



**Acoustic Accordion**  
Popular Norwegian Tunes  
Recordings 1904 - 1916



**“It was just like church music  
and I had never heard anything so beautiful!”**

said Olav Skaslien, Finnskogens great transmitter of cultural traditions,  
about the first time he heard a melodeon.

## The history of the accordion, 1822–1925.

The accordion was invented by Cyrill Demian in Vienna in 1829. His invention was, however, a further development of C. F. Buschman's 1821 instrument "Mundäoline" (harmonica) and the 1822 "Handäoline", which was an accordion with melody keys, but no bass. In the course of the 1830s this new instrument was put into production, and the accordion spread throughout Europe.

In several countries the accordion was initially played by middle-class women, but as a result of extensive mass production the instrument eventually became accessible to the working classes, too. The scope of accordion production can be illustrated by mentioning that the largest factory in Saxony produced 214,000 accordions in one year alone (1860), and this was only one of many factories producing them.

When we talk about the "accordion" of this era, we are actually referring to the melodeon. The melodeon is built up with a diatonic system that produces different notes when the bellows is pulled open and pushed closed. This principle is the same as for the harmonica, which went into production at the same time as the accordion. The modern accordion is unisonoric, meaning that the same pitch is produced whether the bellows is being opened or closed.

The melodeon from Magdeburg became extremely popular, and the instruments were called "Magdeburgers" or "Wahrmuth players" after the music shop owner Carl Wahrmuth in Kristiania (later renamed Oslo). The three-row melodeon was developed around 1900, and the four-row melodeon a few years later. Starting around 1910 the "piano accordion" and the accordion with three main rows and two extra rows were produced.

The instrument developed rapidly in the early 1900s, and after many varieties of melodeon had been produced, the "standard" chromatic accordion had its breakthrough in the 1920s.

Up to 1910, the gramophone had been used for entertainment in cafés and restaurants along with the barrel organ (hurdy-gurdy) and the musical box. The market for gramophone music grew, and making recordings developed into a small industry.

Carl Mathiesen (1870–1933) was the first person in Norway to make a recording featuring an accordion. He recorded the melodeon melodies “Norsk Bondevals” and “Norsk Rheinlænder” as well as the waltz “Tag den med ro”.

In 1908 Norway’s first accordion competition was held, and recording sessions were naturally offered to the top accordion virtuosos. Johan Elsmo (1890–1971), who was the national champion in 1911, made 90 recordings between 1910 and 1920.

Towards the end of the “acoustic period”, accordion music was in the process of being divided into three stylistic genres:

1. Art style: concert repertoire and virtuosic playing on the chromatic accordion
2. Folk style: traditional music played on the melodeon
3. Popular style: dance music with vocals, featuring catchy refrains

Gotthard Erichsen (1882–1964) was the first to play accordion on Norwegian radio. This occurred on a live broadcast in 1925.

## Acoustic Accordion. Music from the acoustic era, 1877 to 1925.

The earliest practical recording technologies were entirely mechanical devices. All sound recordings were made without the use of microphones or electrical amplification.

These recorders typically used a large conical horn to collect and focus the physical air pressure of the sound waves produced by the human voice or musical instruments. A sensitive membrane or diaphragm, located at the apex of the cone, was connected to an articulated scribe or stylus, and as the changing air pressure moved the diaphragm back and forth, the stylus scratched or incised an analogue of the sound waves onto a moving recording medium, such as a roll of coated paper, or a cylinder or disc coated with a soft material such as wax or a soft metal.

These early recordings were necessarily of low fidelity and volume, and captured only a narrow segment of the audible sound spectrum, typically only from around 250 Hz up to about 2,500 Hz, so musicians and engineers were forced to adapt to these sonic limitations. Bands of the period often favoured louder instruments such as trumpet, cornet and trombone, lower-register brass instruments (such as the tuba and the euphonium) replaced the string bass, and blocks of wood stood in for bass drums. Performers also had to arrange themselves strategically around the horn to balance the sound, and to play as loudly as possible.

Luckily, the accordion was an easy instrument to record during the acoustic period, and its sound quality was good compared to that of many other instruments. This was thanks to its powerful sound and its lack of complex overtones.

The reproduction of domestic phonographs was similarly limited in both frequency range and volume. By the end of the acoustic era, the disc had become the standard medium for sound recording, and its dominance in the domestic audio market lasted until the end of the 20th century.

The history of sound recording can be roughly divided into these main periods:

### **1877 - 1925 The Acoustic Era**

1877 Thomas Edison's phonograph was introduced.

1894 Emile Berliner started marketing single-sided 7-inch records in the United States.

1901 10-inch discs were introduced with around 3 minutes of playing time per side.

1925 78 rpm was chosen as the standard because of the introduction of the electrically powered synchronous turntable motor. Early disc recordings were produced in a variety of speeds ranging from 60 to 130 rpm.

### **1925 - 1945 The Electric Era**

Western Electric developed an electrical phonograph recording system using the Condenser Microphone. The microphone was connected to a vacuum tube amplifier and fed the amplified signal to an electromagnetic disc cutting head to make the records. The new recording system improved the frequency range to 50-6000 Hz. This wider bandwidth added another octave of sound reproduction in addition to reduced harmonic distortion and a more realistic sound image.

### **1945 - 1982 The Magnetic Era**

Magnetic tape recording was invented by the Germans during WWII.

1947 Sales of 78 rpm records reached a peak in the US.

1948 The LP (long playing) "microgroove" vinyl record was introduced by Columbia.

1950 Two-channel tape recorders appeared, allowing recording in stereo.

1960 The last 78 rpm record made in the UK was "A Mess Of Blues" by Elvis Presley.

1963 Four-track recording replaced two-track at Abbey Road in late 1963.

1968 One of the first 16-track recorders was installed at CBS Studios in New York City.

### **1982 - The Digital Era**

1982 The Compact Disc (CD) co-developed by Philips and Sony was released.

1991 Digidesign released the first Pro Tools multitrack system, marking a significant advance in digital audio.

2014 "Streaming era?". Revenues from digital music services matched those from physical format sales for the first time.



### **Hans Erichsen (1890-1973)**

Hans Erichsen was known as a musician, composer, promoter and concert arranger, and maintained his popularity into his old age. In 1913 he and Henry Erichsen travelled to America, where they performed under the name “Erichsen Brothers”, although they were not brothers. Hans Erichsen was very active in the recording studios, during both the acoustic and the electric periods, and he achieved a level of popularity that few other Norwegian accordion players have equalled. He composed around 180 melodies, 100 of which have been recorded, and his most famous melody is “Farmerliv” (Track 4).



### **Carl Mathiesen (1870-1933)**

Carl Mathiesen was born in Holmsbu, Hurum, in 1870. He was the first to record Norwegian accordion music in Kristiania, in December 1904. He recorded “Norsk Bondevals”, “Norsk Rheinlænder” and the waltz “Tag den med ro” for the Gramophone Company record label. Together with Adolf Østby (1868–1907), who narrated and made comments, he recorded “Bal i Hallingdal” (Track 2), which was one of the biggest-selling records in Norway in the early 1900s. In fact, this recording was available until the end of the 1930s.

When Mathiesen travelled to America in 1905, Østby replaced him with accordionist Peder Pedersen (1867–1948), and they recorded two versions of “Bondebryllup” (Tracks 7 and 8) together with cabaret artist Agnes Haglund (1875–1917), who helped to create the impression of being at a real village celebration.

GRAMOPHONE CONCERT RECORD

TRADE

MARK

PATENTED



PATENTED

Manufactured by  
The Gramophone Company, Limited,  
and Sister Companies.  
NORWEGIAN TALKING and Harmonica

Bal i Hallingdal  
af

Herr Adolf Østby og Herr Carl Matthiessen

KRISTIANIA

G. C.-81118



### Gotthard Erichsen (1882-1964)

Erichsen was born in Kristiania, and grew up in the working-class neighbourhood of Grünerløkka along with his brother Henry Erichsen, who also became a well-known accordionist. His first engagement was at the restaurant Olympen in Kristiania in 1903. A few years later he made his first recording on the Pathé label, and later he recorded for Beka, the Gramophone Company, Harmonium, Odeon, SkønTon and Polyphon. No other accordionist, and most likely no other Norwegian artist, made more recordings during the acoustic period than Gotthard Erichsen.

In Kristiania he found himself competing with the popular and elegant Italian accordion virtuosos who had come to the country's capital, and who wore golden crowns and dramatic capes when they performed. Gotthard adopted a style resembling a Spanish aristocrat, and became the object of intense idol worship with his good looks and skilful playing. With the end of the Roaring Twenties he faded somewhat into the background. But his compositions lived on, and still do. No accordionist who is interested in the old classic accordion pieces can have avoided hearing about “Kristianiavalsen” (Track 5) and “Lokkar'n” (Track 6).



### Jens Larsen(1865-1925)

Jens Larsen was born in Stavanger. At the age of 16 he travelled to the USA together with his father, where he trained as a tinsmith and a photographer.

In the music magazine “Rytme”, under the title “Stavanger’s accordion players on the march, 1890–1949”, the following can be read about Jens Larsen: “Jens Larsen, the city’s ‘grand old man’ on the accordion. We mention him here together with the veteran player Carl Mathiesen, from Drammen, as one of our pioneers. They deserve credit and honour, post mortem, for having been the two first Norwegian accordionists who truly devoted themselves to playing so masterfully on their instruments that they were a pleasure to listen to, while at the same time they provided a practical basis for our further development.”

During Jens Larsen’s entire musical career he played only a melodeon (diatonic system). When the chromatic accordions arrived, he felt that he was too old to change to a new system. But during his lifetime he managed quite well with his instrument, which was a three-row accordion with 16 to 24 basses.

In the 1890s, as an experienced musician, Jens Larsen spent several years in America, and he later told stories about all of the outstanding musicians he had heard in the USA during his stay there. In his opinion, when he returned to Norway he played as well as those “over there”. He had certainly managed to learn many of their “tactics and tricks”, and felt that nobody could rival his expertise at home in Norway. In any case, the people of Stavanger had never heard accordion music that could compare with what he presented to them when he returned from the USA.



### Johan Elsmo (1890-1971)

Johan Elsmo, from Jømna near Elverum, was one of the great accordion pioneers of the acoustic period. He learned to play the one-row accordion from his father, Emil Elsmo (1854–1932), and at the age of 10 was already playing at dances for three kroner a night. In 1904 he acquired his first two-row accordion from Germany.

Elsmo was declared the national champion in 1911, and the following years proved to be very successful for him. A total of five recording labels wanted to sign him, and he made recordings with all of them. He received 10 kroner per recorded piece at that time, which was a one-time payment.

Elsmo toured all over southern Norway, and he also performed in concerts and at dances together with his neighbour Severin Jevnager (1869–1928), who taught Elsmo many tunes and how to read music. It was said of Elsmo that the reason for his great popularity was that his music was so catchy, irresistible and addictive, and listeners could not help but be swept up in it. He enjoyed playing folk songs, and admired the great classical composers. Mozart was among his favourites.

Elsmo composed around 30 melodies, and stopped giving public concerts in 1928. By that point he had a long recording career behind him, which started in September 1910 with “Norsk Bondevals” (Track 16) and “Gammel norsk rheinlender” (Track 19), recorded for the Gramophone Company (GC). Altogether he made 130 recordings during the acoustic period, for the GC, Odeon, Pathé and Polyphon labels.

GRAMOPHONE CONCERT RECORD.

TRADE MARK



PATENTED

PATENTED

Manufactured by  
The Gramophone Company, Limited,  
and Sister Companies.

NORWEGIAN

HARMONICA

Norsk Bondevals

spillet af

Herr JOHAN ELSMO  
ELVERUM.

289118



### Christian Liebak (1892-1980)

Liebak must certainly be considered one of the best accordion players of the acoustic period of gramophone recordings. Many regard him as having been unique.

Liebak acquired his first accordion as early as 1898. After studying music theory, he became a respected teacher. In 1917 he helped to arrange a concert that was attended by King Haakon and Queen Maud. The concert reinforced the status of the accordion, and in the years that followed many of Liebak's compositions became popular. He published accordion and harmonica manuals,

and was a pioneer in the development of the accordion in Norway. He became well known in Norway and Sweden through his large number of recordings. Altogether he made 110 recordings for the GC, Odeon, Pathé, Rolf Succes and Vike labels. He made nearly 50 recordings with Hartvik Kristoffersen under the name "Orpheum Duo". Among the pieces he composed are "Hilsen til Nordland", "Liebaks mazurka", "Liebaks vals", "Orfeum intermezzo" and "Novelty fox".

Tracks 1, 3, 4, 9, 10, 13, 14,15, 25, 26 and 27  
are copies from the National Library of Norway.  
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All other tracks are transferred from 78, 80 & 90 rpm records from  
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