

BAAC PAGE

The Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Area Accordion Club

TEN YEARS OF BAAC: HOW IT ALL BEGAN

by Jim Holliday

It all began in early 1989 when a San Francisco woman named *Big Lou* (who recently played for us) joined up with several other players to form a group known as *Those Darn Accordions*. A charter member was Tom Torriglia and he became their spokesman and publicist. Always looking for ways to get publicity for the accordion in general and *Those Darn Accordions* in particular, Tom and the group occasionally resorted to some attention grabbing stunts. This included *Accordionista Raids*, wherein small, uninvited groups of players, accordions ready, stormed into North Beach restaurants and bellowed the diners into pleasant submission. Also, he organized a *Lady-of-Spain-athon* during which the hardy participants performed our love/hate anthem for ten hours straight. The desired results were achieved when local newspapers reported these events in featured articles.

It came to pass that *Those Darn Accordions* played at a rally supporting a new ballpark for the Giants. Tom got into a conversation with Willie Kennedy, a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and mentioned to her his group's desire to have the accordion declared the *Official Instrument* of San Francisco. Willie liked the idea and agreed to offi-

"We ought to start an accordion club." It was as happy an idea as when Mickey Rooney told Judy Garland, "We ought to put on a show."



The Founders: Dominic Palmisano, Jim Holliday, Lou Soper, Walter Traverso and Rusty Bartoli.

cially sponsor it if Tom would supply documentation to support and justify the action. Tom complied by presenting her with abundant and well-researched material from San Francisco's accordion-rich past and Willie Kennedy made the official presentation and motion to the Board of Supervisors in January of 1990.

Shortly thereafter an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* mentioned an upcoming Board of Supervisors open meeting at City Hall regarding the *Official Instrument* question and invited any interested members of the public (pro & con) to speak on the subject. About a dozen people, mostly complete strangers, showed up and addressed the Board. Almost all were pro-accor-

dion and at the conclusion of our business we band of brothers and sisters filed out of chambers into the rotunda for a post mortem.

Most left after a few minutes, but five people hung onto the moment unwilling to let the chance of speaking and sharing thoughts about the accordion slip away. After all, there seemed to be an instant bond between us. The

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10th Anniversary Edition

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TONY LOVELLO: HE CAME! HE PLAYED! HE CONQUERED!

by Dick Schiller

There are few experiences in the life of an accordionist that could compare with the performances of the past two months at BAAC. First in April, Jørgen

Sundeqvist and Øivand Farnen brought to us the finest in classical accordion playing, a treasure that most of the world is unaware of. And at our May meeting, Tony Lovello displayed for us the Big Band sound with power and excitement rarely witnessed in our club.

Tony, 67 came to play with the fire of a man on a mission. "I come to let the audience know that I know what I'm doing and when I play I'm going to prove to you that I know what I'm doing!" He stated with perfect Yogi Berra logic. To make it perfectly clear, Tony considers his accordion his

own personal two-fisted orchestra, with strings and drums represented by his bass side and the brass and woodwinds by his piano keys. Then, he utilizes both to the fullest in presenting his unique style of playing. I noticed, too, he has an uncanny sense of his keyboard and can strike any note or chord at will without looking—including flourishes, big finishes and slamming his hand for the final note from arm's length. He can do blind 2-3-4 note glissandos all down the keyboard and stop anywhere he wants to, cleanly. Most of all, he is a master of the bellows shake using it extensively to embellish his offerings and playing some songs all the way through like he was doing an accordion *pizzicato* (in the latter case, he's truly an iron man having a 25 pound accordion and no fear).

His fantastic playing becomes all the more incredible when you find out that Tony is totally deaf in his left ear, and only 40% sensitive in his right. "I have no idea what my left hand is sound-

"I come to let the audience know that I know what I'm doing and when I play I'm going to prove to you that I know what I'm doing!"

ing like." Well, all of us did and it was beautiful, Tony. He's really a player who has total of control of his instrument and uses it to its fullest potential: it sings, it dances, it tells jokes, it roars, it whispers—above all, it made everyone happy.

As Tony unleashed the best of Big Band accordion sounds, he moved comfortably through the audience and made contact with everyone. He was a perfect showman as well as a consummate player and above all a warm, likable person. During his performance he reprised some of his hit recordings like, *Twilight Time* and *Peg of My Heart*, and also brought us up to date with *Phantom of the Opera*—and betcha-your-boots he didn't forget Italian tunes with a name like Lovello. He virtually had the capacity audience in

the palm of his hand with a continuous flow of tunes, songs and stories—including how his brother produced *Hee Haw* and Tony passed it up and missed out on a zillion dollars. "I opted to start my own hotel with 300 thieves and a crooked bookkeeper and ended up washing my own dishes and going broke, but who's crying."

For me, his showpiece offering was his interpretation of Ernesto Lecuona's *Malagueña*. For that, he turned off the

amplification and turned in what was one of the most incredible physically dynamic performances I've ever seen on the accordion. It had to be seen to be believed, with a continuous bellows shake that formed the foundation of an unmatched bravura performance, showcasing all that an accordion is capable of—wow! It was a capable accordion, too, and no spring chicken (like Tony); it was a 40 year old Petosa that stood up to everything Tony handed it and responded with a rich, beautiful tone.

One of Tony's parting remarks was, "Where are the young people to continue on? We need an all out effort to make the youngsters aware of what this wonderful instrument has to offer". Well, Tony, that's exactly what BAAC tries to do and your appearance was a big step in that direction. Thanks!

So, folks, one of the great accordionists of our day passed our way in May and I wonder if we'll ever be the same.

How It All Began *continued from the front page*

five people were: Rusty Bartoli, Jim Holliday, Dominic Palmisano, Lou Soper and Walter Traverso.

After awhile Walter Traverso said, "Let's all go to my house. I'd like you to see and try out a new Midi accordion I just bought and we can talk some more." And so we did. During the next two hours of camaraderie the thought emerged spontaneously, "We ought to start an accordion club." It was as happy an idea as when Mickey Rooney told Judy Garland, "We ought to put on a show." We all jumped at the idea and decided to find a meeting place right away.

The first-ever meeting of the club took place on May 7, 1990 at Woodlake Joe's in San Mateo with 25 people in attendance. One of the first pieces of business was to decide a name for the group and the Bay Area Accordion Club was thus born.

So, lift your accordions in a rousing toast and a Happy Birthday, BAAC is ten years old. Here's to a wonderful club. We salute all those past and present who have made it the great organization it is. Let us thank one and all who do the necessary work to keep it going: the entertainers, the officers, the volunteers, the financial supporters and our faithful members who come and cheer us on with enthusiasm and affection.

The matter of the *Official Instrument* played out this way. At a final meeting held early in 1990 the Supes were required to vote *yea* or *nay*. Despite some strong objections from Angela Alioto on behalf of the violin (an outrageous thought, but her dad Joe played it) the *yeas* won the day and our creature found its hearth in San Francisco.

The passed resolution went from the Supervisors to the desk of then Mayor Art Agnos for his signature. For some reason that neither Plato nor Aristotle could have figured out, he considered the matter too politically sensitive to act upon and did nothing. But there are divine agents who hover over the accordion and the City Charter provides that when a passed resolution from the Board of Supervisors is not signed, amended or withdrawn, it becomes the law twelve months later! Therefore, in the eyes of God, the country and the City the accordion automatically became the *Official Instrument* of San Francisco in January of 1991.

DREAM COME TRUE

By Marie Lecce-Southwick

May 1950 was the highlight of my life. A dream of mine came true then: I had always wanted to entertain on a cruise ship—and I did! The experience played a big part in how I've lived the rest of my life. But my path to personal glory began with a tragedy.

In 1942, when I was 12 years old, my family was involved in a head-on collision. A shipyard truck collided with my Uncle Joe's car. My uncle was killed instantly from the impact.

Fortunately, I was not there; I was baby-sitting to earn money to buy a pair of shoes. But my mother and father were critically injured and had to endure many months of painful recovery. My brother sustained a multiple fracture in his left arm.

My Uncle Mike, who was devastated by the horrible accident, gave my brother an accordion to cheer him up. My brother never had the desire to play it, but my parents saw that I was interested and let me have it. I only got to take a few lessons, because my parents couldn't afford them.

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FROM OUR PRESIDENT

We sure have been busy this April and May. The guest performers have been outstanding and your response has been super. The two special nights we had for Art Van Damme and the accordion club from Sweden was also exciting and the music very pleasing. Our hospitality was warm and the pizza was delicious.

Our first workshop was informative and entertaining. Everybody left with some new ideas and the response was very positive.

Unfortunately the cost exceeded our budget and the finances have dwindled to a point where an adjustment must be made.

Starting at the July meeting, your executive board has increased the admission charge from \$2 for members and \$5 for guests to \$3 per member and still \$5 for guests. When we engage guest artists to perform and the cost is \$300 or more, then the admission will be \$5 for members and \$10 for guests.

Our beautiful new meeting hall, The Patio Español, charges \$215 for our meeting night. We need 70 members in attendance just to break even. This is such a great bargain as we get cold cuts served at the end of our meeting and we can stay and socialize until 11:00 PM. BAAC provides nibblers for you to munch on before the music starts and during the intermission.

At the July meeting, we will ask for your approval of these changes by a show of hands as your impute is desired. This is your club and we need your help.

Our 10 year celebration in June should be outstanding. The insert explains the details and you must have your dinner reservation made by Sunday, June 18. If you wish to dine with us, the 7:00 PM dinner is \$20 and the dance is \$10 for a total of \$30. The dinner choice is chicken or pasta with the trimmings. If you want to come to the 8:30 dance only, then the cost is \$10. We have some awards to present and some other surprises that you will find entertaining. The choice is yours. You can call any of the officers or board members to make your reservation. All their phone numbers are in the newsletter.

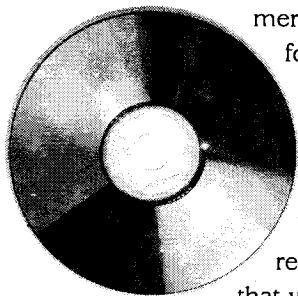
See you at our 10 year anniversary.

Lou Soper

ACCORDION ILLUSIONS

A CD Review by Paul A. Magistretti

Accordion Illusions – Stanislav Venglevski, Bayan Mike Alongi, Piano Accordion



Stas, the young man from Moldava (formerly part of the USSR) and who played for us at BAAC a few years ago and who has previously been noted in our newsletter with two other CDs, Stas! an anthology of Bach, *Dizzy Fingers*, tangos, etc., (with an excellent quartet) and a beautiful solo recording of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* that would delight anyone, has a new

recording well worth your attention.

I like this new CD by Stas Venglevski a lot. First of all, it's beautifully recorded with an accurate accordion sound. The interplay between the two musicians is happy and heartfelt and at times they mesh like a single player with four hands. Mike Alongi is brilliant and a perfect partner for Stas.

The pieces (excepting *Dark Eyes*) are original compositions by Stas; a majority of them French waltzes. What Stas accomplishes with this old genre is to inject freshness and enthusiasm into it. Usually when we hear musette waltzes they're either recordings from a bygone era or renditions by a performer looking through an accordion darkly. But on this CD Stas is playing his own stuff and makes us feel it's new again and not the ghosts of accordions past. Stas has a gift for melody and his interplay with Mike Alongi orchestrates the music nicely.

My reference to the CDs "accordion sound" wasn't idle; this CD is *fisarmonica pura* (maybe Italian will distinguish what I'm trying to say). The sound is without any of the harshness, reverb or would-be organ sonorities too often heard—and the timbre and artistry goes straight to your heart the way only an accordion can when it's sounding its best and wedded to the music. The musette tonalities were so good that anyone who suffers fear and loathing of detuning will have a road to Damascus experience.

In the middle of the recording resides a nice Children's Suite—it comes as a break, giving the CD a structure. Stas and Mike play the suite beautifully—the mimetic movements representing birds, elephants, mice, cats, the circus, etc., emerge with humor, virtuosity and artistry. Stas' suite is not (nor does it intend to be) a giant-killer in child's clothing like we've heard from Semenyov, Schedrin, Solotajow and others. The suite is a delightful essay that uses the accordion to charmingly create mimetic miniatures. It's very enjoyable and I even thought of it as a weapon for ripping a few electric guitars from young people's sticky imaginations.

Running through the selections: *Lindy's Song* opens the CD with a bright, almost contrapuntal waltz that sets the tone of much that follows in Stas' dip in the demimonde of musette. *Lindy's Song* is dedicated to a deceased friend (Lindy Kao of Chicago), as is the next piece, *Always and Eternity*. The theme of *Always* is appropriately poignant and moving.

Let's Play Together is a delightful waltz where the performers romp along a neat melodic line and regularly tease it with a dissonant chord. Stas proves a fine melodist, which is an uncommon talent that many would-be composers pretend they could tap if they wanted (not true).

Latino Moment is a brief jazz bossa nova and Stas displays (solo) a solid command of rhythmic phrasing and impeccable timing.

Short Visit is subtitled, "Two friends getting together, both eager to contribute to the conversation"; it's a waltz time dialectic that's as fresh and satisfying as a warm baguette.

Ecstasy Tango is a *viejo tango* (pre-Piazzolla) opening with clipped rhythm and proceeding along traditional lines. It could easily take its place with Rodriguez' *La Cumparsita*—no mean feat.

French Moment (solo) is a nice waltz and it's a good tune, but it shows Stas coming very close to cutting notes too short. On the positive side, his chromatic runs are clean, fast and thrilling.

Midnight Waltz is a complete contrast to *French Moment*, it's a slow, heartfelt and very ethnic Moldavan Waltz with the two accordions weaving a spell of simplicity and sincerity. The

piece almost sets a scene: it's late night in a peasant house on the Steppes with everyone a bit drunk and thinking of lost love. Two peasants pull out their instruments and fall into a fit of Slavic melancholy that will last the whole night and make the simplest things profound.

Autumn Illusions is another fine waltz with the accordions echoing each other and interweaving beautifully, the effect is almost orchestral.

Musette Caprice (solo) is capricious and demonstrates Stas' technical prowess with runs and trills, but here I feel he's constantly threatening to overrun expression.

Fond Recollections (solo) a tribute his father shows what an emotional impact Stas can deliver when he interiorizes the music. Perhaps when Stas has a story to tell he finds an even deeper self. It was wise of Stas to play with Mike Alongi, a hugely talented player who in many ways centers him and adds his own deeply felt artistry.

Stas is an exciting player and someone who has shown himself with this CD to be a fine composer. I liked all of his compositions, finding them melodic and memorable. I liked, too, that this was a pure accordion CD; that is, no other instru-

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...the timbre and artistry goes straight to your heart the way only an accordion can when it's sounding its best and wedded to the music.

Accordion Illusions *continued*

ment could assay these pieces as well—no violin, no cello, no piano—Itzhak, Yo Yo, Vladimir, nope, nope, nope. I often thought as I listened to his compositions that Stas could be a nascent Andre Astier (a great composer who Peter Soave terms the Chopin of the accordion). I liked that thought. It's a relief to hear music dedicated to the instrument on which it's played and that that instrument is an accordion. Free-reed enthusiasts are too often forced to do aesthetic somersaults—of loving the accordion and suppressing thoughts like, "This would be better on an organ or violin." *Accordion Illusions* is music that no one

on any other instrument could usurp. Usually, this kind of aesthetic relief only occurs when interlopers play Piazzolla, "Yo! Yo Yo, you did good, but a cello does not a bandoneon do, the shoe's on the other ear."

Well, do your other ear a favor and buy Stas' CD and let *fisarmonica pura* waltz over you knowing that Itzhak on a good day couldn't move you half as well. Order from: Stas Venglevski 2955 South 93 Street, West Allis, WI 53227 (414) 543-7714 Web: www.accordions.com/stas. E-mail: stas.venglevski@gte.net

NATIONAL ACCORDION AWARENESS MONTH 2000.

by Tom Torriglia

Well, here we are again. June is National Accordion Awareness Month (NAAM). This is the 11th year. What exactly is National Accordion Awareness Month? National Accordion Awareness Month is a vehicle by which I can promote the accordion in a positive light and also promote any accordion-related endeavors in which I may be involved to the world. That was its original purpose and still is and I think will be for the future. For every (I love that) Jetta commercial, there's the (I hate it) Mitsubishi commercial. You know, the one where the guy yaks something about oxymorons and goes, "accordion music." Yeah, how about "quality automobile" pal?

So, what exactly goes on during National Accordion Awareness Month? Well, at about 3:00 a.m. Pacific Time on June 1, my phone starts ringing. It's radio stations calling from the east coast and asking me if I know it's National Accordion Awareness Month. I do. Then, they ask me to play something that fits their format. Like, I knew they were calling and like I know their format and like it's 3:00 a.m.

"What do you mean you don't know any Limp Bizkit? Hungarian Dance what?" Click. Then, I have a Polka Cola and go back to bed. That's how the month starts. The machine picks up the rest of the calls and during the day I return the calls to all the radio stations, TV stations and print mediums and set up scheduled interviews. Yes, I do try to learn something that fits radio formats: country, classical, rock. Sometimes stations want to play Stump the Accordion Player and they ask me to play a song in their format and the listeners have to call in and guess the song. Many stations want to know if there's someone in their area whom they can contact to bring onto their show. So, usually around May 15, I send out emails asking if anyone would like to be a "friend of NAAM" That is, a local contact for the media to call. Debra Peters in Austin comes to

"What do you mean you don't know any Limp Bizkit? Hungarian Dance what?" Click. Then, I have a Polka Cola and go back to bed. That's how the month starts.

mind. Last year, I got a call from a TV station in Miami looking for someone to come on the air to promote the accordion. I found a Latin woman who played the accordion, but couldn't speak very good English, but after about an hour with her and talking with her friend, she kinda got it and as it turned out, the TV station said she appeared on a news broadcast in a wild, colorful costume and just blew everyone away with her playing. It does the heart good.

Last year, Jay Leno mentioned National Accordion Awareness Month in his June 1 monologue. I got a lot of awareness out of that. The furthest interview I did was with the Canadian Broadcast Company (CBC) in Nova Scotia.

One of the most common questions I get is "how do these media types know to contact you?" Good question. When I started National Accordion Awareness Month, I was careful to make sure that I placed the event in publications that I knew the media used

for fill-fodder. The same publications that list May whatever as Secretaries' Day also list May whatever as National Be Good to Your Ironing Board day. All the media use these publications. "Hey, any of you listeners been abusing your ironing board? Well, I hope not because today is National Be Good to Your Ironing Board day. Mary on line 1—Got an ironing board abuse story for us?"

Locally, there's not a lot of hub-bub about National Accordion Awareness Month—even though the accordion is the official musical instrument of San Francisco (perennial awareness). This year, my company All Things Accordion and the Cannery are putting on Day of the Accordion—an afternoon of fun accordion music that's free to the public. That day is Sunday, June 18 at the Cannery (1801 Leavenworth St.). I want to especially thank the BAAC for getting support funds for the Day of the Accordion. (BAAC will have a sponsor's table at the event.). I hope to see you there. Hey, and spread the word.

THE QUESTION: TO BROWSE OR NOT TO BROWSE

by Bob Berta

Some of you may be comfortable with computers while others may look at a computer as a form of voodoo. In reality, the modern computer has given birth to the most powerful form of communication known to man after the discovery of speech (and the overuse of drums). Imagine being able to search for information about even the most obscure subjects and instantly receiving hundreds of pieces of information and suggestions where to find more, much more. Also imagine finding people like yourself and corresponding daily with them all over the world. After all, most of the world considers the accordion a major part of their mainstream culture. So, how would you like to write to somebody in said country and find out what's happening? My most pleasurable Internet activity is to go to an accordions only bulletin board and participate in the continuing flow of thoughts.

The tool that lets all this happen is called a browser. Several browsers are on the market, but most people just use the one supplied with Microsoft Windows, or their competitor, Netscape. Browsers make it easy to search, post messages, and find information. The most common use of a browser is to go to an Internet Web site—this is sort of like using your phone to call a friend—instead of talking to someone you go to a location on a computer. What's posted there can include everything from articles, to pictures, to reviews and even samples of

For those of you who want to share your love of the accordion with others there is no better way than to join a NEWSGROUP

music you can listen to. How do you find the Web site you want? If you know the address, just type it in and hit enter; or, you can use a search engine. A search engine simply allows you to enter a question or topic and it looks for sites that might fit your request. Often you get more than you need or want, so you'll type in more specific info and refine the search. Some search engines are better/worse than others: try, Yahoo, AskJeeves, AltaVista and Deja. It's no big deal and within a short time you'll be separating sense from nonsense. Contact me and I will either help you, or find another member who can.

Probably your first choice will be our own site. There you'll find information about the club and links to other sites, so you don't even have to wander the Internet in general. Our site will be up soon, so just type www.BAACCORDIONclub.org

and hit ENTER. You're there. You'll find links to some of the best places to go—like, the Classical Free Reed site which is run by Henry Doktorski: <http://trfn.clpgh.org/free-reed>. You may remember Henry as the virtuoso classical accordionist

who entertained us at a meeting three years ago. He's put together a beautiful site that features reviews of free-reed instruments (accordion, bayan, bandoneon, harmonium, harmonica, etc.) on CDs, as well as reviews of books, music and concerts from all over the world (you can order through him, too); also, more LINKS, including big ones like www.accordions.com. Several of our club members have contributed

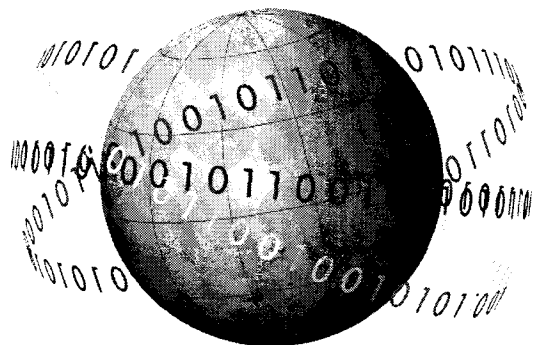
reviews to Henry's Classical Free Reed site, myself included. If you want the last word on the best accordion information and where to order things this is the place to go!

To make it clear: links are prevalent wherever you go. When you read a review, say, on Henry's site, there will be a highlighted address that you merely click and you'll be taken to the artist's own site, or some other relevant place. You can go on and on from there—always able to get back to where you were by clicking BACK until you're there (or HOME, etc.); it's easy.

For those of you who want to share your love of the accordion with others there is no better way than to join a NEWSGROUP. A newsgroup is an electronic bulletin board devoted to one subject. Newsgroups are accessed from the browser the same way you found WEB sites. One such site devoted to accordions is: rec.music.makers.squeezebox. Enter this newsgroup and you will see hundreds of e-mail messages about every aspect of every type of accordion and every style of music: it doesn't matter if you play jazz on a concertina or polkas on a piano accordion; it's all there. You'll find that each message usually starts a discussion and you'll see a string of continuing e-mails that make fascinating reading. You'll probably see the names of many members of BAAC, as well as international stars, accordion importers and repairmen: have a problem, need an answer; go there. Many of our club's new members first heard about us from this newsgroup!

I have corresponded with accordion enthusiasts from just about every country in the world, from Iceland to China, from Australia to Russia, Africa, South America and everywhere in between. So, if you aren't yet on the Internet you are missing out big time. If you are on the Internet, then give those accordion sites a shot and tell them Bob sent you.

Bob <rkb4@pge.com>



JOHNNIE TOFFOLI LOVED TO PERFORM

By Joan Morris

One night in 1930, a group of vaudeville performers boarded a train in San Francisco, bound for Los Angeles and a string of one-night stands.

As the train rattled through the night, Johnnie Toffoli pulled out his accordion and entertained his fellow entertainers with a few of his standards. Sitting nearby was a thin man with big ears and a hound-dog face.

With the music serving as background, Johnnie and the thin man began talking about instruments and show business and the future of vaudeville. The conversation, as talks between two good-natured men are apt to do, led to a friendly challenge.

The exact circumstances of the wager are lost in the tides of time, but it boiled down to this: The thin man bet the accordion player that he couldn't coerce, wheedle or cajole *The Flight of the Bumble Bee* from his pearl-keyed squeezebox.

A smile played across Johnnie's face as he accepted the bet. Feigning concern, he limbered his fingers, took a deep breath and began. As the thin man's jaw dropped, Johnnie's fingers blurred across the keyboard and the frenetic strains of Rimsky-Korsakov's masterwork filled the train.

Bing Crosby, the friendly wager-maker, had lost his bet in an impressive manner.

"It just happened to be a specialty number that my dad played and often auditioned with," says John Toffoli Jr. "He played it for Bing and was offered a job in Los Angeles with him. My dad didn't take him up on the offer, but they did spend the rest of night playing and singing on the ride south."

That was the thing about Johnnie Toffoli. He never failed to surprise and delight his audience.

Johnnie, who lived in Richmond more than 80 years before moving to Rossmoor three years ago, was barely 6 years old when he began performing. After the dinner dishes were cleared, Johnnie would sing and dance on the tables for his fellow immigrants on Ellis Island.

Johnnie was born Giovanni "Gianni" Toffoli in Ronche, Italy, a small town about 50 miles north of Venice. His father, Louis Toffoli, immigrated to this country in 1910 and saved up enough money to bring over the family—his wife, Maria, and their children, Giuseppe, Victoria, Domenica and Gianni—in 1911.

Louis had found a job at the winery in Winehaven, a small community on San Pablo Bay. Louis was making about \$1.75 a day at the winery, which left precious little for extras. So Johnnie took a job at A.C. Lang's drugstore at Sixth Street and

Macdonald Avenue in Richmond and earned \$3 a week at the corner drugstore, sweeping up and running errands.

"I was proud to have a little job and help my family," Johnnie said in a 1986 newspaper interview. "The boss would slap three silver dollars on the counter, and it was just like a ring from a bell."

With the money Johnnie, his siblings and his father earned, the family was able in 1917 to buy a house on 14th Street in Richmond. Another added benefit was that Johnnie got an accordion and lessons.

Johnnie had become interested in accordions when he was 8 years old and saw a man playing one at a dance. But it would be three years before he saved up enough to buy the relatively inexpensive accordion and then another year before he could afford lessons.

But he proved a quick study. By the time he was 17, Johnnie was performing publicly.

"Being Italian, you know, it hit me in the right spot," Johnnie said in 1986. "It was the complete instrument."

Johnnie had a special interest in classical music, John says, and he developed an extensive repertoire of overtures and difficult pieces. With his trademark trimmed mustache and his snap brim fedora, Johnnie became well-known.

But he knew it wasn't wise to hang his future on a music career.

His after-school and weekend job at the drugstore had led to an interest in pharmacology, and after high school, he enrolled at UC San Francisco, where he majored in pharmacy.

Johnnie mixed his studies with his music. He performed at the Orpheum and was part of the Fanchon-Demarco circuit, traveling around California.

In 1927, he auditioned for the NBC radio and was immediately hired. The full-time job and the steady gigs left little time for school, so he dropped out of the university and devoted himself to music.

For the next 12 years or so, the studios at 111 Sutter St., littered with Steinways, was Johnnie's home, the theaters throughout California his home-away-from-home.

While at NBC, John says, Johnnie played with Meredith Wilson, Max Dolan, Edna Fisher and Charlie Marshall. He also performed on the *Carefree Carnival Show*, *In Old Brazil Show* and *The Philco Hour*. He also had his own radio show, *Accordianna*.

He also worked the West Coast Circuit, traveling by bus and train to perform. And he became a regular at the Fox, Curran and other theaters in San Francisco.



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Johnnie Toffoli *continued*

In 1930, Johnnie took time off to marry his childhood sweetheart, Aurelia Bravin, the daughter of Italian immigrants. Two years later, Johnnie received two special gifts. He was included in a book titled *Stars of the Radio*, which also included Crosby, Wilson and Rudee Vallee. And he had his first child, a son, John Jr. A second son, Eugene, arrived the next year.

In the next few years, despite the Depression, Johnnie's career continued to soar. In 1936, the family moved to Chicago, and Johnnie began appearing with *Marshalls Mavericks* on the nationally syndicated *National Barn Dance*, the forerunner of the *Grand Ole Opry*.

But after a year there, John says, the family agreed Chicago was not for them, and they moved to the warmer, more familiar shores of Richmond. Johnnie returned to his job at NBC, but change was afoot. The company was considering relocating its studios to Los Angeles, and Johnnie decided it was time to consider his options.

He returned to school, and in 1939, when NBC made the move south, Johnnie decided to stay put. "Music changes", Johnnie said in 1986, explaining his decision to leave full-time show business. "Look at radio. It went out, and television came in."

Johnnie got a job as a pharmacist with the Owl Drug Co., which had opened at the World's Fair on Treasure Island. He stayed with that job until the fair closed its doors in 1941, then went to work for the Owl Drug Store at 13th and Broadway in Oakland.

During the war, a number of soldiers and seamen found their way to the store, and Johnnie was forever inviting a few home for a good meal.

On one occasion, he brought home a group of merchant marine officers from Holland, John says. He introduced them to family and friends and one of them shortly became his brother-in-law. Several of the others married family friends.

Johnnie kept busy during the war, working at the pharmacy and performing for the servicemen.

After the war, another son, Thomas, came along, and Johnnie decided it was time to strike out on his own. He bought a drugstore on 10th Street and Macdonald Avenue in the heart of Richmond and opened Toffoli Drugs.

Johnnie continued to perform, and he became well-known throughout the region. Even while on vacation, Johnnie sometimes would be recognized. John says his father unabashedly admitted the fame was a boost to his ego, but he considered himself more pharmacist than performer. Johnnie and Aurelia—known as Rae—ran their store for 20 years.

Johnnie finally retired and sold his business, although for years after, he worked as a relief pharmacist at the store. It wasn't until he was 82 that he finally hung up his white coat. But he never retired from performing.

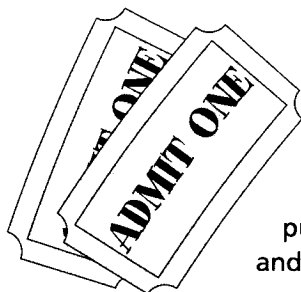
Bob Rezak, a longtime friend and former president of the Concord Pavilion Associates, arranged for Johnnie to surprise the audience at a Pavilion 10th anniversary dinner. Mel Torme and the *Hi Lo's* were scheduled to perform, but Johnnie became the opening act.

"The audience was dazzled by his rendition of *Lady of Spain*, *Rhapsody in Blue* and other selections. He got a standing ovation," Bob says. "He'd have played all night, but it took John Jr. to walk up to the stage and escort his dad—still bowing—off the platform so that Mel and the *Hi Lo's* could do their wonderful set. It was a most memorable night."

That was the last public performance Johnnie gave. He played for friends and his family, but he spent most of his time with his wife and grandchildren. If prodded, he could regale them with stories of the old days.

It had seemed Johnnie would be playing well into his 100s—he often had talked about it—but his health worsened, and he died less than a month before his 95th birthday.

This story originally appeared in the April, 30 issue of the *Contra Costa Times* and is reprinted with permission.



Get your Cotati Tickets Now

If you are planning to attend the Cotati Accordion festival, you can purchase your tickets in advance from BAAC. One day admission is \$10, and tickets for both days are only \$18.

I JUST HAD TO SAY SOMETHING, TOO

by Bob Berta

The tension was high in the air with anticipation of hearing the much heralded concert by Tony Lovello. As a youngster back in the 50s I heard my parents recordings of the *Three Suns* group of which Tony was a member. In fact that group was one of the main experiences that sparked my interest in both accordion and electronic organ...both of which I play today.

I and others heard of the great "shows" that Tony puts on and when I saw a video of one of his performances at the Seattle Accordion Club I knew that this would be an entertaining evening of showmanship and great music. Tony certainly doesn't show his age. He stood the entire performance and wandered around the audience, did what seemed to be unending bellows shakes and played in a highly emotional manner that would have left most performers gasping for breath.

I particularly enjoyed the wide variety of music he played and the mixture of old and new tunes. Part of his show is a musical history of the accordion playing in all the styles that contributed to the evolution of accordion playing as we know it today. While Tony and *The Three Sons* are best known for great tunes like *Just One More Chance*, *Twilight Time* and *Peg O' My Heart*, he played from such diverse musical selections as *Dizzy Fingers*, *Nolo*, Theme from the *Lone Ranger*, *Somewhere My Love*, *Phantom of the Opera* and *Malagueña*. To me the most beautiful piece was one of his own compositions called *I Never Cried Before*. Wow, what a nice piece...hey Tony...got any more of these great compositions laying around?

During his playing he used three techniques which proved to be of interest to the audience. The first is of course his bel-

lows shake control which was pretty amazing. The other was his ability to remove his hand from the treble keyboard, wave it in the air and instantly come back to the exact note or chord he wanted without looking at the keyboard...I can think of a few times when I went for a note and missed it by a note or two causing a sound unlike the composer intended and causing a few raised eye brows in my listening audience! The final neat "trick" was a hand induced vibrato that was very nice.

During the concert he would show the various "tricks" and after enticing the audience would tell them if they came to his workshop on Wednesday night he would show them how to do it. Sadly, I was unable to attend due to family commitments so am looking forward to hearing the secrets from others who attended.

Club member Bart Benico had the unfortunate duty to follow Tony to finish out the evening. Bart asked the audience if anyone else wanted to take his place! No need for worry though Bart. You proved, as always, that you were easily up to the task of keeping the audience happy. Bart played *Tango of the Roses*, *Len Mazurka*, *Ferry Boat Serenade*, *Guitara Romana* and *España Cani*. Bart can be counted on for a smooth, beautiful performance with interpretations from the inner soul. It is always a treat watching him perform in an animated manner. It is like he is dancing with his accordion. It has been said that the accordion is the most "human" of instruments. It breaths, trembles and sighs, is held close and becomes one with the body and is capable of the most intimate musical expressions. There is no better illustration of this than to watch Bart play.

*Bart can be counted
on for a smooth,
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BAAC APRIL BOARD MEETING NOTES

1. John Seckman is working on a classy t-shirt design for BAAC's 10th anniversary, coming up in June. We also selected a design for BAAC buttons which Lou Soper will order. Buttons will be sold for \$2 apiece and may also be used for promotional purposes.
2. Dick Schiller's resignation as newsletter editor was read to the board, who were reluctant to accept it.
3. We have acquired 50 tickets to the Cotati Accordion Festival that we can sell. The club gets a percentage on any tickets sold by us.
4. BAAC will provide some players for the San Carlos Family Day Festival May 20 and 21. In return we will ask them to give a donation to BAAC.
5. Our tenth anniversary celebration will be a gala dinner-dance at Patio Español on Friday, June 23. It will take the place of the June meeting, which would otherwise have taken place on Tuesday, June 6.
6. The board voted that henceforth we will charge \$5 for members, \$10 for non-members, at the door when we bring in outside entertainers who charge at least \$300 to perform for us.

An exciting opportunity

Shortly after the accident, my friend Julie asked me to join her in a talent show sponsored by the Richmond Recreation Department. I accepted with excitement and enthusiasm.

Finally, the big night arrived. For the first time in my life I was going to be on stage! After Julie played the piano, the crowd whistled, cheered and clapped. As I proudly stood up to do my number, I was amazed at the size of the crowd. While playing a favorite WWII song, *Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere*, I received boos, shouts and thumbs down, but I kept on playing and kept on making mistakes. I was deter-

The band played "O Marie" as I walked in to perform. I was energized and quickly acclimated to the rocking motion of the ship.

mined to finish, realizing that when you fall down, it doesn't mean you are a failure. It's only when you stay down that you are a failure.

So I didn't let that experience hold me back. Quite the opposite: I decided I would do something unique and spectacular.

I continued to earn money for music lessons by house cleaning and baby-sitting. I also continued to improve my performing skills. I designed and mastered a routine where I could play the accordion, sing and dance all at once. I also choreographed my own version of the Tarantella.

A great comeback

I entertained locally and at parties. Many people were amazed by my routine. Gone were the boos—I only received praises, cheers, applause and compliments. I faced each performance victoriously after initially failing so miserably.

In 1947, my father passed away, so I quit school and went to work in San Francisco, doing various office assignments. Since I was earning \$125 a month, I was able to continue with music lessons.

My boss found out about my interest in entertaining and asked if I would like to perform at the next company party. I gladly accepted. I performed at the company Christmas party in 1949 and received a standing ovation. My boss encouraged me to pursue my musical career and gave me \$100 to continue with music lessons.

Then in 1950, when I was 19, I had the opportunity to go to Italy for my father's memorial service. On the bright side, I was able to visit relatives for the first time and entertain professionally. On May 5, 1950, I boarded the California Zephyr train to New York. The trip took four days from Oakland. I spent much of my time in the Vista Dome of the train admiring the beautiful scenery. After arriving in New York, I stayed overnight in a hotel. Early the next morning, I boarded the *Vulcania*, an elegant and luxurious Italian cruise ship, en route from New York to Naples, Italy.

Good ship Vulcania

The *Vulcania*, with its innovative design, sophisticated details and sturdy construction was awesome! It was like a floating city with a swimming pool, shops and beauty salon. It had three stories and accommodated about 2,800 passengers.

I shared a cabin with three girls. We all got along very well and enjoyed doing things together; there was a real sense of camaraderie. The captain of the ship found out I was an entertainer and asked me if I wanted to perform. Of course I was delighted and accepted.

The night before my performance on the *Vulcania*, I walked along the deck. The night was peaceful, and the cool breeze was refreshing. The smell of the ocean was so clean and crisp. Many thoughts came to mind. First, I felt like a free spirit; on my own away from home for the first time. I felt confident and well-prepared about my act, but I also had some fears. Dancing on a moving ship would be different than performing on land, and if I fell, it would be very embarrassing. My roommates were encouraging and complimented me on how fabulous I looked in my red and white costume with silver tap shoes.

The band played "O Marie" as I walked in to perform. I was energized and quickly acclimated to the rocking motion of the ship. First, I danced the Tarantella with the background of a nine-piece orchestra. Then I played the accordion, tap danced and sang all at once. The crowd went wild. After the performance, everyone on the ship called me "the ballerina."

High praise

For 10 glorious days I entertained the passengers. After my last performance before embarking in Naples, I received a standing ovation from the passengers and crew and was crowned Miss *Vulcania* by the captain of the ship. He also stamped the name of the ship on my tambourine, which I will cherish forever.

Although I didn't get paid for entertaining, I felt like the wealthiest person on Earth. For me, money doesn't signify wealth; the appreciation people show is what's priceless to me. The passengers and crew gave me a feeling of euphoric energy.

Performing on the ship and spending six months in Italy was an educational experience that broadened my point of view and made me realize how very fortunate I was to be a U.S. citizen. Despite all the domestic turmoil, America is still the land of opportunity and provides the best standard of living and best way of life in the world.

My life has been filled with tragedy, hard times, heartaches and humor. I try to focus on fun and challenging experiences, and I always reflect on my time on the *Vulcania*. It was a significant turning point in my life, and it made me what I am today. On that ship, I learned to fully trust my own sense of what means most to me and to accept it as my guide. I thank God for helping me discover my talent and my purpose in life.

This was a glorious, adventurous and exhilarating time. Because of it, I face each day with fulfillment, joy and gratitude.

Vince On The Mend

by Dick Schiller

Vince Cirelli, our Grand Man of the Accordion is making excellent progress in his recuperation from open heart surgery. "My hands are itching to play my accordion again". Vince wants to thank everyone for the kind thoughts, cards and telephone calls, feeling blessed with so many friends. He also felt honored that Tony Lovello came to his house and played a concert for him, courtesy of George Arminino. He is keeping busy with therapy and writing his "story" for inclusion in the Cotati Accordion Festival Program, being named this year's Honorary Chairman. Vince also hopes in the very near future to return to his shop to finish restoring famed Pietro Deiro's accordion and bring it to the club to play for us. So, you just can't keep a good accordion man down...way to go Vince!

THE AUSTRIAN BUTTON BOX

by Valerie T. Kieser

Up until mid-1994 I didn't know a diatonic button accordion from a chromatic from any accordion with buttons on both sides. I was just getting excited about the Bay Area Accordion Club and was longing for some guidance to help me start to improve my piano accordion playing after about 40 years of playing the same way I did in the early 50's. Someone suggested I introduce myself to Joe Smiell and ask him if he would be willing to listen to me play and give me some pointers to work on.

Well, I gathered up all my courage at a BAAC meeting and approached Joe. He readily agreed to give me a listen and offer some pointers. While sitting in his living room I spotted a button box. Having heard he gave a button box camp, I knew he was a master of this strange (to me at that time) instrument, so I asked him for a little demonstration. I was totally fascinated. I asked him whether he thought I could ever learn it and he said

"Sure, why not?" I had a million questions about how the button box worked, why it was called "diatonic," what the different rows represented, etc. I couldn't wait to go home and ask my husband if he thought I should try it. Again, "Why not?"

So, I called Joe and asked whether he had a box I could buy. He did, but wouldn't let me buy it until I had tried it for several weeks. He handed me his beginning course and I was off and running all on my own. (This is not recommended, but I couldn't stop myself!) All of which meant I would qualify for the "advanced" camp session in September.

So, off to camp I went. I was certainly a beginner, but was able to learn to play many of the exercises of the more experienced group so that I didn't have to be isolated as a beginner.

In the six intervening years I've made a lot of progress in both four-row button box and piano accordion, thanks to Joe and his generosity and his influence.

In the six intervening years I've made a lot of progress in both four-row button box and piano accordion, thanks to Joe and his generosity and his influence. I've been fortunate enough to join Joe's group in Austria in 1998 and visit the Strasser button box factory, where my button box was made. (In Austria and Germany the button box is known as a *Steirische Harmonika*, *Steirisch* referring to Steiermark, a province of Austria where we spent a week of our trip.)

This style of button box has a unique sound, unlike any other accordion, button diatonic or otherwise. Some call it musette, but it is not the same as musette tuning on a piano accordion. The Austrian button box is made in a 3-row, a 4-row and a 5-row style. Most often you will hear what is called an *F-box*, but more and more people are discovering the *E-flat box*, tuned one full step lower, row for row, than the F box, for a somewhat mellower tone quality.

I prefer the 4-row for its versatility combined with light weight. Only two notes of the chromatic scale are not represented in the 4-row F box: the A-flat (or G-sharp) and the C-sharp (or D-flat). The Cajun and other diatonic button accordions are most often dry-tuned and have two rows or even a single row of right-hand buttons. You find them also with three rows, and although I don't recall seeing a four-row model, it might exist. They also have a unique sound, but I am not very savvy on this type of button box, since it is tuned quite differently from the Austrian (sometimes called Slovenian) style.

I could go on and on, there is so much to tell about this bright and wonderful instrument. Maybe in a future article...

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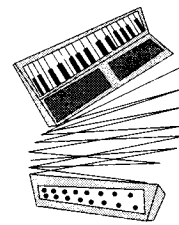
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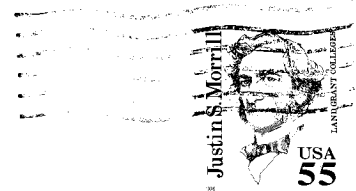
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