




The
**MAIN
SQUEEZE**

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TURN IN THE KEYS

TWO TEENAGE BOYS, REED BEVERSTOCK AND RICK VANGEE, AND JENNIE DYNESIUS, who is in her 50s, set up their music stands and lift their accordions onto their laps. In unison, they lean forward and struggle into the shoulder straps, their legs braced wide to support their instruments. The fingers on their left hands hover clawlike over the bass buttons, while the fingers

By GENEVIEVE RAJEWSKI



Dale Wise has been playing the accordion since he was 11. "If something is good, it'll come back again," he says about the instrument's decline in popularity.



on their other hands splay awkwardly across the keys.

And then they begin making music.

Almost immediately, Dale Wise hears something he doesn't like.

"Reed," Wise starts, and his students stop abruptly. "Reed, do you have a new baby at home that I don't know about?"

"Nooo," answers Beverstock with a quizzical look.

"Because it sounds like you're afraid you're going to wake the baby," Wise says. "Put some muscle on that."

Beverstock nods, and the three turn back to their method books, which were developed by two acclaimed accordionists in the 1950s and 1960s and have changed little since — still offering tunes such as "Camptown Races" and "Vegetables on Parade" and featuring bobby-soxers on their covers. The students play with more emphasis on the bass notes this time — for an audience consisting of only Wise, a wall of accordions and "Carlos Santucci and his super international accordion." The large, framed poster of the maestro hovers appropriately large in the room, as Santucci was Wise's first teacher. In the picture, Santucci smiles approvingly and wears glasses, a dark suit and an enormous black accordion bejeweled with silver rhinestones — the same accordion glittering atop the filing cabinet beneath the poster.

During the biweekly lesson, in the basement of his Burr Hill, Va., home, Wise runs the two home-schooled teens and Dynesius through numerous drills, all designed to help them master

"I have no idea what that means," says Wise, 65, shaking his head.

Despite the name of the program, Jennie Dynesius is not that much younger than Wise herself.

"I saw an article in the paper about Dale wanting to get together a group of eight to 11 to teach accordion," she says, "so I called him up, and he said, 'No, I meant 8- to 11-year-olds.' I went, 'Ohhh.' But he said, 'Come on up, and I'll teach you anyway.'" Wise is loath to turn away any interested student. Sessions such as these — as well as the various accordion programs and initiatives he has set into motion over the years — reflect Wise's determination to squeeze new life into the instrument.

"Time is waning," Wise says. "The accordion is hanging by a thread." The instrument's downward spiral in the American music scene over several decades is especially painful for someone who remembers its once vaunted status.

"If something is good, it'll come back again," Wise says. "If we could just live long enough, we'd see the cyclical nature of so many things. The seasons, we count on them every year. But with something like music or trends, it may be a 35-year cycle."

After a moment, Wise says, "Most of us don't get to see too many 35-year cycles."

IN A "FAR SIDE" CARTOON, DEPARTED SOULS STAND IN LINE AT TWO GATES. In the upper panel, an angel says,

"THE BEATLES CAME INTO FASHION, AND, SUDDENLY, I WASN'T COOL PLAYING AN ACCORDION. I PUT IT IN THE CLOSET. A LOT OF PEOPLE DID," SAYS CHERI THURSTON, PRESIDENT, CLOSET ACCORDION PLAYERS OF AMERICA.



Wise instructs 8-year-old Aaron Peters.

dynamics: the control of air through the bellows and the secret to expressive accordion playing. "We replicate different instruments while playing the accordion. We're the whole band," he tells them. "So when you play the bass notes, you're like a

tuba or a bassoon. The chord is played by a much smaller instrument, like a string bass, so you underplay the chord note after the bass. It's a lot more than just pushing a bunch of plastic."

As graduates of Wise's Accordions for Kids program, the students are trying to apply this lesson. Beverstock, Wise's first student in the three-year-old program, recently played accordion with a Christian grunge band he describes as "like Metallica, but more laid-back."

"Welcome to Heaven . . . here's your harp." The lower panel's devil: "Welcome to Hell . . . here's your accordion."

Wise happens to play both instruments, though the harp is a much more recent pursuit. When Wise sits at his harp, he narrows his eyes, plucks a few heavenly notes from the red C strings and breaks into a boyish grin. "It's a daily discipline," he says. "Every morning, I practice while DeAnn's still in bed. The dog comes in, lies down and just takes it all in."

"Even when he hits a wrong note, it sounds beautiful," says DeAnn Wise, his wife.

Unlike the accordion?

"Well, Dale never hits a wrong note on the accordion," she says.

Wise's fervor toward the accordion is in direct contrast with the level of ridicule it generally receives, but the instrument has not always been seen as a punch line. Although originally conceived in the early 1800s as a device to tune pipe organs, the accordion was quickly embraced as an instrument throughout Europe for its versatility, rich sound and portability. It traveled to the United States with the wave of emigration at the turn of



Wise leads a group of accordion-playing friends during his annual picnic at his Burr Hill, Va., home.

the 20th century and became big business in the 1930s, when immigrant vaudeville performers stole the spotlight with their ornate accordions and fast-flying finger work. It was accordionist Dick Contino who spawned legions of imitators after he made numerous appearances on, and ultimately won, Horace Heidt's "Original Youth Opportunity Program" in the late 1940s.

The program "was like 'American Idol,' only it was on the radio, and you didn't have to be a singer," explains Cheri Thurston, president of the Closet Accordion Players of America. "Dick Con-

tino was this really handsome, hot accordion player who kept winning. He had teenage girls swooning and following him."

The instrument's mainstream popularity soon began its slide, although it remained an enormous influence in zydeco, Cajun and polka music. Thurston attributes the plummet to two factors. "One was 'The Lawrence Welk Show,' which was nerdy, and the accordion was strongly associated with it," she says. "And, two, the advent of rock-and-roll."

"That's what happened to me," says Thurston, who played accordion into high school. "The Beatles came into fashion, and, suddenly, I wasn't cool playing an accordion. I put it in

the closet. A lot of people did.”

But not Dale Wise. When he was 11 years old and living in Ottawa, Ill., Wise’s parents signed him up to learn guitar. He studied it for a few weeks until he wandered across the hall from the classroom and met his future mentor: Santucci, an Italian immigrant who was both Ottawa’s mayor and an accordion teacher.

Wise was immediately hooked.

“All the musical elements — including melody, harmony, rhythm and timbre — are all wrapped up in one beautiful package,” Wise says of the instrument’s appeal.

Wise started working accordion jobs as a young teenager and went on to teach band and orchestral instruments in public schools in Illinois and Arizona. In 1971, he moved to Northern Virginia and began teaching in Maryland.

In 1980, after 17 years of teaching in public schools, Wise quit to devote himself solely to the accordion and its survival—by per-

forming, teaching and selling and repairing instruments. He named his business Accordion Plus. He moved to Burr Hill, near Culpeper, about three years ago.

He presses her to play at two public concerts the following month: one organized by the Washington Metropolitan Accordion Society and his own Accordion Plus concert. But Elise, like most kids today, is overscheduled. She rattles off a list of July dates she’s unavailable.

Wise reminds her that the concerts are in June. “I might not be able to make it, because I’ll be doing a play,” Elise says. “It’s about electricity,” she explains. “Ben Franklin has to rap.”

But a month later, on the night of the Washington Metropolitan Accordion Society’s June concert, Elise shows up with her father, her body almost bent in half under the weight of her accordion backpack. More than 50 people — accordionists and their family and friends — fill the basement of Sleepy Hollow United Methodist Church in Falls Church. Nearly all the night’s attendees have white or gray hair, and many of the men are wear-



Wise’s instrument collection includes accordions dating from the late 1880s to the 1950s, above, and the present.

Elise Malouf travels 135 miles round-trip from Springfield for lessons with Wise. Her mother, Anne Van Heyste Malouf, says the 10-year-old was drawn to the instrument precisely because no other kids played it and that Elise has never been teased by her classmates — only by one “inappropriate” scoffing adult. “Kids today didn’t grow up with a sense of the accordion being an old-fashioned or unhip instrument,” she says.

In Wise’s basement, Elise’s gleaming black Hohner accordion dwarfs her tiny frame, but when Wise asks her to play “You Are My Sunshine,” she delivers a jaunty rendition, playing chords on the right-hand keys and wielding the bellows with ease.

“Not bad, kiddo,” Wise says. “But what do I know about music?”

“Nothing,” Elise replies. “You’re old as dirt.”

Elise next plays “Church in the Wildwood,” which shows off her prowess on the left-hand bass buttons.

“That’s ready to perform, isn’t it?” Wise says.

“THIS ACCORDION THING IS GOING TO HAPPEN, ONE WAY OR THE OTHER,” WISE SAYS. “HOW BIG IT BECOMES IS JUST A MATTER OF HOW MUCH ENERGY WE GOT.”

ing ties. Some are strapped into accordions and wander in and out of the room, warming up, as people begin to take their seats.

WMAS organizes semiannual concerts, workshops and visits by celebrity guest artists, such as Frank Marocco, a jazz accordionist who has written music for films. Wise is not playing tonight but will serve as emcee. He talks about the progress he’s made in recruiting young accordionists, then scans the room until he spies a familiar curly brown head and invites Elise up to perform. She lugs her case to the front of the room, unzips it and hauls out her 48-bass instrument.

Before giving the floor to Elise, Wise tells the crowd proudly that the girl recently performed for a large audience at a Baltimore library. A murmur of surprise and smattering of applause greets this news.

“This is called ‘Church in the Wildwood,’” Elise says, and plunges into the number. Although she nailed the song in her lesson with Wise, tonight it does not go well. About four phrases in, she stumbles over a note. She mutters “eck” in frustration but continues. She fumbles again and, with a professional’s poise, corrects herself by stopping and starting over. But the same mistakes haunt the performance to the end. The 40-second number stretches to over a minute, as some of the audience members shift in their seats, crossing and uncrossing their legs in impatience.

When Elise finishes, Wise returns to the front of the room.

“That was very nice. Thank you, Elise,” he says, giving her a pat on the back. He claps until the room joins him in a

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round of applause.

AT WASHINGTON'S GANGPLANK MARINA, the Wises turn down a narrow plank and see friends from WMAS waving from a 46-foot-long houseboat. Paul Aebersold, the boat's owner, sits on the top deck, playing a haunting German song on his accordion. From inside the boat's tiny kitchen wafts the aroma of Viennese goulash, spaetzle and red cabbage — take-out from a German restaurant where Aebersold plays accordion on the weekends.

As the sun sets over the Potomac, a paddleboat glowing with lights plows quietly by. The day's oppressive heat and humidity have dissipated, and everyone agrees it's a far more beautiful night than the last houseboat party, when someone had to hold an umbrella over Wise as he played.

Later in the evening, Wise climbs to the houseboat's upper deck with his accordion, pulls up a chair and begins to play "La Vie en Rose." Although Wise finds it difficult to articulate exactly why he loves the accordion, he always returns to the principle of tension and release in music. He says that how he chooses to express himself reflects his struggles throughout the day and that, "as the music comes to rest so, too, does the player."

"La Vie en Rose" can be an accordion cliché, but Wise's orchestration elevates it to a personal anthem. He slouches into his accordion, arms hugging it tight, eyes closed, chin tucked against the instrument's top, coaxing a symphony out of the cumbersome box. The bittersweet melody reveals itself slowly as Wise's right hand strolls down the keys, evoking strings, his fingers on the bass buttons summoning a piano's gentle percussion. While Wise rocks in his seat, the bellows gradually begin to voice a lone coronet that lifts the notes higher and higher until, at last, they break and retreat to quiet.

Across the inky water comes a ripple of faint applause from another houseboat, the clappers unseen.

IN 2004, WISE PERSUADED A REPORTER for the local newspaper to write about his idea for Accordions for Kids. The Associated Press picked up the story, helping spread word of his 10-week pro-

gram in which children receive free lessons and a loaner accordion. Wise has since taught more than 30 children and recruited still more to pair with program teachers in other states.

Last August, 10-year-old Katelyn Peters and her brother, Aaron, 8, attend the recital that is the traditional last lesson of the program. Their mother, Karen Peters, and the Wises make up the audience.

Katelyn starts with "Hot Cross Buns," as does Aaron. She next heads where her little brother can't follow, playing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" from memory and adding new notes along the way to liven it up. When the children finish, Wise says: "Take a bow. Both of you," and waits for them to stand before presenting two certificates of achievement.

"He who climbs a ladder must begin at the first step," Wise says. "May you take the next step and continue a lifetime of joy with your music."

Now, the Peters family has to decide if either of the kids, who enjoy playing, will continue with accordion.

"So, what do you think?" Wise asks.


"I don't know. Katelyn is pretty busy with violin," says Karen Peters, referring to the rigorous lessons the girl takes through a public school. "Maybe Aaron..."

"Well, you don't have to decide right now," Wise says. "Why don't you keep one of the accordions for now and think about it?"

"Are you sure?" she asks.

"Yes, yes, keep it, and get back to me later."

After the Peterses leave with Aaron's 16-bass loaner, Wise sits alone in the lesson room. "There's some selling that has to be done," he says. "But this accordion thing is going to happen, one way or the other. How big it becomes is just a matter of how much energy we got."

Wise gazes down at the blue pearl accordion abandoned by Katelyn. He lifts it by its tiny shoulder straps and, for a moment, considers shutting it away in its case. Then he carries the child-size accordion across the room and gently places it on a shelf next to his own well-traveled instrument, where it awaits a taker. 

Genevieve Rajewski, a writer living in Massachusetts, is hoping to follow in her grandfather's footsteps by learning to play the accordion. She can be reached at www.ticktockwordshop.com.