A cautionary tale of free-reed instruments

Many years ago the countryside was innocent. Life was easy, & people spent their time singing songs, telling tales, & dancing to pipes and drums. But there's a mystery. If life was so good, how come the melodeon got invented?

I'll tell you the story: There was once a blacksmith, who'd always wanted to be a musician. But he couldn't find any instrument he could play, because he was such a big useless lump. He'd tried the pipes, but his hands were too big. He'd tried the drum, but his brain was too small. And, one March day, he was working at his forge, smithing some black, when the fire grew as dim as he was. So he pumped his bellows. And as he pumped he had an idea. At first he wasn't sure what it was, because he'd never had one before. But he asked about, and decided that it was definitely an idea.

Now, there's nothing wrong with ideas – as such. Ideas are quite safe if locked up and kept away from other ideas. It's doing things with them that causes trouble.

For instance, you might come on the idea of having a proper job. Nothing wrong with that – as long as it's just an idea. My uncle George says if you ever come on the idea of having a proper job you should get on your bike and keep peddling till the idea wears off. Some people do morris dancing for similar reasons.

But the blacksmith didn't do that with his idea, because the bicycle hadn't been invented.

And morris dancing wasn't in season. So rather than doing something useful – like inventing the bicycle – he kept working on his idea.

First, he took his spare bellows, and put ends on them. Well, that meant he couldn't squeeze them, because there was nowhere for the air to come out – nothing wrong with that.

Then he made holes in the ends, which meant the air could come out, but it just made a wheezing noise – nothing wrong with that, either.

But then, for reasons known only to himself – if that – he put different reeds over the holes, so the air blew through them. Well, there was something wrong with that, because now it made a noise like a melodeon.

Hearing that, the blacksmith naturally lost interest. He put the Thing he'd made on a shelf and forgot all about it. And all might have been well if a wandering minstrel hadn't dropped into the forge to get the blacksmith to straighten his ferrets.

Now I don't mean live ferrets. Not the sort you and I keep. No, they were a tool from the glass-blowing trade. You see, in those days there was a shortage of words, so people would take the names of things they saw about them to use to call other things. So a lark was messing about. A mole was a beauty spot. A tit was a sort of garden bird. You wouldn't get it now. You wouldn't get people looking at their desk and saying 'Oh look, it's got no tail, no legs and no whiskers – so let's call it a mouse'.

Anyhow, while he waited for his ferrets, which he used to juggle with, this minstrel saw the Thing the blacksmith had made, and he said "What's one of them?". "Buggered if I know", said the blacksmith. Well, the minstrel got it down, and soon found that if you covered some holes with your fingers you could get a tune out of it – not any known tune, but a tune nevertheless (and neverthemore, either).

Now it just so happened that the minstrel was looking for a novelty item for his shows. Something to do between the long boring ballads. Not that long boring ballads weren't popular back then, because they were. Because there's nothing like hearing about other people's misery and misfortune to cheer you up. But you need a break to gloat properly.

Up to then the minstrel had done the ferret juggling, but he wasn't a very good juggler, which is why his ferrets were bent. It was why his head was bent too.

Which may be why he struck a deal with the blacksmith to buy the Thing. Which he did. He took it round and showed it off between ballads. And people would be suitably amazed, and say "Right – sing us another ballad then".

And while it was just a novelty idea for one minstrel there was no real harm done. But, of course, ideas breed. That's why they're so dangerous. You have one idea. Someone else has another idea. They both get out one night, and before you know it you're overrun by them.

Now, there was a bloke in one village he visited called Idle Hans. And he was always looking for things to do.

Well he got hold of the Thing. And he came up with the idea of blocking up all the holes to stop the noise – so far, so good. Then he thought of putting on levers, so you could open up each hole, should you wish to, to let the noise out again – not so good, but not disastrous. Finally, he attached keys to the levers so that you could press them to open the holes – well, now catastrophe was just round the corner. Because then he got it into his head to play the Thing.

Well, that's where ideas get you. Obviously no-one would set out deliberately to invent the melodeon. But the fact is that from the very first idea that blacksmith had, it was always going to happen.

And it couldn't be stopped now. Now the ideas came thick and fast – which is a description which half covers the blacksmith. Someone had the idea of making loads of Things. And someone else had the idea of selling them. And that led to a craze, and now the countryside was no longer innocent. Now it was guilty as hell. Life became hard, and people were forced to stop enjoying themselves, and listen to the melodeon instead.

And that's how we got to where we are today. So if this story has given you any ideas – well, you could always join a morris team. Or, if that's too drastic for you – it just so happens I know where I can lay my hands on a bike.

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