

Roger, John



Accordion Maker

John Roger builds diatonic accordions that are well known nationally and internationally by the brand name Cajun. He is a self-taught accordion builder and began his craft in 1978. He uses woodworking techniques and tools and the finest musical instrument wood available: bird's eye maple, curly maple, walnut, and mahogany. Mr. Roger's work is distinguished by its fine inlay work and hand engraved scrolls.

John Roger notes that the popularity of the accordion in Cajun music was revived in the late 1940s and early 1950s through the influence of Iry LeJeune and his popular recording "The Love Bridge Waltz," and later by musicians like Lawrence Walker and Aldus Roger. Today, the sound of the accordion is "more or less synonymous" with Cajun music, he says.

Born in Eunice, he grew up listening to Aldus Roger perform at a local television station. By the time he was a teenager and old enough to visit local clubs, many of the bands in the region were playing early rock and roll music rather than Cajun music.

After his family moved to New Orleans, he went to hear a Cajun band play at Jackson Square. He decided then that he "wanted to learn to play the accordion a little," but decided to make one first. With his background in woodworking and cabinetmaking he was successful in building an accordion. He says jokingly, "Making the first one was probably the biggest mistake, because I never did learn how to play, but now I make accordions," generally on custom orders. His handmade accordions are now shipped to buyers all over the world.

He learned to make his first accordion, he says, "by looking at one." This was a skill he had learned in cabinetmaking, where a craftsman must learn to copy pieces often without actually having them in hand.

Like most accordion makers, he makes all of the pieces himself except for the reeds and bellows, which are imported from Italy. He says that all of the fine cabinetmaking woods are suitable for making accordions. The choice of wood does affect the instrument's sound somewhat, but not to the extent that it does in a stringed instrument with a soundboard. Hard woods gives a "brighter" sound, he says, and softer woods mute and mellow the sound. Musicians may have a preference for a particular sound and this will affect the choice of wood used for the accordion. More important though, is the quality of reeds used.

Making accordions in Louisiana's humid weather can be tricky, especially if they will be shipped to other climates. The accordion's keyboard is made entirely of wood, for instance, and the keys may tend to stick in cooler, drier climates as the wood shrinks. He tries to make his instruments so that they will work in all climates and weather.

John Roger has lived in Meraux for many years and is a member of the Louisiana Crafts Program. He demonstrates accordion making at a number of festivals like the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and Lafayette's Louisiana Native Crafts Festival. He also exhibits his accordions in Canada each year.