

Accordion Boy

By Thomas V. Lerczak

[Author's preface: *I first began making notes for this essay over twelve years ago in preparation for being interviewed at Dickson Mounds Museum, Lewistown, Illinois, as part of a series of programs the museum planned on American roots music (e.g., folk, mountain, blues, zydeco). Up to that point, I had never thought that playing the accordion was much out of the ordinary or that anyone other than my mother would be interested in reading about it; but after seeing the videotape of the interview, which was part of the Smithsonian's "New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music" traveling exhibit, I realized that placing my accordion experiences into the larger context of history and personal growth could result in a unique and interesting story. I hope that I have been successful in accomplishing that. The following essay, first published in [Sobatka Literary Magazine](#) (Issue #8) is the result.*]

The steady breeze that blew in from the west did little to relieve the afternoon's heat and humidity. And so only one week into my retirement at age 60, I remained inside our air-conditioned bluff top cabin, playing one song after another on my guitar, gazing out across the backwaters and forests of the three-mile-wide Illinois River valley. The songs came easily from deep within as my right hand hammered out rhythms and tunes, and with only a small effort I recalled each song's lyrics and their meanings while simultaneously thinking about the past, the idyllic scene in view, and what the future might hold. At times like this I have found it to be absolutely true that while playing a musical instrument, the mind enters a highly enhanced state of functioning and awareness on many levels.

When I finished Martha Scanlan's song "Little Bird of Heaven" with its final line "There's a little bird of heaven right here in your hand," I paused for a moment: Yes, there is, I thought, and how fortunate I have been to have music as such an integral part of my life, listening as well as playing.

My maternal grandfather was the musician in our family. And his instrument of choice was the button accordion, a highly ornate, old-time instrument in the shape of a box that looked like it came straight out of the Middle Ages. There were sets of keys or buttons for the left and right hands to press with bellows in between. Moving the bellows in and out forced air through internal reeds which created the sounds. I don't recall that my grandfather could read music; in fact, I believe that he played strictly "by ear," meaning that the tunes were in his head, and he simply "knew" which buttons to press at the proper times. The right hand played the melody, while the left played the rhythm or bass which sounded like "oom pah pah, oom pah pah" for $\frac{3}{4}$ walzes, and "oom pah, oom pah" in $\frac{4}{4}$ time. As a small boy, I thought he was a genius, and I longed for the day when I would be old enough to play a musical instrument.



The author's grandfather, Vincent Zelizko, mid-1960s.

Riding a great wave of European immigration to the United States following

World War I, both my maternal grandparents came to the United States in 1922 from a part of Czechoslovakia called Bohemia. They brought along few material possessions from the “Old Country,” as they referred to Europe, but in their minds they carried the cultural richness of the home country in the form of secret food recipes, language, stories, and music. Like other European immigrants, my grandparents sought out folks like themselves who spoke their native language, much like anyone would do if transported to a strange foreign land. And with so many immigrants from different countries doing the same, major parts of large cities, like Chicago where they eventually settled, became composed of neighborhoods defined by ethnic origin or race. In these neighborhoods, the home cultures survived in reality, not just memory. In “Little Bohemia,” not surprisingly, the button accordion was king.

Finally in 1966, at eight years of age, I was deemed old enough for music lessons. The Chicago Park District’s Lawndale Park offered lessons for several types of instruments, but my parents never really thought seriously about anything other than the accordion. I, however, was more open-minded. With The Beatles at the top of the music charts, I remember thinking that maybe guitar lessons were the way to go; my grandfather, though, scoffed at that idea; and the sad fact was that all of the guitar classes were full. But the accordion class had plenty of room for more students, and, besides this, I was assured by my grandfather that “The accordion player always gets the girls.” Of course, I was embarrassed by the idea of “getting girls,” but I thought if this instrument could influence females, maybe there was something to it, something even The Beatles were missing. In fact, who were George, Paul, John, and Ringo

anyway compared to an accordion? So accordion lessons it was...for the next ten years.



The author 1966.

Progress was a bit slow at first, though, probably because I was only a few steps behind my music teacher at the park, who could barely play. My grandfather occasionally tried to offer a little guidance, but I was learning on the more modern piano accordion (with keys for the right hand similar to a piano), which he could not play. And at my lessons I was being taught to play from written music, and discouraged from playing by ear, as this was thought to be undisciplined and merely made-up music. So my grandfather and I never really teamed up, although he did teach me the tunes of several Czech folk songs, which I continued to play without written music. Those songs, in particular, made my 67-year-old grandmother smile, even while she may also have been thinking of the times when she carried my 20-pound accordion a half mile to my school for “Show and Tell.”

By the summer of 1967, I could read simple music and had shown at least a rudimentary ability. And so I was encouraged to enter Lawndale Park’s annual talent contest, where I would be in competition with other children who were taking music or dance lessons at the park. It was stiff competition, indeed, especially

the little girl in a ballerina costume and one boy whose parents had purchased a professional accordion system for him called a Cordovox. I thought they probably spent many thousands of dollars on that equipment, which consisted of an electronic piano accordion with four suitcase-sized amplifiers that could sound like an organ. Where did he come from? I wondered. I didn't remember seeing him at any of the accordion lessons. There was no way I would win.

On the evening of the talent show, the park district's auditorium was packed. The audience's size, by my conservative estimate through the fog of 50 years, must have been at least 200. And the park district staff were highly excited by the turnout, which added to the anticipation and my anxiety of playing before a large crowd. As I stood backstage and peeked through the curtains, I could see several of my neighborhood friends, including the girl who lived across the street from me, sitting in the front row; she would soon be impressed, I thought, and be putty in my hands, although I had no idea what to do if that actually happened.

Soon the show began. I was too nervous to pay much attention to the first several acts which quickly passed, and then it was my turn. I plugged my small accordion into the amplifier system, and with an anxious stomach waited for my introduction. After the curtain abruptly opened, I stood there ready to puke. The stage lights blinded me to all but the first few rows of the audience. In the sidelines I saw my music teacher nodding to me: Play! And so I began a song called "Juke Box Rock," with my left hand pounding out the bass rhythm, "oom pah, oom pah, oom pah, oom pah," which I could feel through the floor. I played with no mistakes, this song I had practiced maybe 100 times (my poor family), but it was quickly over. The

audience cheered and clapped. I stood there in shock, probably with my mouth hanging open, and the curtain closed.

A few more acts followed and then a short break ensued so the Cordovox system could be set up for the last act. When the curtains opened, it was as if we were engulfed by no less than the mighty Heavens; the kid was a deity and his Cordovox was magical; it looked like an accordion, but it sounded like a mixture of smooth organ-like sounds, deep bass notes, and haunting violins, a triumphant combination of talent and electronics. After this performance, I think there was no doubt in anyone's mind who would win first place.

Finally, all of the participants were called to the stage to stand together as the judges announced the winners. The kid with the Cordovox, of course, took the first place trophy. I have no recollection who won second place, but then as the third place winner was announced, everyone began looking at me, and I realized that it was my name being called. The door had opened to accordion stardom.

But the next year saw only minor progress in my playing. I learned many new songs, but I was not learning proper technique or increasingly complex music. My music teacher admitted that he had done all he could with me, given his own limited abilities, and suggested I pursue private lessons with a professional accordion player. And so, I became a student of Tommy Kosatka in Cicero, with one-on-one meetings once per week. I played scales over and over, and learned proper fingering techniques, chords, how to play songs in different keys, and how to improvise, which to me seemed very similar to playing by ear. I learned how to read and play more complex music and how to add a personal touch to an arrangement. Mr. Kosatka challenged me to do better and

not be afraid of any music, no matter how complicated; I would simply learn pages and pages of music one measure at a time over a period of weeks. I learned rock, jazz, pop, crooner ballads, and, of course, polkas. Many polkas. These lessons provided a firm foundation in musical theory with the precision of mathematics.

While all of this was happening, though, my musical tastes were changing as I became older, especially after I entered high school. Like most kids, I listened to music on the top 40 AM pop stations in the 1960s. None of this included accordion music, except maybe as a background instrument. So I did not listen to accordion music for enjoyment or inspiration. The Lawrence Welk Show, of course, had accordion music. But Lawrence Welk was...well...Lawrence Welk. Squaresville. None of my friends watched this program; their parents did, of course. But how could parents know anything about what was good? Polkas were from the Old Country. I had entered the rebellious teenage phase of rejecting the older generation and their music.

And while I continued to take accordion lessons, by the early 1970s I became drawn to music that had deeper meanings or stories in the lyrics. Creedence Clearwater Revival sang about the riverboat "Proud Mary" and leaving a job in the city, "*working for the man every night and day.*" In "Me and Bobby McGee," Janis Joplin sang about being free, owning little, and drifting around the country, where "*Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose.*" I was drawn to singers like Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, and Tom T. Hall who sang about working and living hard, and the challenges faced in everyday living. Bob Dylan's sardonic lyrics, commentaries on society's ills, struck many nerves. And during this time period, the world was literally about to blow up. The

Cold War and thermonuclear threat were raging, with the Soviet leader shouting that his country would bury us. There was the Vietnam War, the maniacal Cultural Revolution in China, war in the Middle East, starvation in Bangladesh and Africa, the 60s assassinations, civil rights protests and riots in our cities including my hometown Chicago, air and water pollution getting worse, hippies and free love, and we were putting men on the Moon.

Through all of this, I played the accordion, diligently learning the music Mr. Kosatka placed in front of me. But it was not long before he could tell that something was missing, and I felt that too. I was competently learning to play the notes, some very complicated songs, but I now know that what was lacking was the heart, a connection to the inner soul and life experience. Just playing the notes as written is not enough; true emotion must be a part of the playing, and that must be real, not something to be produced on demand. When I listened to recordings of my accordion playing, I could hear that something was missing, which was not so apparent when I was actually playing the music. One day when it became clear that I was unprepared for my lesson, Mr. Kosatka finally asked me: "What kind of music do you listen to? What do you want to play?" He rightly knew that the songs I listened to on my record player and on the radio were the ones I should be playing on the accordion; these songs, he hoped, would make that important personal connection to the music and put the heart into my playing. So I bought song books by Kris Kristofferson, Bob Dylan, Creedence, and others, plus assorted sheet music of songs I heard on the radio. I played "Proud Mary" and "Me and Bobby McGee" on the accordion. It kind of worked for a while, providing some new inspiration, but there was still something missing. While I

played the tunes, I would hear the lyrics in my head; I needed something more than the accordion could offer, especially since in the end, they all still sounded like polkas from the Old Country. Now, a polka may be a fine piece of music, but the fact is that certain types of instruments sound best for certain types of music; one would not attempt “Stairway to Heaven,” for example, on the tuba, although the results might be amusing. I did not wish to be amusing.

After I graduated from high school, I stopped the accordion lessons, mainly because for a couple of years, I was no longer advancing, and both the teacher and student seemed to be out of ideas. I think Mr. Kosatka knew this too, but he was not about to suggest that a paying student discontinue; if I stayed under his tutelage for the rest of my life, I think he would have been fine with that.

In the late 1960s and 1970s a part of Chicago’s north side was at the epicenter of a folk music renaissance that produced such icons as John Prine and the late Steve Goodman, as well as the renowned Old Town School of Folk Music. As it turned out, I was able to experience the tail end of this musically rich period, especially at the same time that disco was taking over the airwaves and popular night spots; and this resulted in my musical tastes moving further from accordion music. A key factor was that in 1976, the year I turned 19, the state of Illinois, in its wisdom, lowered the drinking age for beer and wine from 21 to 19; I’m not sure of their rationale, but after only a few years, and probably a lot of DUIs, it was back again to 21. But this brief period opened up a great opportunity, and I wasted no time gathering up a few friends for some serious bar hopping. And not being familiar with any bars, I first looked at the entertainment section of the local newspaper for a place to try out my new drinking privileges. One item stood

out: The Bitter Creek Newgrass Band at the Clearwater Saloon on Chicago’s Lincoln Avenue.

From the outside the Clearwater Saloon looked a bit dingy. From the inside it appeared authentically rustic from years of hard use and benign neglect, rather than from the creative mind of a degreed interior designer; it was a comfortable atmosphere that smelled of wood and long-ago spilled beer. My kind of place. As the only customers early on a Friday evening, we had our choice of tables; so we awkwardly chose one, ordered our first pitcher of Beck’s dark beer, looked around, and waited for something to happen. Gradually over the next hour, more patrons entered along with the band, who began setting up equipment, tuning instruments, and initiating their own night of drinking. Judging from the appeal of bluegrass music in those years, I kind of expected a much older, rather conservatively dressed crowd, maybe even a family-like atmosphere, as bluegrass music tends to have a strong gospel component. But this was “newgrass,” whatever that was. By ten o’clock, the bar had a full crowd with every table occupied, and they were mostly younger folks, probably with an average age of between 25 and 30. The band itself was composed of five unpretentious long-haired characters in faded denim that looked right at home at what might be called a “dirt bar.”



The Clearwater Saloon, late 1970s or early 80s.

As we moved into our third pitcher of beer, the band—with banjo, bass, two acoustic guitars, and mandolin—finally launched into its first song. When they finished, the place erupted in an explosion of applause, yelling, stomping, and whooping. I had never seen a bluegrass audience react in such a way. By the middle of the first set, folks were dancing between the tables with a couple of blue jean-clad young ladies, with long flowing hair, dancing on top of the bar between glasses and bottles. The band played more traditional bluegrass songs plus bluegrass versions of songs by Creedence, The Grateful Dead, and other contemporary country and rock artists (i.e., newgrass). I felt at home and more connected to this music than any I had ever played on the accordion, and I was reluctant to leave even as the midnight hour had long passed.

My friends and I returned often to the Clearwater Saloon. But its heyday continued only for another two or three years, when it seemed the main customer base settled elsewhere and the somewhat rickety building itself seemed to be about played out. In a few years, its doors would close for the last time.

I have never experienced another establishment quite like the Clearwater Saloon, where the audience was truly in sync with the live music. I think those years may have been an example of a short-lived, unique convergence of social and cultural trends that can never be deliberately duplicated. Were it not for the brief change in the legal drinking age, I may have missed it completely. It was great fun, but also educational as it opened my mind to new styles of playing familiar tunes as my musical tastes continued to evolve. Even so, throughout all of this, I was faithful in maintaining my accordion-playing skills, but less and less as the years went by. I eventually attended a university

in southern Illinois, and I took my accordion with me. And it was with me still when I later moved near the Illinois River and began working as a natural resources manager.

One day, a friend down the road, at his home along the river bluffs, held a yard party. Several of his friends played guitar and one was very good on the harmonica. With the river valley as a backdrop, they sang as the sun set beyond the western river bluffs, then under starry skies, and well into the early morning. Their songs included many of my favorites from Dylan and Creedence. I could not help being reminded of certain rowdy evenings at the Clearwater Saloon, nearly two decades in the past. Their playing was straightforward and loose, the kind of playing one learned by ear or made up on the spot with a few lyrics and simple chords. They had fun, and I had fun listening. And I thought, yes, I could do this too. The next day, I unpacked a guitar which I had acquired a decade before but never learned to play. Determined not to give up, I would play the guitar at least as well as I could play the accordion, maybe even better.

At first I was a bit daunted. Holding down strings with my left hand to make the chords was a painful process until my fingertips toughened up. And I discovered that a stringed instrument requires a gentler touch and more subtle movements than an accordion's keys, buttons, and bellows. The slightest shift in position or touch on the strings in one direction or another can produce vastly different sounds and effects. And while music theory is the same for any instrument, as in the order of notes and chord patterns, the relationship between player and instrument could not be more different. I also had never sung before and did not even feel that I had a decent singing voice, let alone learning a song's lyrics and meshing those lyrics with a tune and timing

the guitar's rhythms. But then singers such as Dylan, Kristofferson, and John Prine showed that having a melodious singing voice was not necessarily a requirement. (Of course, it is possible to sing along with an accordion, but I decided not to go there.)

Quality of voice notwithstanding, singing was one of the missing pieces, because the lyrics were important; with the lyrics came the stories and the emotions tied to those stories. To memorize a set of lyrics, I had to think about what they meant, and those with personal meanings were the easiest to learn. For most songs, I may not have lived the stories, but by relating them to my life in a realistic way, I could make the words flow without much effort, each verse logically following another as the stories unfolded. Unlike playing the accordion, it was not necessary to imagine the lyrics. With the guitar, all of the pieces were there, the physical act of playing and the emotional or intellectual part, the meaning and deep truth behind the songs; as when I'm singing Woody Guthrie's songs of the dust bowl era in the 1930s, I imagine walking down a dirt road in Oklahoma among grassland covered hills, billowy clouds overhead, dry winds blowing through my hair. Each song is its own journey.

For the last twenty years, then, the guitar has become my instrument of choice. And so, what has become of the accordion boy? After a few years of exclusively playing the guitar, I actually started to miss the keyboard. So I obtained an electronic keyboard that can duplicate the sounds of many musical instruments including drums; in fact, it can put the old 1960s Cordovox to shame. I usually play it in the grand piano mode, where my accordion skills easily transfer. The accordion, I rarely unpack. But as it turns out, my wife has always loved the accordion and polkas. Soon after we met, both in our 40s, she became

overjoyed to learn that I was an accordion player. I think it even helped solidify our relationship. So only for her, the girl that I finally "got," I will, on occasion, play the "Baby Doll Polka," written in 1954 by Eddie Korosa, a button accordion player personally known to my grandfather. And to my surprise, so many years after I had first learned the tune, I discovered that the simple lyrics actually do resonate as a deep, yet simple, truth.

You are my Baby Doll

You are my Baby Doll

You are my Baby Doll

You're my darling now.

Don't leave me Baby Doll

Don't leave me Baby Doll

Don't leave me Baby Doll

You're my sweetheart now.

[This essay has also been posted on The River Landing blog at [https://theriverlanding.typepad.com/.](https://theriverlanding.typepad.com/)]