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Soul bellows

Cory Pesaturo is on a mission to make the accordion hip by playing jazz. He's even taken home a world title.



By Joseph P. Kahn

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CUMBERLAND, R.I. — In any competition to crown the world's geekiest musical instrument, the accordion would be a top contender. Invented in Germany in the early 1800s, it's most closely associated in this country with polka music and Lawrence Welk's bygone television show, the epitome of postwar squareness.

If anyone can confer sex appeal upon the stodgy old squeezebox, though, it just might be 23-year-old Rhode Island native and jazz accordion wunderkind Cory Pesaturo. Last month Pesaturo won the World Digital Accordion Championship in New Zealand, dazzling judges with his rapid-fire playing style and showmanship. It marked the first world accordion title won by an American in 25 years, earning Pesaturo, who's been playing professionally since age 11, \$1,500 in prize money and a priceless measure of coolness.

He's all over YouTube, too, more than 50 videos and counting. Roland Corp., an electronic instrument maker,

has signed him to demo its line of digital accordions. He has recorded two jazz-flavored albums, played at the White House on four occasions, and performed with both symphony orchestras and cutting-edge jazz bands. On his most recent recording, the 2008 release "Change in the Weather," he teamed with veteran jazz saxophonist George Garzone to inject old standards like Cole Porter's "What Is This Thing Called Love" with a sizzle seldom heard on polka records.

When Pesaturo talks about making the accordion hip again, he's deadly serious. Or as serious as any artist can be who got laughed off "America's Got Talent" by panelist David Hasselhoff this year.

"You can't get mad at the media world - that's just how the game is played," Pesaturo mused during an interview at his family home. Hanging on the walls are many framed photos and fan letters, including several from Bill and Hillary Clinton.

"People my age are getting more into jazz now, though," Pesaturo said. "I'm showing them how the accordion can rock out, as it were. The best thing that ever happened to the accordion was it dying in the '70s and '80s. Why? Because there's no stigma attached to it by the current generation. Almost dying would have been worse."

Hasselhoff's mockery was predictable, Pesaturo went on, considering how easy it is to exploit the accordion's nebbishy image for laughs. Yet he also hears from purists who fear that newfangled digital models like the one Pesaturo plays might upstage, if not replace, more traditional models. The digital model favored by Pesaturo has bellows like an acoustic accordion, but instead of reeds it uses computer-chip technology to mimic other instruments, much like a synthesizer does. Within the small world of serious accordion players, challenging tradition has become a sore issue, he admitted.

"I tell them we have to bring back the accordion as something cool first," Pesaturo said. "We're not trying to kill off the acoustic accordion. The electric guitar didn't kill off the acoustic guitar, did it? I can't play a techno song on a

traditional accordion. My philosophy is, you have to be a musician first and an instrumentalist second.”

Pesaturo’s enthusiasm - some might call it obsession - for promoting the accordion’s virtues is endearing, if surprising to find in someone so young. Not many 20-somethings, after all, speak reverently about Myron Floren, the featured accordionist in Welk’s band for three decades; Dick Contino, a virtuoso who appeared on “The Ed Sullivan Show” a record 48 times; and Charles Nunzio, a legendary performer who, at 96, represents “the last living link to the Golden Age of the Accordion,” as Pesaturo puts it.

(Jonathan Wiggs/Globe staff)

In the same breath, though, Pesaturo can knowledgeably discuss the specs on the Roland accordion Bruce Springsteen recently ordered for an E Street bandmate or the fact that pop star Billy Joel started out playing the accordion, not the piano.

It’s when Pesaturo plays, though, that the musty old Welk association fades away completely and the “wow” factor kicks in, big time. His right hand flies up and down the keyboard at lightning speed, the passionate expression he wears on his face reminiscent of the Boss himself cranking out a hot guitar solo.

“What’s unusual about Cory is that he comes from the remnant of the old 1950s-style competition accordionist world” yet has the improvisational skills to play in a variety of contemporary styles, including modern jazz and classical, observed Hankus Netsky, a New England Conservatory of Music professor who taught Pesaturo while he was a student there, from 2004 to 2008. During his years at NEC, Pesaturo “brought his accordion world into the department - and it added a completely fresh point of departure,” Netsky noted in an e-mail.

Long recognized as an accordion prodigy, Pesaturo took up the instrument at age 9, inspired by his Italian-American father, who played a little accordion, too, and by an uncle who once played jazz saxophone in Frank Sinatra’s band. At 12, Pesaturo made his professional debut opening for Floren at the Warwick Musical Theatre. When the headliner canceled because of illness, Pesaturo became the featured performer. Later that year he was invited to play at a White House reception, beginning a fruitful relationship that has led to nine more playing appearances in front of the Clintons in Washington and elsewhere.

At age 15, Pesaturo won his first national accordion championship. His most recent US title came this year when he set out to qualify for the world championships in Auckland. Pesaturo made the long trip on his own dime, becoming the first American to compete in the newly established digital accordion category - and the only American to compete in New Zealand this year, period. Although Americans had won numerous world titles leading up to the mid-’80s, it has been the Russians and Chinese who’ve dominated international competitions in recent years, said Linda Soley Reed, president of the American Accordionists Association.

“There’s far greater respect for the instrument and its players in Europe and Asia right now,” Reed explained. And far more opportunities for accordionists, especially classical players, to play professionally in other countries, she added. Even here, she said, “a good jazz player like Pesaturo is king, but they’re few and far between.”

In Auckland, Pesaturo was given 15 minutes to play in half a dozen musical styles. An eight-judge panel made up of former accordion champions and master teachers evaluated his performance. “It was kind of a world tour,” Pesaturo said. “It was quite scary, because these judges were world-class players themselves.” Rated on a 25-point scoring scale, he emerged with an average of 23.8, more than good enough to take home the gold.

Ron Lankford, Roland’s US sales and marketing director, said he has little doubt that Pesaturo is on his way to becoming the best, and best-known, accordionist in America, if not the world. Lankford has hired six acclaimed musicians as Roland accordion “clinicians” and said Pesaturo is by far the best American of his generation. “Plus - and I mean this in the nicest way possible - he’s a cute kid. Cory is extremely personable, very sharp and perceptive.”

He’s versatile, too. In some circles, Pesaturo is even better known as an amateur meteorologist and Formula 1 race-car nut. His research into extreme weather events, including a definitive list of statistics on major Atlantic hurricanes, can be found on www.weathermatrix.net, a website run by and for weather enthusiasts around the world. His knowledge of Formula 1 racing stats and history is equally prodigious.

Given a choice between having a music career and joining a Formula 1 race team, Pesaturo said he’d happily opt for the latter. “Even,” he said, “if I were just the musical entertainment.”