performance style of the accordion.

Using Online Mediums to Learn Accordion

The lack of concert experiences and jam sessions became an issue during my research because concerts were canceled or postponed. While there were Zoom workarounds to try and bring a sense of community, the jam sessions were not the same. In the San Antonio Accordion Club, members were sent a PDF of the session book to play in unison during the meeting, and at the SFAC we were

told to come off mute and play our piece to the audience listening in at the time. While that was not optimal, it was an option - but even then, the Zoom capabilities for sound were limited. While the sessions were not ideal, they at least offered our groups a sense of belonging and a shared experience of making and doing art during a difficult time. My experience in lessons online proved fruitful in many ways. I switched to online lessons for a little less than two years, from March 2020 until the beginning of 2022, when my instructor felt comfortable being in person again. During that time, I completed a series of four books with Lou Jacklich. We completed all lessons online and had check-in meetings online as well. While I felt quite accomplished in thinking I had practiced so well and performed well enough to complete some advanced techniques (bellows shakes, three against two, and diminished chords), I quickly recognized upon our first lessons back in person that I had created a very different sound than what I normally would have produced in our face-to-face sessions. I never heard it because I wasn't recording myself as often in 2020, but in 2022, when I played through the completed fifth book of the Palmer-Hughes series in a lesson, my instructor turned to me and commented on how robotic I sounded.²⁶³ He mentioned to me that I had removed my sense of phrasing and the ability to make the music "sound pretty." In my experience, the removal of physicality and presence during our virtual lessons somehow forced me to omit the experience of

²⁶³ Hughes, Bill and Willard A. Palmer. *Palmer-Hughes Accordion Course: Book V*. Van Nuys, CA.: Alfred Publishing Company, 1952.

creating a more rounded, rather more human sound. In my understanding of how I use the word “human” here, I mean to say that my playing lacked the natural intuition of tone and awareness of a natural groove. The end result produced a sound that was remiss of dynamics, and my playing lacked musicality. These parts of musical performance are what Charles Keil refers to as “participatory discrepancies.”²⁶⁴ In a performance, humans participate in a flexible manner where interpretation is an expected norm. The issue was that I couldn’t observe myself playing fully because I was recording my lessons via Zoom. Since that time, I had to take about three months of face-to-face lessons to correct those missing elements, and it made me question whether Zoom and Skype were fully effective for newcomers learning online music lessons post-pandemic.

An Uptick of Interest in Accordion During the Pandemic

Throughout the pandemic, I observed important changes that affected my research. The first area where I noticed a positive effect of Zoom occurred in online sales and newfound interest in the accordion in general. During my interviews with shop owners and repair persons, all cited that there was an uptick of repairs coming in during the pandemic and that people were interested in playing the accordion again. Liberty Bellows (a known accordion shop in Philadelphia) was backlogged, and requests were taking days to process. According to Valdet, he was busy during the pandemic as many people brought in

²⁶⁴ Charles Keil, *Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music* in *Cultural Anthropology* 2, vol. 3 (1987): 275.

their accordions to repair while they were home, and Skyler informed me she saw more people signing up for her classes and lessons online. In spending time at the virtual accordion clubs, I noted that many new attendees had never had the time or opportunity to learn the accordion, but during the pandemic, they were confined to their homes, and they had time that would have not otherwise been afforded to them. One common theme I heard in the SFAC was how new members had an accordion in the closet that they longed to play, and this was their chance to learn the instrument.

The second positive observation I made on Zoom was that the clubs were truly representative of people from all backgrounds who wanted to learn the accordion. At this point, I began to see how the romanticized idea of the Italian family carrying on traditions could possibly cease or at least allow for room to include other participants in families, such as friends and those in similar communities. I instead saw the importance of community, how people came to the accordion, and what drew them into their lessons. I also noticed that the young people who wanted to play did so because they heard the accordion at home or they were exposed to it at their own family gatherings. These children, however, were not Italian, but they were part of a diasporic community living in California.

Younger Generations Sustaining the Accordion in California

During an enjoyable afternoon at Valdet's (June 26, 2021) workshop in San Jose, I had the opportunity to sit down with Vince Cirelli Jr., whose father once worked at the accordion factories in San Francisco before opening his own

repair shop. I noted that like me, he was very proud of his Italian heritage and made a point of speaking about his Italian upbringing and his dad's workspace with fond memories. When I asked him about the decline of the accordion in the Bay Area, rather than speaking about the loss, he felt inclined to mention how his family saw a shift in the purchasing power and who was coming into the shop:

And I think that the accordion still being an ethnic instrument, we did see that young people that were playing were either Russian coming into the shop who had families, young families that were coming to the United States were Russian. That's what we saw. Yeah. But the average third, or fourth-generation Italian kid was not playing.

- Vince Cirelli Jr. (68), son of repairman Vince Cirelli, San Francisco
Chinese (children), too.

- Valdet Jakubovic (57), a repairman working in San Jose

For Vince and Valdet, who were both involved in the repair business for over 40 years and saw new demands in the Bay Area market, they noted how their customer base began to change over time. While I made the observations of the population shift during the six years of this project, the repair persons and Bay Area locals noticed the longstanding effects at least twenty years prior. When Italian Americans were slowly moving out to the suburban areas of the Bay, they also changed the way neighborhoods interacted, and the demands of those enclaves were also affected. Reno di Bono recalled how his number of playing gigs was reduced greatly after the 1990s:

The story is most interesting since cultural change and high tech ended the practice of live musicians doing weddings at all. I was lucky to catch the very end of a changing market for music. We played 150 engagements per year, sometimes three in one day. All the Italian clubs then aged out of existence. The German clubs likewise disappeared, and so it goes.

- Reno Di Bono (80), Cupertino, active performer and teacher. Email to author, June 16, 2021

Reno, who lives in Silicon Valley, California, also suggests that the advent of the tech boom produced a shift in the population, leading to fewer Italians living in the area and a divested interest in hiring live bands. From both of these statements, it is clear to me that the Italian communities lost a lot of younger people playing the accordion in the 1980s. In one of my shorter interviews at the Festa Italian Fisherman's Festival in Monterey, a man in his 40s relayed to me his experience as a non-Italian and why he returns to the festival each year:²⁶⁵

Well, yeah, I mean I'm here with my family. My girls like the music, and I grew up with a lot of accordion, so it's all good. We're Mexican, though you know we live out here near Salinas, but the music and the love songs really remind me of my *abuelo* (grandfather). He listened to a lot of *boleros*. We had these tapes of like Los Panchos, I don't know if you know them but it's similar to how they (pointing to stage) sound. It's just a nice day out. We really like the food. Sausage sandwiches and such... and the calamari (looks down at his daughter), um what else, oh, the fried tube things, cannoli!

- Mark, 44 (from Boronda, CA)

For Mark, he connected to the festival through the lens of his own experience growing up in a diverse community near Monterey. In his reflections, he connected to Italian music because it sounded like his childhood. Throughout my entire time visiting multiple Italian festivals for this project, I noticed that same

²⁶⁵ Interview held on September 11th, 2022, in Monterey, CA at the Custom House Plaza.

experience where families from different backgrounds came together for the food and music of the festivals. For example, in Stockton, I noticed multiple Filipino families attending the Lodi Grape Festival.²⁶⁶ In my observations, non-Italian families carried on as anyone else: eating, drinking, and dancing. For them, the Italianess of the space may not have been present or a focus, but they were able to experience and participate in Italian cultural production.

Today, in the accordion clubs, I notice there are young people wanting to learn, but more often than not they are not of Italian descent, but they are all first-generation American children learning the accordion. Similarly, at the Cotati Accordion Festival, the teenagers playing are mostly in this same group, and I have observed Joey Manfredi of Santa Rosa and Maria Teleshev, a Ukrainian American woman who plays as part of a father-daughter duo with Sergei Teleshev. To understand how these younger communities of students became interested in playing the accordion, I decided to interview three young players from the San Francisco Accordion Club.

Considering Young Performers

In the SFAC, we have seen a few young people aged 4-16 come through the club meetings. Typically, the younger performers are accepted with encouraging welcomes from the other members, and we tend to allow them more time to perform as they are learning and beginning their accordion journey. I also observe that the children tend to garner the most applause and support, and they

²⁶⁶ Held on September 17, 2021, in Lodi, CA.

mostly play by rote and memory, while the adults sometimes need sheet music. In my observation of an SFAC meeting held on September 18th, 2022, a younger school-aged girl played for our club:

The chair is set up in the front center of the room, and there is a small stand with sheet music in front of the chair. A young girl with blonde hair pulled back into a low ponytail appears with a blue hospital mask. She is wearing black Nike shoes, black leggings, and a long-sleeved cheetah-print dress in mauve. She must be all of five years old. Her 12-bass accordion is black with white bellows and a white flat grill. As she walks up to the chair, the applause from the crowd is much louder than the previous participant. She sits down and situates herself, then begins playing a piece in 3/4 time. It is a short waltz that I have not heard before, but it has a reduced melodic range and is written in 16 bars. As she plays, she continues through each bar and stops abruptly at the end of each phrase of 4 bars. She swings her legs through the chair, and she moves her body a bit with the antecedent line as it returns back to the tonic. I notice her eyes staring loosely at the sheet music. When she completes her song, the crowd shows roaring applause, and I hear “bravo” and “yay” in the space. The previous band that just played is still sitting in their seats, and the drummer produces a drum beat to show excitement. The girl looks around the room in acknowledgment and then stands up to return to her seat in the audience.²⁶⁷

In my experience of the SFAC, our younger participants are very straightforward in their process. They appear on the stage, announce their song, and exit upon completion of their set. Some also like to talk about their teachers, and introduce a song and why they like to play it. While the adults spoke more about the history of the song choices, younger people tended to explain why they enjoyed a song. On that particular occasion, the young girl did not speak, but she appeared happy.

While not all of the children I asked were open to participating in the interview process, I did manage to spend some time speaking with three young people who performed at our club. During our meetings since 2019, I was

²⁶⁷ The meeting was held in Millbrae, CA, at the David J. Chetcuti Community Room near the library.

introduced to Colin Kennedy and sisters Annabelle Selvaraj and “Juni” (Jennifer) Aruldass. They played for the accordion club members on Zoom and at the accordion club picnics, and they also participated in the Cotati Accordion Festival. I also interviewed them in 2024. They are all first-generation Americans playing accordion in the Bay Area. I first met Colin at the Cotati Accordion Festival in 2019, and I have seen Annabelle and Juni at SFAC since 2020, when their father, Anand, first joined our group during the pandemic. Their stories are similar in that all three of these younger performers played, in part, because their parents shared their love of accordion music and the instrument with them. In some cases, the same music they enjoyed was also heard in their respective countries. Each of these children grew up in California, and they are the first generation of their families to be born in the United States.

Case Study I: Interview with Sisters “Juni” (Jennifer) Aruldass (8) and Annabelle Selvaraj (9) at their home in Fremont, CA.

Monica: How long do you think you're going to be playing this?

Juni: Um, forever.

Annabelle: Me too.

Monica: Let's say this year or next year, what do you want to do with the accordion? What songs or what things do you want to learn?

Annabelle: My favorite songs and what my dad plays.

Monica: So, let me ask you know, when you go to high school, and you're grown up, what are you going to do with your accordion when you're in high school?

Juni: Buy a bigger one!

Annabelle: I'll ask if I can keep playing one of my dad's accordions.

Fig. 29: Juni Aruldass (left) and Annabelle Selvaraj (right) at their home in Fremont, CA. (March 9, 2024).



It is a little after 2pm. I arrive at the girls' home located in central Fremont, CA. Located about 40 miles southeast of San Francisco, the city has developed into a major tech hub. The family lives in a modest-sized house typical of mid-century style and design. The front entrance features three thin cement steps that lead into an open living room with hardwood floors protected by area rugs. At the back wall sits an upright piano featuring a few piles of sheet music, and to the left of that is an apple-red electric keyboard. My interviewees Juni (age 7) and Annabelle (9) are seated, sharing a dark wooden piano bench with shiny, quilted black upholstery. They are reading sheet music and talking. Their legs swing freely and they are all smiles. They are happy to show me their brightly-

colored accordions. The girls attend Oliveira Elementary School in Fremont, CA., and they are fortunate to be able to play in some local school programming. Juni proudly exclaims that she recently played for all 24 students in her grade level. They also participate in the Cotati Accordion Festival and various competitions for their age group. They have played in the Cotati scholarship competition, and Annabelle also plays music from the Accordion Star International competition repertoire, even when she hasn't entered, in order to practice at a competitive level. Last year, she played an arrangement of "In the Jungle, the Mighty Jungle."²⁶⁸ This song appeals to children, and it is common to find a swirl of traditional songs from different countries in younger children's repertoire. Their father, Anand, also plays, and he encourages the girls to perform locally. For Annabelle, she recounts why she began playing as well:

Monica: I'm just going to ask you if you know why you started playing, what do you like about the instrument, and does it make you happy?

Annabelle: Umm, my dad started playing, and I thought it was cool, so I asked him if I could start playing.

Juni: Same.

Annabelle: Yeah, because I started playing, and Juni wanted to, too.

Monica: How old were both of you when you started playing?

Annabelle: I started two years ago.

Monica: So how old would that be... minus two?

Juni: Um, seven.

²⁶⁸ Song originally written by Solomon Linda and the Evening Birds in 1939 as "Mbube," and later more famously covered by American group The Tokens in 1961 as "The Lion Sleeps Tonight."

Annabelle: Oh, I was 6 and ½.

Recently, the family has taken to participating in outdoor performances:

Monica: Do you like to tour? That means when you go to visit different places to play for people.

Annabelle: Umm... Niles. Niles and the airport.

Anand: There is a busking program at the Oakland airport. I take them there on weekends.

Annabelle: We aren't going there this weekend, because we are going to see *Kung Fu Panda 4*.

Monica: Tell me about the airport.

Annabelle: There is a candy shop. So, we play our duet. And then my dad plays.

Juni: And then we play again.

Annabelle: And then I play a solo, Juni plays a solo, and then my mom plays the ukulele, then my dad plays the accordion, and Juni and me play too.

Monica: Do you talk to the people?

Juni: Um, no.

Annabelle: We just say 'thank you' or smile at them.

Monica: Does it make you nervous?

Annabelle and Juni: No (simultaneously).

Monica: Would you want to continue going to the airport? Or to Niles?

Juni: We don't go to Niles that much anymore.

Annabelle: Because our dad keeps taking us to the airport.

Anand: They like Niles because there's an ice cream shop.

Juni: And also, there's a park that I can ride my bike! Weee!!!!

Juni and Annabelle tell me how they feel free to enjoy their after-school activities separate from the accordion. Throughout their interview they mention playdates,

their preferences for sweet treats, and some of their friends from school. They show me their awards and proudly display items they made at school. Their dad shares with me that they enjoy their time with friends and as sisters. They enjoy accordion so much that for example, they revealed to me they are trying to see if their parents would allow them to begin practicing accordion at 6:00AM on school days.

Monica: And for Juni, how do you practice? What's your method? What's your process?

Juni: You know, um, I guess play it every day.

Monica: Is there any particular time?

Juni and Annabelle: Um, after school.

Monica: And you practice here.

Juni: Yeah.

Anand: So, they actually want to wake up at 6 AM to practice.

Monica: Really?

Anand: I let them down every single day. (Chuckles)

Monica: You want to wake up early and practice. Wow!

Anand: Yeah. They tried it for like three or four days.

Annabelle: I woke up at six this morning, but for some reason on weekends, I wake up really early on and I even woke up at 5:00AM and on weekdays I'm really sleepy.

Juni: Yeah, because we have to get there at eight.

This awareness of time is part of the dedication that is needed for beginning an instrument at such a young age, and I noticed in many of the interviews with children that practice was constant, although it was often their least favorite part

of the process. In the case of Juni and Annabelle, they are also taught in a group class setting by local accordion teacher Mike Zampiceni and by their own father in daily practice.

Monica: So, who did you start learning with? Is it dad only or was there another teacher?

Annabelle: Um, Mike Zampiceni.

Monica: Very good, yeah. So, Mike was your teacher, for both of you or just Annabelle?

Juni: Both... and we learned from daddy.

Monica: So, do you know how to play without reading the sheet music, or do you do it by memory, or do you like to have the book?

Annabelle and Juni: Ummmmm.

Juni: I can do “Tiny Marty” by myself because I’ve been playing it one million times.

Monica: So, you like it better by memory you think?

Juni: Yeah, “Tiny Marty,” just memory.

Annabelle: Um, I know I can memorize and play “In the Jungle” on the accordion with no sheet.

The songs they learn are typical from the earlier parts of the Palmer-Hughes book series, and some are beginning arrangements.²⁶⁹ Annabelle likes “Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes” and “Summer Wind,” and Juni enjoys “Aura Lee” and she is learning “Turn Around Tune,” and she also creates some small songs by ear. While Juni says she simply practices daily, Annabelle quoted that she learns by

²⁶⁹ Palmer-Hughes is a popular accordion method of teaching books that is widely-used by American accordion students. Introduced in the early 1950s, the series of books is still published in volumes 1-10 with specialty books dedicated to Christmas tunes and polkas.

“playing a million times” and “again and again and again and again.” Annabelle’s bright pink custom-made accordion is a Solloni accordion with 72 bass buttons purchased through Kevin Solecki, and it features a unicorn on the bellows with an A for her name. Juni’s accordion is an older model from the 1960s, and she plays a 12 bass that is appropriate for her size. She explains to me how the chords are ordered and then demonstrates a C scale for me on her left hand.

Monica: What is this? Tell me about it.

Juni: Accordion.

Monica: How many bass buttons do you have?

Juni: I have six.

Monica: Times two, right?

Juni: B and b chord, B flat, F chord, C chord, G chord, D chord, and whatever this one is. The A!

Monica: You got the top row - excellent.

Juni: I can play the C major scale on the left hand.

As she plays, I notice that Juni has excellent timing and is apt at composing her own songs. During the interview, I learned from Annabelle that Juni wrote her own song called the “Turkey Song” at the age of three.

Annabelle: Because I know the tune of it. “Twinkle Twinkle.”

Anand: Okay, but how do you know which chord goes with the tune?

Annabelle: Um, I just try, and every chord within a C, which one sounds better?

Monica: That's a really good point. So for you, when you make the songs up, do you have other ones that you've made? Or is this the only one?

Annabelle: Juni did... Juni made up a tiny song a long time ago even with like a tiny accordion.

Annabelle: She called it the “Turkey Song.”

Anand: She was like three.

Monica: Now, Annabelle do you compose or do you make some songs?

Annabelle: I did make a song on paper but I lost it. Wait, I found it!

Anand: She does things like that.

Monica: And so, does it help you? What do you do? Do you sing your songs?

Annabelle: Yeah, but my dad says not to.

Monica: But do you like singing your songs?

Juni: Yes!

Annabelle: I like singing songs with words.

Anand: Yeah, it makes it harder for them to learn, so it's not about singing it first before learning it. They want to sing it when they play it, and they start to make more mistakes, so I asked them not to.

Annabelle, on the other hand, creates small excerpts of tunes, which she scribbles on small pieces of paper. During the interview, I noticed how physically involved the sisters were with their instruments, demonstrating the need to convey the music they play through movement, singing, and writing. These were the same mediums that most of the performers I interviewed also engaged with in their own study. The sisters showed me their dedication to their craft through the two hours we spent at their home. Already at their young ages, they understand that it takes practice, and they have secured a routine of study that they incorporate into their daily lives. They also engage with their instruments in a way that intersects with their practice, family, and playtime.

Case Study 2: Interview with Colin Kennedy (13)

While the sisters were primary school-aged children learning to play, Colin's experience proved differently during the interview process.²⁷⁰ Colin Kennedy is about to enter high school, and he has been playing the accordion since he was eight years old. Having a more experienced player in the interview offered fruitful data as I was able to hear more about Colin's personal experience in playing and how he has gained some of his skills.

Colin: I started when I was like, like, eight, nine. Yeah, it was, I think I was nine at the time. Um, yeah, yeah, I was eight. My mom told me what she said, it'd be good if I started learning the accordion. I think I was in like, fifth or fourth grade at the time. So that's where I started.

Monica: That's awesome. Which school were you at?

Colin: I was at Dave's Avenue at the time.

Monica: Okay. So, when you learned accordion, did you study? I know who your teacher is but did you have a teacher already, or did someone in your family teach you?

Colin: When I first started the accordion, that's actually one of the issues we had, we couldn't find any accordion teachers. So there was actually, very luckily for us, there was a um, there was a man who, like Kevin was his name, he played the accordion, he lived like a couple of blocks away so it was very convenient and that's, that was my first teacher.

In Colin's age group, finding an accordion teacher is seemingly difficult in comparison to the other ages of interviewees. For example, older participants would recount the number of teachers they had and how many they were able to choose from in the 1950s. For example, Ed Massolo took from five different

²⁷⁰ Interview held via Zoom on February 6th, 2024.

teachers in the Bay Area between the 1930s and his retirement age in the 1970s.

As Colin continued, he told me more about his learning process in the early

stages:

Monica: Okay, so when you first pick it up, right. Are you using books? Are you playing by ear? Or are you listening to things that you like and maybe trying to copy? How do you learn it?

Colin: I was primarily learning through books, which can actually, primarily the Palmer-Hughes was probably the most common. Like, if you're looking for accordion books, there aren't a lot of places to go. So, Palmer-Hughes was one of the most widely printed and it's one of the easiest. Those were really my um, that was the material I started on.

Monica: Okay, do you remember how far you got in the book series?

Colin: I got to maybe book like four or five. With Mike my current teacher, we will occasionally go over pieces from it but the thing is, Mike, he has from a friend who passed away they had a very large collection of music, and it's actually we rarely use the Palmer-Hughes books now because there's just a lot more material that he has access to.

Monica: In the books. His other collection ok. Ah, okay. Which accordion did you start on? And is it the same one that you have now?

Colin: It was a 12-bass accordion and I don't use it anymore, and I actually don't even have it anymore. I think we sold it quite a while back. You can't really, you can't do quite a bit on it, but you can't do enough on it to keep performing.

Monica: Okay, thank you. And that suited you at the time. So, I'm assuming you moved on to the 120 bass?

Colin: Yeah, I moved onto 120 bass, which is the one I still use, I've picked up a few others. I had kept some, namely the Dallapé accordion, which was actually given to me by an elderly person who heard that I play the accordion and since they didn't have a use for it anymore, they would give it to me.

Monica: Oh, you have a very good model. Dallapé is wonderful. When did you switch for your lessons to Mike?

Colin: I think it was...we were getting the 120 bass accordion repaired. Valdet is where I get my accordions repaired. He said, "this is good, but you really need to see Mike." In 2019 and 2020.

At Colin's age, inheriting a Dallapé is something out of a storybook. The Dallapé company began in 1876 in Stradella, Italy. He owns a later, model but it is still in excellent condition and the accordion is backed by a name renowned for its craftsmanship. As we continue in our interview, Colin relays to me a bit about his lessons during the pandemic, how he practices, and why he likes the accordion:

Monica: Ok, so that's when you switched over to having a proper teacher. During COVID, did you, do study on Zoom?

Colin: Oh, yeah, it was all on Zoom. Actually, we still use Zoom because it's quite a commute actually.

Monica: Okay. And how do you feel about the Zoom lessons?

Colin: Zoom lessons? Like they, they work well, but there's no denying that in-person teaching is just superior.

Monica: Yeah, we all went through that, and it was very, very strange. I want to get back into the actual instrument itself. What makes you like the accordion?

Colin: I mean, it's just, it's a very, very unique instrument. It's essentially like, when you think about it, its closest relative is the organ. Or one of the closest relatives is the organ. And it's really just a unique instrument. I think it has such a role in like a lot of cultures, like, there are a lot of places that use the accordion in the music so it's very widespread. It's very unique. It can play most genres. So I just came to like that.

Monica: Do you have any preferred styles you like to play on it?

Colin: I've always been partial to more fast, like polkas is mainly what you think of when you hear accordion and fast. So I've played a lot of those.

Monica: If you had to give me maybe your top three polkas that you really enjoy. What are they?

Colin: I must say, up there has to be the "Beer Barrel Polka." It's a stereotype but for a good reason. It's a very good song. It's very iconic. Most people can recognize it. Another choice of mine, I will say the "Giulietta Polka." It's maybe not as well known, but it's still equally good, and for the last one, I'm gonna say the "Liechtensteiner Polka." I think it's actually... most people have, at one point or another, heard the melody. Maybe they don't know the name of it, but it's very well musically constructed. So, I always just found it to be a good piece.

Monica: So, if it's not polkas, what are other genres you enjoy?

Colin: Other genres I enjoy have to be marches. I like them. It's actually, yeah, they're very simple rhythmically, but I like that they're really straightforward. It's very simple. It's often a simple melody. Some of the same reasons I like polka as they can be very fast.

Monica: Yeah, and what about your practice process? Do you have, you know, a process when you go in to study or rehearse every week?

Colin: Practice, I mean, typically, it's like, maybe 15-minute little pieces here and there. I just, like, well, run through pieces and then...okay, so the first time I get it, like, play through it. Ignore, like, any mistakes, break the song into pieces, or like sections that need working on, and then you just go one by one, and you put them together as you go.

As Colin explained his process of learning I realized that the people I interviewed in the older age groups tended to have a very different experience. Ed Massolo relayed to me that in his practice, he was given one page of a piece each week, while Lou LeBrun remembered she was learning two pieces and expected to spend an hour a day practicing at minimum. Colin had a choice and agency in his practice process and was able to direct his study in a way that suited his learning style. Once more, in this project, I witnessed a shift in the way lessons were being delivered and the way students had more involvement and direction in their process.

In returning to the focus of this project and considering cultural products of sound through familial connections, one thing that definitely appeared clear to me was the fact that these younger generations experienced a very different reason for playing the accordion. The young people didn't necessarily play because they were from a specific cultural background but because they saw their parents enjoy it, and they also developed their own interests in the instrument.

Colin: Well, honestly, when I was (younger), my thoughts were not really about the accordion. It was about...I don't know what I really liked back then, but it was my mom. Because when you (turns to mom) grew up, and the accordion was like far more popular where you grew up than it was in the U.S.

Monica: And where did mom grow up?

Colin: Belarus is near Russia.

Monica: You are kind of connecting like a family background a little bit?

Colin: Yeah, family, yes.

Monica: So, do you have a lot of family members who play this?

Colin: I am pretty sure I am the only one who plays the accordion. But, I thought it just meant quite a bit to my mom from when she was growing up, so. It's a very unique instrument. I think it has such a role in a lot of cultures. There are a lot of places that use the accordion in their music. It's very widespread, it's very unique, and it can play most genres, so I just came to like that.

Monica: Right, who is going to continue these traditions? I would like to ask you, if you want to speak about some of that, like, what do you think is happening for the accordion? Let's say, in the next 20 years?

Colin: The thing is the large percentage of the accordion playing population, so to speak, is very rapidly aging, and when they're gone, it's going to be this, this rather small portion of young people, and it's really with the old people that a lot of the, like an accordion playing knowledge...is it's located with them. So, I think educating younger accordion players is important. So, so the accordion can really continue.

Colin, Annabelle, and Juni are part of the continuing accordion story and part of the sustainability factor for the instrument today. Throughout my interviews with older generations, I was told how the accordion became unhip, and some were teased for playing in high school. Arleen told me that the accordion was the last thing she was thinking about as a teenager, and John Monteverde also pointed out that rock and roll took over by the time he was in high school. During my experiences in interviews and observations over the past four years, I have

observed that for this current generation, there does not seem to be a stigma, and the accordion is having a bit of a resurgence. The students note a lower cost for used instruments and their parents' participation and interest. For example, it is easy to purchase an accordion on eBay or through the Facebook marketplace for an average of \$200-\$500. Lessons in the Bay Area cost \$40-\$70 per hour, but many instructors are open to meeting bi-weekly. There are also Zoom options to learn, and group lesson settings like those that Reno di Bono holds each weekend are a viable option to keep the cost down.

Colin was born in the Bay Area, but his mother was born in Belarus, and Annabelle and Juni's parents hail from Tamil Nadu, India. Both sets of parents were exposed to the instrument, and now their American-born children are playing the piano-accordion in their new host country. In my observations, the torch is no longer primarily held by Italian Americans these days, but it appears that the children of other immigrant groups are increasingly participating in the SFAC and Cotati Festival. The children and young persons from the accordion club are just a handful of players demonstrating the possibilities of how the clubs provide a sense of community and purpose for first-generation Americans today. The heritage elements may appear different now, but the purpose of uniting to celebrate the accordion and enjoy music is what remains. In addition, today's instruments are made accessible through a variety of materials and imports in more comfortable price ranges, and parents are no longer strained to pay thousands of dollars for a single accordion. I am excited to see how these three

young players progress in their studies, and it is my hope that another scholar will soon take up the task of reporting on how the accordion functions for young performers in California today.

Conclusions

Considering the Ethnomusicologist

Throughout this study, I turned inward to consider my own place in the project. I had to constantly examine the personal lens from which I experienced the performances and recognize that at some points in the study, I was afforded trust and acceptance because of my background and scholarship. It is not lost on me that people in the accordion community were interested in someone who was excited to study their instrument, shed light on some of the lesser-known facts, and showcase the history of their beloved music.

To position myself, I want to begin by stating that I am half Italian, with the other half being South Asian. I am extremely proud of my heritage on both sides, yet I maintained a closer connection to the Italian side through simple geography. After a ten-year stretch in Rhode Island, my immediate Italian side eventually settled in California, and the Gujurati side spread throughout the East Coast and into the UK as a result of the South Asian expulsion and genocide in Uganda circa 1972. In the early parts of my childhood, my father was the sole member of his family who decided to live in California, and it was in these years that I naturally became absorbed and connected to my Italian roots. My Italian grandparents became part of an intrinsic web of family support from a young age, and therefore, I witnessed many happenings that first-generation children experience. I had to translate and navigate patterns of Italianess that I didn't quite

understand then, and yet I did those things while being American. Much like the in-betweenness theory I approached in this dissertation, I also experienced a feeling of being neither here nor there in my upbringing, where music, family, and histories gathered to form a complex part of my identity.

Similar to Deborah Wong's experience in the final chapter of *Speak it Louder*, I often think about my own childhood and how it has come to inform this current project.²⁷¹ Music was a daily experience in my household. It ranged from 70s disco to soul music, Miriam Makeba on the weekends, and 1960s popular music like The Beatles and The Kinks. My first concert was to see Luciano Pavarotti at the age of nine when the family saved up for a special trip to hear one of his solo concert performances. I was also fortunate to participate in an Italian after-school cultural program where I learned elementary language skills, dancing, and the gastronomy of Italy. Accordion music was present at most family gatherings like parties and weddings, and in some instances, funerals and wakes. The music that my family listened to and experienced was part of what Christopher Small terms "musicking."²⁷² That is a total experience of making and participating in music as a process and an observer rather than simply being in the presence of music making. Music, in this way, becomes a shared experience. The foundation for Wong's argument in that final chapter is centered on the idea of

²⁷¹ Wong, Deborah. *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

²⁷² Small, Christopher. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

living and being in a music praxis with her own family and considering her interactions as something that needs to be considered through multiple lenses:

I regard listening as a kind of making. I want to call into question the most basic assumptions around music production. This book is subtitled *Asian Americans Making Music* for that reason. Our vocabulary for talking about the participation of ordinary people in music is paltry. Ordinary people “consume” music, or dance to it, or take lessons for a few years, or sing in the church choir, or listen to the radio, or buy CDs. Ordinary people are understood to “listen” to music, yet I believe that the act of listening is at once richer and more complex than we have yet theorized.²⁷³

In a similar way, I am in dialogue with Wong’s work in that I am considering how my own familial settings have informed my practice. I also examine how the accordion clubs and the Bay Area accordion community work symbiotically, where non-musicians participate by frequenting the club meetings, helping to prepare food for breaks, and assisting with local events when clubs appear at summer festivals and parties. My experience with these clubs and the musical intertwining within the history of my own family have proved invaluable to this project. Family becomes a direct cause for this project. With this framework, I first decided to study the accordion - because of my family. My grandparents loved their tapes of polkas and mazurkas, and I grew up hearing many of the songs I study today. When I first walked into the project, I wanted to study the music I heard growing up and thought I would reach a very different outcome from what I thought community meant for Italians in connection to the accordion.

²⁷³ Deborah Wong, *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 321.

I did not consider the geopolitical conditions of the northern part of Italy when considering the accordion, nor did I understand how much the community would change when I studied it - especially during COVID.

Loss and Change

As I mentioned in Chapter Five, I also recognized how much change occurred when we shifted to the Zoom medium. I also recognized that our clubs changed the way they met in a post-COVID world. For the past four years, our SFAC changed to a hybrid format where Ken Schwartz was able to garner more interest from those living outside of the Bay Area. While I have observed as many as 40 people in a Zoom, the club picnic hosts roughly 50 people each year. The hybrid format opened a new modality for those with mobility issues and people in neighboring clubs as well. One after-effect of this study that I did not consider when originally beginning the project was the loss that comes with the older persons involved in the project.

In 2024, three people from the oral history part of this project passed away. Lou Lebrun (1930-2024), Lou Jacklich (1928-2024), and Ed Massolo (1924-2024). All three of them were well-known accordion players in the Bay Area community clubs, and I was fortunate to know them through multiple personal interactions over the course of five years. In reflecting on their absence, I noted not only my own personal feeling of loss but the impact those deaths had on the accordion community. With their passing came the end of a specific type of

sound and style that they learned and inherited from their teachers about one hundred years ago. Besides my own experience, the SFAC and members at the Cotati Accordion Festival also recounted to me the emptiness they felt. Many of the clubs posted tribute videos and dedicated spaces in their newsletter for these individuals. The festival posted obituaries on their website <https://cotatifest.com/>. Their deaths also made me recognize once more how much of the older accordion community is passing away and just how critical it is to ensure the instrument is enjoyed by future generations. The focus on sustainability for the instrument from this very project became personally apparent in their passing. Two small ways I observe the continuity of performance for the instrument are in club outreach and through the support of younger accordionists.

In the SFAC, we are beginning to generate some interest in new club memberships each month. In my recent experience from 2023 and 2024, when the club began attending Italian festivals, there were handfuls of people who expressed interest in the club, and too many shared their lack of knowledge that the SFAC or any other accordion clubs existed. In the summer of 2024, I was asked to preside over a table at the Festa Italiana in North Beach, and I heard many of the same experiences from people who walked up to our table:²⁷⁴

Woman: Wait, we have an accordion club? It meets here?

Monica: We do have one, yes, and it meets in Millbrae.

Woman: Well, I'll be darned. Did you know about that? (Turns to husband.)

²⁷⁴ The San Francisco Athletic Club hosted the Festa Italiana on June 2nd, 2024.

Man: No, I've never heard of it. What types of things do you all do?

Monica: Well, we meet up and play for each other once a month, and we share snacks, it's a lot of fun. We also have regular guests and sometimes we are hybrid and on Zoom as well. It costs \$5 a meeting, or you can join for the year, \$35, I think.

Woman: What can you tell us about this one? I like how it looks like a Cadillac.

Monica: Yes the grill is a feature from that time where I think the design of the accordion looks very retro as it was inspired by the aesthetic from the 50s. Ok, so this is a Guerrini that was actually left to us by one of the club members, and you can see here the bass buttons on my left, and then on the right, we have a standard piano keyboard, but it is flipped sideways. Do either of you play piano?

Man: I did a little.

Monica: Ok, well then, you would just need to start getting used to the motion of playing vertically rather than horizontally, but if you know piano and you have good left-hand coordination, I am confident you could pick this up rather quickly. Would you like to try it?

Man: Oh, I won't even know where to start.

Monica: Ok, well, you can watch me play, and then if you have questions, just ask.

During that event, I stayed at the table from 10:30 am to 4 pm (minus 45 minutes to observe some performances) and had at least 40 people come up to the booth asking me about the accordion and its history in San Francisco. What I noticed at that festival was that, yes, we were at an Italian festival, but the accordion was malleable for so many events and purposes. The club could have easily also set up a table at an Oktoberfest, which celebrates German food and music, Carnival, which has become a pan-LatinX event in the city, Pride Parade and Celebration for queer arts, or the St. Patrick's Day Parade and fair which celebrates Irish heritage and history in the city. The accordion club of today is no

longer tied to strictly Italian heritage and it is now open to showcase all of the intersectional cultural offerings the Bay Area has to offer.

Another way to connect through outreach is by simply relocating club meetings. In our recent gatherings in the Fall of 2024, the president is experimenting with holding meetings in Piedmont, which is located just two miles from Oakland. In shifting the meeting space, the president informed us in a newsletter that there is a new population of accordionists interested in attending club meetings. The club has been relocated a number of times since its current iteration that returned in the 1990s but all locations were hosted in San Francisco. Both the Donworth Hall and the Verdi Club were two such spaces that hosted the club. The president stated the success of the East Bay meeting in a newsletter:

Last February's meeting in the East Bay was declared a success! We saw both familiar and many new faces participating. What works once is worth repeating, so we will be holding this month's Accordion Circle again at the historic Piedmont High School Student Center, Building B, 800 Magnolia Avenue, Piedmont, CA 94611.²⁷⁵

In hosting the club meetings in the East Bay, it is my hope that the club will gain some interest from followers living in the vicinity.

Finally, the importance of supporting young players in the festivals is essential if we are to see progress in the sustainability factor of the instrument. At the Cotati Accordion Festival, the roster of students entering the Dick and Judy Contino Accordion Scholarship continues to grow. The scholarship provides

²⁷⁵ Newsletter from the SFAC dated October 10, 2024.

\$1200 to a student who is a junior or senior in high school, and they must “exhibit superior technical skills and a proficient ability as exhibited in their presentation of four contrasting pieces.”²⁷⁶ For even younger performers, the Cotati Accordion Festival provides smaller scholarships from \$300-\$500, and the guidelines for those are less restrictive: “Students are not required to memorize their selections; however, memorization is strongly urged. Students are not deducted points if they read from a score; however, placement of the sheet music stand should not interfere with the judges’ need to observe students.”²⁷⁷ I am happy to say that the young players from this project (Juni, Annabelle, and Colin) all participated in the scholarships in both 2023 and 2024.²⁷⁸ To help fund the scholarships, the Cotati Accordion Festival hosts an annual fundraising concert at the Church of the Oaks on the Friday before the festival begins.²⁷⁹ In 2024, the group raised \$4,000, which was awarded to nine students. The President of the LA Accordion Club, David Noferi, was present and quoted on the importance of teaching and awarding younger players: “The whole point is to share knowledge and instruction of the accordion with our younger generation.” Open to all ages, the Cotati Accordion Student Stage (colloquially known as CASS) hosted nearly three hours of student players for the 2024 program.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁶ Quoted from a Cotati scholarship announcement for the 2023 iteration of the festival.

²⁷⁷ Scholarship Guidelines and Rules: Cotati Accordion Student Stage (CASS) 2023.

²⁷⁸ I am happy to report that Colin Kennedy was the recipient for the \$500 level top prize in the 2021 festival gathering.

²⁷⁹ In 2024, the fundraiser was held on August 16th.

²⁸⁰ Held on August 17, 2024, 9:30 to noon in Cotati, CA at the festival grounds at La Plaza Park.

Future Research

After this dissertation is published, my plan is to eventually gather my findings and strengthen the arguments and data presented here into the basis for a formal book project. I will likely add to the recent interview materials and photos, and I will update any names and addresses as needed, complete with a current bibliography. Since this is such a niche area, I would like to see other authors and scholars take up the cause of keeping a memory of the accordion in all of its threads, even if not Italian. In California alone, there are over a dozen accordion clubs from San Diego up to the Oregon border, and plenty of young students and potential new instructors are waiting to take up the interest in this instrument.

It is my hope that the material presented here is useful for those who study or play the accordion and for those who study related repertoires and accordion-adjacent materials. This information will serve scholars interested in the Bay Area communities of musicians performing on the Hohner Corona series of instruments, typical to Tex-Mex and *Norteño* styles. I think there are possible connections and observations to be considered for musics that appeared in California alongside the Italian songs I mention in this project. In addition to Italian communities, it is my hope that a scholar will also pursue the politics of the accordion in Chinese communities of the Bay Area. While I did not touch upon that subject in this project, Pamela Tom has shared with me some of her own research on Laura Loew Park (1880-1959), a Chinese female accordionist who lived and worked as a musician in San Francisco in the 1920s and 30s.

Pamela is now attempting to delve further into Park's rich history and consider the omissions and experiences that occurred during the time period pertaining to the scope and range of the dissertation.

I will also encourage a space for future scholars to write and publish stories concerning LGBTQ performers that have been omitted through the lens of antiquated canons. I hope that as scholars move forward, they research, acknowledge, and name such performers. In my own scholarship, this was an area that did not appear overtly but I did come across performers appearing on Ray's Deli Stage (the secondary staging area at the Cotati Festival) who identified as queer. I also hope that scholars will continue to research the history of women's involvement in the accordion. I have been fortunate to speak with a few known women who are both accordion players and major figures in the accordion community in the United States, including Joan Cochran Summers and Dr. Helmi Harrington. I would like to see an excellent historical scholarship dedicated to fully researching the lives of women who were omitted in the 1920s and 30s. For example, I cannot seem to find information on Vittoria Galla-Rini after 1930. She was the sister of American accordion artist Anthony Galla-Rini. I found numerous advertisements of Vittoria in the Italian-language newspaper *L'Italia* where she is mentioned to perform with her brother, but after papers in the 1930s she is nowhere to be found. I did hear from an anonymous and trusted scholar during an interview that her brother denied having a sister. There is much here to concern

ourselves in the silencing of women's accordion histories, and the work is at a critical point.

Some other areas of interest that I would like to see researched (as they pertain to the West Coast) are as follows: young people in various immigrant communities who play the accordion, the accordion communities of Petaluma and Cotati, further research of accordion club histories, the now defunct accordion schools and competitions that dotted the West Coast in the 1950s and 60s, the accordion at Italian festivals of Southern California (held in San Diego and Los Angeles), USO shows that featured accordion, the accordion as it appeared in prisons, the accordion on military bases and how it was used during WWII, continuing research on the SFAC to consider what happened to the club from 1916-1949, and the history of minstrelsy and the accordion in California.

Appendices

I. Vocabulary

- AAA (American Accordionists' Association)
- Accordion Club - a club dedicated to the preservation of accordion music through monthly meetings where members perform for each other. Some meetings feature known accordionists in a single meeting, and there is usually an "accordion circle" where all members are invited to play.
- ATG (Accordion Teacher's Guild)
- Bisonoric - a button or key on an accordion that produces a different note when the bellows are compressed versus expanded.
- Diatonic accordion - A Diatonic accordion has two reeds tuned to different pitches for each note. The direction of the bellows determines which note is produced.
- Double Action - The pitch of the note is not affected by the direction of the bellows. C is the same note on the out bellows as it is on the in bellows.
- Free Bass - Unlike the *stradella* system, all the bass buttons play individual notes. This setting gives the accordion a fantastic range of notes. Organ and piano pieces can be played without needing to be arranged. Free Bass is used by many baroque and classical players.
- Italian American - a person who lives in the United States and is part of the Italian diaspora
- Piano-accordion - a free-reed instrument that uses a piano keyboard on the right side and a Stradella bass system on the left. In this dissertation, the reader should know the word "accordion" is assumed to mean "piano-accordion" at all times unless otherwise specified.
- *Stradella* bass - also known as standard bass, it is the most common mechanical system used in accordions. With six rows of bass buttons, the system is a mix of single bass notes and chords: major, minor, 7th, and diminished. The name derives from the city of Stradella located in the province of Pavia, Italy where accordion factories were located since the late 19th-century.

III. The former accordion studio of Theodore Pezzolo located at 1682 Union Street, San Francisco, CA.



IV. Alameda County Board Meeting Document May 7, 1990, declaring the accordion as San Francisco's official instrument

FILE NO. 180-90-1 RESOLUTION NO. 319-90
 (The Piano Accordion)
 MEMORIALIZING THE MAYOR TO PROCLAIM AND MAKE THE PIANO ACCORDION THE
 OFFICIAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENT FOR THE CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO.

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MINUANO, The piano accordion was first manufactured in the United States in San Francisco by Finau Plataneal in 1907; and MINERAS, Between 1907 and 1950, there were at one point no fewer than eight accordion manufacturers in San Francisco; and MINERAS, Finau Plataneal was awarded medals for craftsmanship in a musical instrument at the 1915 World's Fair; and MINERAS, The first all accordion band, "The Accordion Club" started in San Francisco in 1915, and today's foremost all accordion band, "Those Darn Accordionists" is also comprised of San Franciscans; and
 MINERAS, Dick Contino, the most famous accordionist in the world today studied and began his career in San Francisco; and MINERAS, Signatures have been gathered to have the accordion declared the official instrument of San Francisco; and MINERAS, To date, there is no official instrument for the City and County of San Francisco; now, therefore, be it RESOLVED, That the Board of Supervisors hereby memorializes the Mayor to proclaim the piano accordion the official instrument of the City.

SUPERVISORS MINORITY

Adopted - Board of Supervisors, San Francisco April 23, 1990

Ayes: Supervisors Gonzalez Kennedy Maher Weider Weiser Marc

Noes: Supervisors Alioto Scott Hallinan Honglato

Absent: Supervisors Haib

I hereby certify that the foregoing resolution was adopted by the Board of Supervisors of the City and County of San Francisco

[Signature]
 Clerk

File No. 180-90-1 Date Approved _____ Mayor

May 7, 1990

I hereby certify that the foregoing resolution, not being signed by the Mayor, shall be deemed to have been adopted by the Board of Supervisors of the City and County of San Francisco in accordance with the provisions of said Section 2.302 of the Charter.

[Signature]
 Clerk

File No. 180-90-1

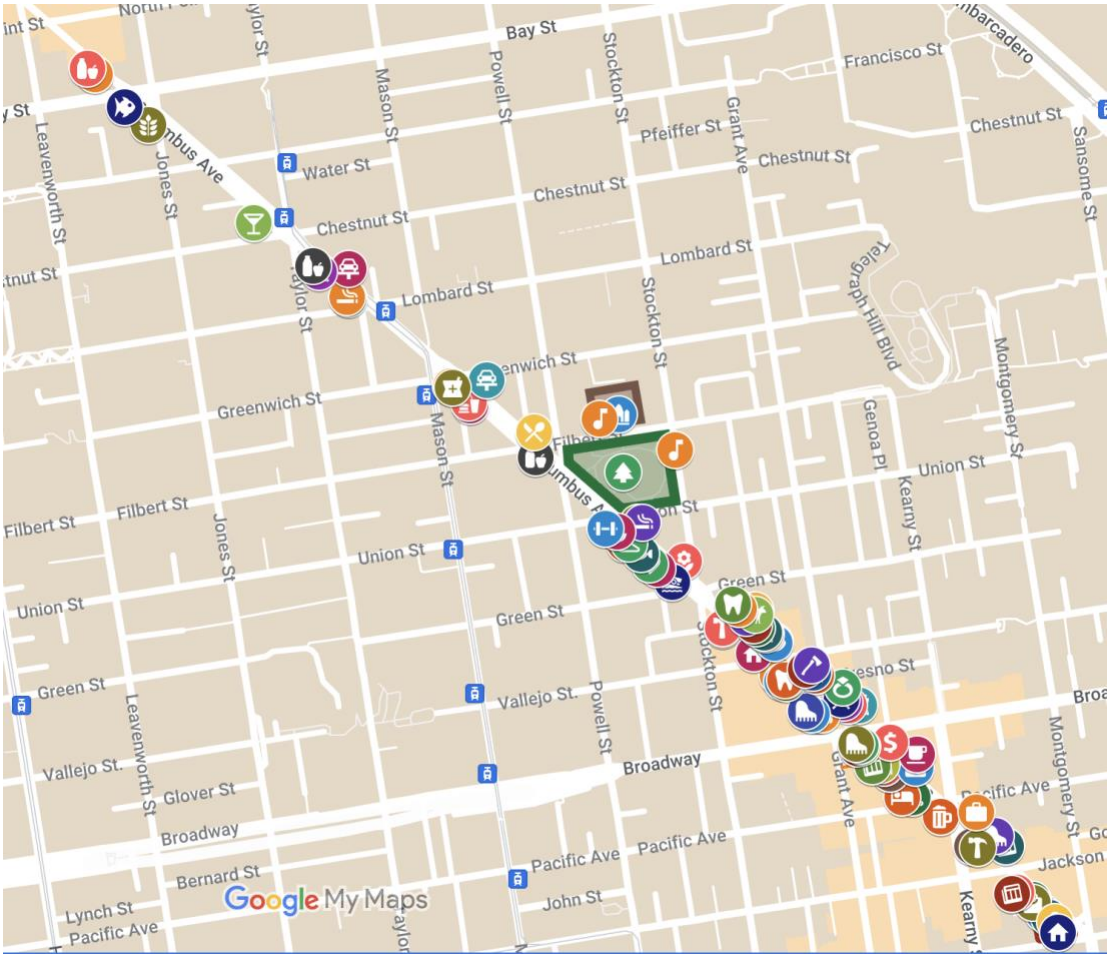


V. Maps

A. Shepherd, William. "Map of Unification of Italy 1815-1870." *Historical Atlas*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911. Accessed December 20, 2022. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Italy_unification_1815_1870.jpg 1815-1870.



B. Recreated map of the North Beach section of San Francisco by Monica F. Ambalal. November 20, 2021.



VI. Sheet Music for 'O sole mio.' Composed by Eduardo di Capua. Lyrics by Giovanni Capurro. "O Sole Mio." New York, Schirmer, 1904.

55

'O sole mio!

My Sunshine.

Poem by G. Capurro.
English version by
Henry G. Chapman.

E. di Capua.

Andantino.

mf

The piano introduction is in 4/4 time, marked 'Andantino' and 'mf'. It features a simple harmonic accompaniment with a steady bass line and a treble line of chords and single notes.

p

1. Che bel - la co - sa
1. Oh! what's so fine, dear,

The vocal line begins with a half rest, followed by a melodic phrase. The piano accompaniment continues with a steady accompaniment.

'na iur - na - ta'e so - le, n'a - ria se - re - na dop - po 'na tem -
As a day of sun - shine? The sky is clear at last, The rain and

The vocal line continues with a melodic phrase. The piano accompaniment continues with a steady accompaniment.

pe - stal Pe' ll'a - ria fre - sca pa - re già 'na fe - sta...
storm are past, Thro' air so cool, so bright, Comes the fes - tal sun - light...

The vocal line continues with a melodic phrase. The piano accompaniment continues with a steady accompaniment.

17481

cresc. *mf*

- Che bel - la co - sa 'na iur - na - ta'è so - le. Ma n'a - tu
 - Oh! what's so fine, dear, As a day of sun - shine? An - oth - er

so - le chiu' bel - lo, ohi - na, 'o so - le mi - o sta nfron - te a
 sun - light Far love - lier lies, Oh my own sun - shine! In your dear

f

te, 'o so - - - le 'o so - le mi - o
 eyes! Oh sun - - - shine, my own sun - shine,

p

- sta nfron - te a te, sta nfron - te a te!
 - In your dear eyes, in your dear eyes!

p *D. C.*

'O Sole mio!

I

CHE bella cosa 'na iurnata 'e sole,
 N'aria serena doppo 'na tempesta!
 Pe' ll'aria fresca pare già 'na festa...
 Che bella cosa 'na iurnata 'e sole.

Ma n'atu sole
 Cchiù bello, ohinè,
 ||:'o sole mio
 Sta nfronte a te!:||

II

Lùceno 'e llastre d' 'a fenesta toia;
 'na lavannara canta e se ne vanta,
 E pe' tramente torce, spanne e canta,
 Lùceno 'e llastre d' 'a fenesta toia.

Ma n'atu sole, ecc.

III

Quanno fa notte e 'o sole se ne scenne,
 Mme vene quase 'na malincunia;
 Sotto 'a fenesta toia restarria,
 Quanno fa notte e 'o sole se ne scenne.

Ma n'atu sole
 Cchiù bello, ohinè,
 ||:'o sole mio
 Sta nfronte a te!:||

My Sunshine

I

Oh! what's so fine, dear, as a day of sunshine?
 The sky is clear at last, the rain and storm are past,
 Through air so cool, so bright, comes the festal sunlight.
 Oh! what's so fine, dear, as a day of sunshine?

Another sunlight
 Far lovelier lies,
 ||:Oh! my own sunshine,
 In your dear eyes.:||

II

The sunlight flashes from your windowsashes,
 And as her clothes she wrings, the washerwoman sings!
 She works with happy smile, and sings, for all the while
 The sunlight flashes from your windowsashes.

Another sunlight, etc.

III

When day is ending and the sun's descending,
 A tender sadness pervades my gladness;
 I long to linger underneath your window,
 When day is ending and the sun's descending.

For another sunlight
 Far lovelier lies,
 ||:Oh! my own sunshine,
 In your dear eyes.:||

VII. Federal Immigration Laws

- 1790: Naturalization Act of 1790²⁸¹
- 1882: Chinese Exclusion Act²⁸²
- 1885: Foran Act (Prohibited contract labor)²⁸³
- 1921: Emergency Quota Act²⁸⁴
- 1924: Johnson-Reed Act (Immigration Act of 1924)²⁸⁵
- 1952: McCarran-Warner Act (Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952)²⁸⁶
- 1953: Refugee Relief Act²⁸⁷
- 1965: Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965²⁸⁸

VIII. Italian-Language Newspapers Used in Research

Il Corriere del Popolo

- 1911-1967
- Frequency varies, delivered on Tuesday and Friday
- Published by Pedretti Brothers Pub.

Il Leone

- (Microfilm: 1929-1930, 1932, 1934-1988).

La Colonia Svizzera

- 1903-1958
- Weekly
- Swiss Pub. Company

²⁸¹ Jamie Maniloff, "Section 5.2 Naturalization Act of 1790," *Diversity: Understanding and Navigating Discrimination in America* (Dover, DE.: Omnigraphics, 2021), 65.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁸³ Ronald Young, "Foran Act," *St. James Encyclopedia of Labor History Worldwide*, ed. Neil Schlager 1 (Detroit: St. James Press, 2004), 317.

²⁸⁴ Kristofer Allfeldt, "Rejecting the United States of the World: The Consequences of Woodrow Wilson's New Diplomacy on the 1921 Immigration Act," *European Journal of American Culture* 26, no. 3 (2007): 145.

²⁸⁵ Richard K. Vedder and Matthew Denhart, "The Immigration Act of 1924: A Centenary Reflection," *The Independent Review* 29, no. 2 (2024): 335.

²⁸⁶ Maddalena Marinari, "Divided and Conquered: Immigration Reform Advocates and the Passage of the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 35, no. 3 (2016): 9.

²⁸⁷ David Rego, "Refugee Relief Act (1953)," in *Chinese Americans: The History and Culture of a People*, ed. Jonathan H.X. Lee (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 107.

²⁸⁸ See: Orchowski, Margaret Sands. *The Law That Changed the Face of America: The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

La Sentinella

- Frequency: Monthly
- 1915 - ???
- Editor and publisher: Gastone G. Bertini (d. 10.30.1930), 1752 Grant Avenue

La Tribuna

- Frequency: Saturdays
- 1903-1920
- Editor: C. Martini

L'eco d'Italia

- Frequency: Weekly
- Dates: 1968-1970, 1974
- Merged with L'Italo-American (LA)

L'Ecco della Patria

- Editor: Federico Biesta
- 1868 - ???

L'Italia

- (1887-1943)
- Frequency: Tuesday-Saturday
- Editor: Ettore Patrizi

L'Italo-Americano

- Merged with *L'Eco d'Italia*
- Frequency: Weekly
- 1957-1982

La Scintilla Italiana

- Editor: Giovanni Fugazi

Secolo Nuovo

- Frequency: Weekly
- Microfilm: 1903

Voce del Popolo

- Frequency: varies - weekly, semi-weekly, monthly
- Microfilm: 1867-1943

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Field Recordings/Interviews

Albini, Steve. Festa Coloniale Italiana, performer. June 4, 2023, North Beach, San Francisco, CA.

Cain, Paul. Visiting personal collection with the owner, by Monica Ambalal. September 20, 2021. Audio recording, personal collection, Prunedale, CA.

Cirelli Jr., Vince. Interview by Monica Ambalal, June 26, 2021. Audio recording, personal collection, San Jose, CA.

DiBono, Reno. Interview by Monica Ambalal, August 22, 2021. Audio recording, personal collection, Cupertino, CA.

DiMaggio, Lou. Interview by Monica Ambalal, March 15, 2021. Phone recording, personal collection, Antioch, CA.

Fell, Skyler. Interview by Monica Ambalal, July 22, 2023. Zoom with transcript, personal collection, Yucca Valley, CA.

Jacklich, Lou. Multiple recordings of personal lessons between 2020-2024. Audio recordings, personal collection, San Lorenzo, CA.

Jakubovic, Valdet. Visiting in the repair shop. June 13, 2021 Audio recording, personal collection, San Jose, CA.

Johnson, Arleen and Frank Venturelli. September 14, 2022. Audio recording, personal collection, San Mateo, CA.

Kennedy, Colin. February 6, 2024. Zoom with transcript, personal collection.

Klement, Karl. Interview by Monica Ambalal, February 4, 2021. Zoom with transcript, personal collection, Oregon State.

LeBrun, Lou. Interview by Monica Ambalal, January 30, 2021. Zoom with transcript, personal collection, San Leandro, CA.

Marotta Jr., Mike. September 10, 2022. Audio recording, performer at Festa Italia Fisherman's Festival. Monterey, CA.

Massolo, Ed. Interview by Monica Ambalal, August 22, 2023. Audio recording, personal collection, South San Francisco, CA.

Monteverde, John. Interview by Monica Ambalal, March 13, 2024. Phone interview. Piedmont, CA.

Palmisano, Dominic. Interview by Monica Ambalal, March 2, 2021. Zoom with transcript, personal collection, San Leandro, CA.

Pandori, Don. Funeral. Mixed company and performers at a wake. April 7, 2022. Audio recording, personal collection.

Perry, David. June 28, 2021. Phone interview. Father worked at Standard Accordion; student of Ernest Gloe.

Petosa Jr., Joseph. Interview by Monica Ambalal at Petosa Accordions, January 24, 2023. Audio recording, Lynwood, WA.

Piatanesi, Louise. March 13, 2024. Phone interview, uncle worked at the Columbo Accordion factory.

Pigini, Francesca. December 15, 2022. Visit to Pigini Accordions. Audio recording, Acquaviva (Castelfidardo), IT.

Pilgrim, Joanne. July 23, 2021. Phone interview, former student of Anthony Galla-Rini.

Pizzo, Steve. Interview by Monica Ambalal, July 25, 2021. Audio recording, personal collection, Granite Bay, CA.

San Francisco Accordion Club meeting, May 22, 2024. Audio recording, personal collection, Millbrae, CA.

San Francisco Accordion Club Picnic. July 31, 2022. Audio recording, personal collection. Beresford Park, San Mateo, CA.

San Francisco Italian Heritage Parade. Molinari's Deli, and walking Columbus Avenue, October 10, 2021. Audio recording, personal.

Savant, Don. Interview by Monica Ambalal, June 11, 2021. Zoom with transcript, personal collection, San Leandro, CA.

Selvaraj, Annabelle, and Juni Aruldass, March 9, 2024. Audio recording, personal collection, Fremont, CA.