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The Magic Box

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Serenading the City of Light

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Imagine the wintry boulevards of Paris under a starlit sky. A mist rises over the river Seine and the thousand lights of the Champs Elysées sparkle. Couples sit close at heated café tables, lost gazing into each other's eyes. Paris has forever been the city of love and seduction, and the soundtrack to Parisian love affairs could be nothing but the melancholy melodies of an accordion playing in the distance. Listen carefully, one of the most sought after accordionists in the capital is a Japanese woman named Hiroko Ito.

Born in Utsunomiya, Tochigi Prefecture, "many years ago," Ito's musical journey has been a long and adventurous one. "I first saw an accordion in music class at the age of 10. I picked it up and started touching the keys and it was as if a jolt of electricity ran through my body," she says. "I felt like this was a magical music box—a toy for me to play with. I have always known I wanted to be a performer. I have always needed to express myself through music."

Clad in an elegant suit and a red beret, Ito exudes Parisian chic. So how did this Japanese woman end up here? Ito began her musical career at the age of 4, as a piano student in Japan. "My parents' generation grew up during World War II and felt strongly that their own childhood had been lost," she says. "My mother wanted her dreams fulfilled through her children, and one of her dreams was to be a concert pianist."

However, Ito's path was difficult. "My teachers weren't very good, and before long it became clear that I would never be a world class player." Her brief encounter with the accordion was also short-lived. "I begged my parents for accordion lessons, but there were no good teachers." Ito progressed slowly in her piano studies and eventually graduated from the faculty of piano at the Kunitachi College of Music in Tokyo.

"Life can be amusing and ironic," she notes with a chuckle. "Sometimes it gives you signs. I had just graduated and someone I knew was leaving for Paris to study at the music conservatory. Looking at the prospectus, I realized they taught the accordion and I suddenly felt a pang of nostalgia. A few days later, I came across an article in The Asahi Shimbun on Yasuhiro 'coba' Kobayashi—probably the most important Japanese accordionist of our time. It was 1980. He had completed his degree at the Luciano Fancelli Conservatory in Venice and had won first prize at the World Accordion Competition in Vienna."

Ito decided it was time to take the plunge and pick up the magical music box again. She contacted Kobayashi, who invited her for a meeting. "I listened to his repertoire. He played a French folk music piece traditionally called *musette*, titled 'Mon amour de St. Jean' and a few arrangements by Bach," she says. "I was hooked." Ito soon began her apprenticeship with the master.

One day in 1983, Kobayashi accompanied Ito to a concert in Tokyo given by French accordion star Marcel Azzola. The artist was on tour in Japan, accompanying the French cabaret singer Juliette Greco. "It was perhaps the most important turning point of my career," Ito says. "I sat there listening, unable to communicate with this



Hiroko Ito, one of the most popular accordionists in Paris, plays at a club in the French capital.

artist, and yet through his music I felt I could connect to him. His sound was electrifying."

Ito immediately asked Azzola for lessons. "Rather, I asked and master Kobayashi translated for me!" she says with a grin. Azzola declined but suggested Ito contact someone named Joe Rossi in Paris. Little did Ito know that Joe Rossi was one of the French masters of the accordion. He had played with the stars of French postwar cabaret music including Yves Montand and Georges Moustaki. He was a part of the soundtrack to life in Paris in the 1950s. "I didn't speak French, but that wasn't going to stop me," she says. "I bought a grammar book—one of those books that explain how to write letters in French, and put pen to paper, explaining that I wanted to be his student."

Rossi certainly received the young Japanese woman's letter, but wasn't very

forthcoming in his reply. It didn't matter.

"I just didn't wait for any response," she says. "Before I knew it, I had packed my suitcase and I was catching a flight to France, ready to face a new culture ... All I wanted was to live and play my accordion."

Ito was fearless and determined. "I went all the way to his doorstep and knocked on his door. It was summertime, and I hadn't realized that the French take very long vacations in the summer. So, I decided to wait, and in the meantime I went and enrolled in a French language course at the Sorbonne University."

It was a matter of weeks. Once Rossi was

back, highly amused and intrigued by this young musician who had traveled across the world to learn to play the accordion, he accepted.

Ito was suddenly terrified. "It was quite a shock, and at first I found it very difficult because his style was so different from the

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HIROKO ITO
Accordionist

Japanese classical style. He would annoy me because he would constantly change the position of my fingers and hands. But for the next 10 years till his death, I learned by his side. He taught me to play the music I love."

Ito has a number of recordings to her name. Her first "Accordion in Colour" (1993) was a collaboration with Rossi. Her first solo album was "Blue Pierrot" (1997). Last year she produced "Happy Requiem" (Yufuin Music Supply), which was released in April in Japan.

Today, Ito heads the band Melting Pot. Created in 2000, it is a fusion of nationalities: Ito on the accordion, Guadeloupe-native Sylvain Diony on the acoustic guitar and the samisen, Colombian Mauricio Angarita on the double bass, Frenchman Christian Paoli and Japanese Emiko Ota on percussion. "I do not believe in musical frontiers. Our band reflects our musical identity—we are from three different continents and came together because we all wanted to share and exchange musical influences from different cultures in order to achieve emotional intensity. Everyone makes their contribution—Emiko, for example, can sing traditional *minyo* music and play rock on percussion."

From blues to ska, from salsa to tango to Japanese traditional festival music, Ito is not afraid to use diverse musical influences. "I love all styles and I love absorbing what I hear, adapting different flavors. Sounds are ingredients that melt and fuse together to create something delicious. I also love contact with other musicians—a concert should be an extravagant show."

Melting Pot has a strong following among accordion aficionados in France, playing regularly in folk music competitions including the National Accordion Festival of France and the European Accordion Festival.

They perform regularly in France and Japan and have toured South America, Canada and Hong Kong. Ito's travels have provided her with endless inspiration. "Writing music is automatic for me. I don't look for inspiration—I'll hear a sound, or I'll see something that grabs my attention and I'll want to create music around it," she says.

"Improvisation is also important in our performances—our instruments like to talk to each other and what we say obviously depends on the mood."

Watching Ito onstage one has the impression the accordion is an extension of her body, and as she gracefully stretches and squeezes the instrument, the music flows and one feels transported on a voyage to a distant time and place—Argentina, Okinawa or perhaps just a Parisian metro station.