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Jausoro family



Accordion legend Jimmy Jausoro (1920-2004) became Idaho's iconic ambassador of the Basque folk tradition.

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Play it,  
**JIMMY**  
by Carolyn Groom

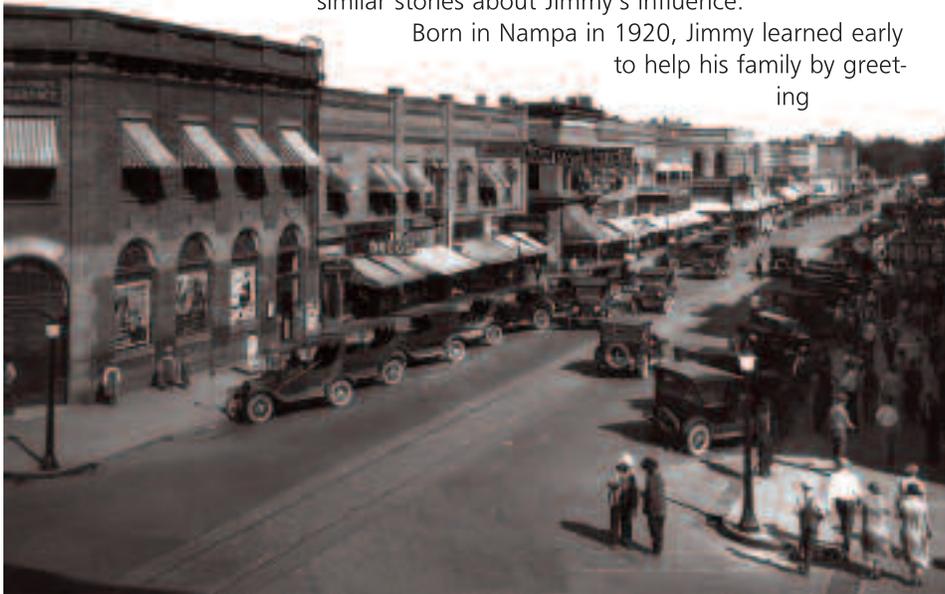
**H**is bicycle wobbles as he struggles to keep the package from hitting the front wheel. Thirteen-year-old Jimmy Jausoro pushes the pedals faster, knowing his destination is not too far. He is going to his piano accordion lesson, carrying the precious instrument on his bike. His accordions will later become valuable tools of the trade as he performed, taught and preserved Basque music over a 50-year career. He passed away in 2004, but Jimmy remains an icon in the Treasure Valley. Who could have imagined that the boy pedaling to those first lessons in Nampa would later preserve Basque music for future generations and leave a legacy of musicians who continue to play his music today?

Jake Murgoitio's grandmother drove him to music lessons on Fridays in late 2002 and early 2003 to take Basque accordion lessons from the master—Jimmy himself. "He was a very good teacher of life, willing to give the shirt off his back," Jake said. "He was a very caring person. I don't know anyone who had a negative story about him. If there was ever a perform-

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ance, if there was a student to teach, he was there. I was fortunate to have had the time with him that I did." Those lessons were filled with gentleness, Jake, now a pre-med student, reminisced. "We would go over and over theory as well as music. I had no musical knowledge and he took me from there to where I am now." Many musicians throughout southern Idaho can recite similar stories about Jimmy's influence.

Born in Nampa in 1920, Jimmy learned early to help his family by greeting



Idaho State Historical Society

Jimmy, age 15 in 1935, was already a featured attraction in Nampa's boarding houses. Pictured: downtown Nampa, 1930s. Opposite: a vintage postcard, about 1940.

Basque sheepherders at the railroad station and bringing them to the family business, the Spanish Hotel. His father, Tomas Jausoro, emigrated from the Basque Country shortly before WWI and purchased the property after working in the Silver City mines.

Attracting boarders was a fine art. Jimmy helped patrons by eagerly seizing their bags—often their only possessions—and stacking them onto his little wagon. Tired from arduous months trailing sheep through the intermountain desert and flush with a season's pay, the men were eager for the comforts of a bed, bath and home cooking. Although shy and small, Jimmy learned quickly to charm the lonely sheepherders and lead them past the competing boarding houses to their new "home" on Nampa's Twelfth



Avenue.

Like other young boarding house children, Jimmy spent much of his time helping around the home and in the family business. His dearest interest, however, turned toward music. In an era before television, many boarding families and their tenants played musical instruments in the evenings to create their own entertainment. Gathering in the front room, they enjoyed each other's musical talents and company. These sounds of the Old Country served both to entertain and to attract homesick young men who missed their own families. A great deal of socializing occurred among the houses, so Jimmy met many musicians every season.

After school, Jimmy took care of the chickens, rabbits and goat, while his brother Joe took care of the cow. All the Jausoro children—three brothers and two sisters—shared in the household chores. Their neighborhood, near church row along the present-day Twelfth Avenue commercial area, was mostly Basque. So Jimmy grew up hearing the language, although he didn't speak it as well as some of his friends. "Typically, my parents spoke very good English, but they spoke Basque with each other," he said in a 1991 interview. "My dad was from Gipuzkoa (northwestern Spain) and my mother was from Ereño (Bizkaia, northern Spain). They would speak to us in Basque and we would answer in English. They did encourage us to speak English, but we spoke English and Basque at home with the family and the guests," he said.

He made lifelong friends in the neighborhood. "Domingo Ansotegui lived across the street and that's where I first met him. He herded sheep with my brother Joe for the Andy Little Sheep Company." As adults, the two

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Basque Museum & Cultural Center



Jimmy Jausoro's Orchestra, founded in 1957, played dance music for more than 40 years. Opposite: One of Jimmy's accordions.

partnered in various musical adventures. Jimmy's mother, Tomasa Mallea, taught her musically talented children Spanish songs. "Louie, Lola and Tony were in the glee club, and Maria often got parts in musicals," Jimmy said of his siblings. "The *trikitixa* (button accordion) songs had to be metered and I would try to repeat them. We didn't have many songs other than in Spanish," he said. Many of the Basque songs lived only by oral tradition, so over the years Jimmy worked tirelessly to record pieces for the very first time ... and thus save them for posterity. Listening to the shepherders playing their guitars and accordions created some wonderful memories for him. "Louie Barnes let me play his accordion, and I listened to John Urlezaga and Vic Arego from Boise. I learned from Vic Arego and really idolized him," he said. Arego played accordion at all the picnics in the 1930s.

A friend's aunt allowed the boys to play the button accordions stored at her house while the shepherders were in the field. But Jimmy really needed his own instrument. He earned his money through delivering papers and doing odd chores. When he was 13, he wandered by a slot machine in his parents' hotel and secretly put a coin in the slot. He hit a jackpot, just what he needed to help finance the new accordion. "I bought the accordion from Charlie Johnson at the Samson Music Company, where Basque pianist Lola Mendiguren worked," he explained. "My first accordion was a brand new chromatic piano accordion that I paid \$120 for. [It would cost \$2,150 today.] It was a shiny new Hohner, with mother of pearl buttons." Soon the young boy carrying a large, awkward package could be seen bicycling along the streets in Nampa at least once a week. "I rode my bike to my lesson carrying my accordion in one hand and steering with the other," he said. He wasn't able to take many classes but he soaked in everything he could from boarders and other musicians.



He was recognized at an early age for his talent. People going by his home heard him play and encouraged him to expand his abilities and show others what he could do. When he was 15 he entered a contest sponsored by the *Idaho Free Press* and Lloyd's Lumber Company in Nampa. Called *Amateur Hour* and broadcast over the radio, Jimmy competed against other people who had different talents. He won, he said, because it was judged by the amount of handclaps from the audience. The performer who moved a sound meter to the highest level was the winner. Since the contest was held in the Adelaide Theater in Nampa, Jimmy had a slight advantage over the other six or seven contestants. "I knew every kid in that theater who clapped for me," he said. Once he won locally, he boarded a bus for Portland, where

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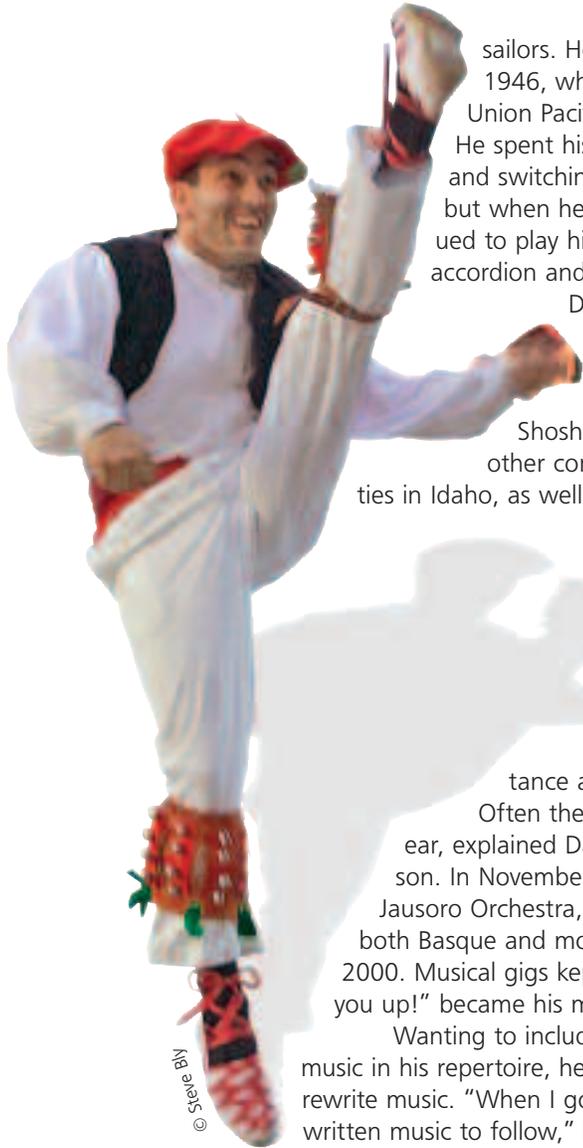
Basque Museum & Cultural Center



Jimmy, with student Patrick Williams, was instrumental in the Boise revival of folk music and dance. Opposite: Oinkari dancer Sean Aucutt.

he toured the KGEW studio, enjoyed a nice dinner and stayed in the New Heathland Hotel. The Oregon press wrote about his radio appearance: "Shy, small, Jimmy Jausoro, 15-year-old amateur contest winner, had his 'big moment' on the air, was interviewed and got a chance to play his accordion, an accordion almost as big as himself, and an accordion that he has worked months selling newspapers for the *Boise Capital News* to buy. He said he was a little scared, but he liked it."

Young Jimmy and his accordion became a fixture at Basque events in the 1930s and '40s. His prized instrument went with him when he joined the Navy during WWII, serving in the South Pacific as a ship's clerk aboard the destroyer *USS Bexar*. He played mostly popular music for his fellow



© Steve Bly

sailors. He returned to Boise in 1946, where he worked for the Union Pacific railroad as a switchman. He spent his days assembling trains and switching cars in the railway yard, but when he wasn't working he continued to play his music. With Jimmy on his accordion and his boyhood friend

Domingo Ansotegui on tambourine, along with other musicians, they played for Basque dances in Boise, Shoshone, Gooding and many other communities in Idaho, as well as in

Elko, Winnemucca and Ely, Nevada. They were young and energetic. They

got paid only a pittance and played all night long. Often they put together pieces by ear, explained Dan Ansotegui, Domingo's son. In November 1957, he formed the Jim Jausoro Orchestra, which continued to play both Basque and modern dance music until 2000. Musical gigs kept them busy. "Music livens you up!" became his mantra.

Wanting to include more traditional Basque music in his repertoire, he continued to write and rewrite music. "When I got started, there was no written music to follow," he explained. Although friends didn't find sheet music when they visited Gernika in 1960, he later made contacts who gave him some direction. "There was a guy in Gernika who wrote out a little for me; it was a lot easier when tapes (cassette) came out," he added. And when the tapes weren't available, someone would just hum the music and he would figure out the

by Pollux (Paul Morris)



A Picassoesque trikitixa player. Opposite: Gary Larson's accordion music in hell.

notes from that.

This was the method he used to help the newly formed Oinkari Basque Dancers put their programs together in the 1960s. His friend Domingo was always at his side. The two were crucial in preserving and playing traditional Basque dance music, and filled key roles in the growing popularity of the Oinkari troupe as it became a trademark of the Idaho Basque community.

"When the Oinkari Basque Dancers got going in 1960,

they'd hum the dances to me and I'd write down all of the dancers' music," Jimmy said. Some of the music he recreated then, such as *makil dantza*, *aurreskua*, *txankarrekua* and *jota barri*, remain with the group today. He travelled extensively with the Oinkaris up to the 1990s. He even appeared in a

Walt Disney movie, *Greta, the Misfit Greyhound*, a story about a Basque sheepherder who befriended a racetrack dog.

"We just had to ask him and Jimmy would play. He was so gung ho!" said Al Erquiaga, one of the early Oinkari dancers. "We would ask for a donation, but I don't think Jimmy or Domingo ever took any money from the pot," explained Diana Urresti Sabala, another Basque dancer from that era. When a second musician could not make the trip to the New York World's Fair in 1964, Jimmy stepped in and played the music for those dances too. "Once again he was willing to drop everything and play for the dance group. Jimmy learned all the dance numbers. We spent the day in the basement of a church practicing and the next day we went to the World's Fair," Al said.

"That man had the biggest heart to give his time for his music. We asked him to come down, sometimes unreasonably often. I don't think he ever turned us down unless he had a previous commitment. We considered him part of our dance group," Al explained. "I think of not only Jim's commitment to all of us in the Basque culture, but I also remember his patience," added Diana. "We would say, 'Hey Jim, would you play that one more time? Okay, stop-stop. Jim, would you play that one more time?' He was so very patient, so kind and so willing." Jimmy had a little trademark hand motion to indicate when to start from the top of a song. "He'd cup his hand and raise it above his head, bringing it forward and down to show he was going to start at the beginning," demonstrated Boise State University professor John Yursa. "He'd do that over and over, never complaining."

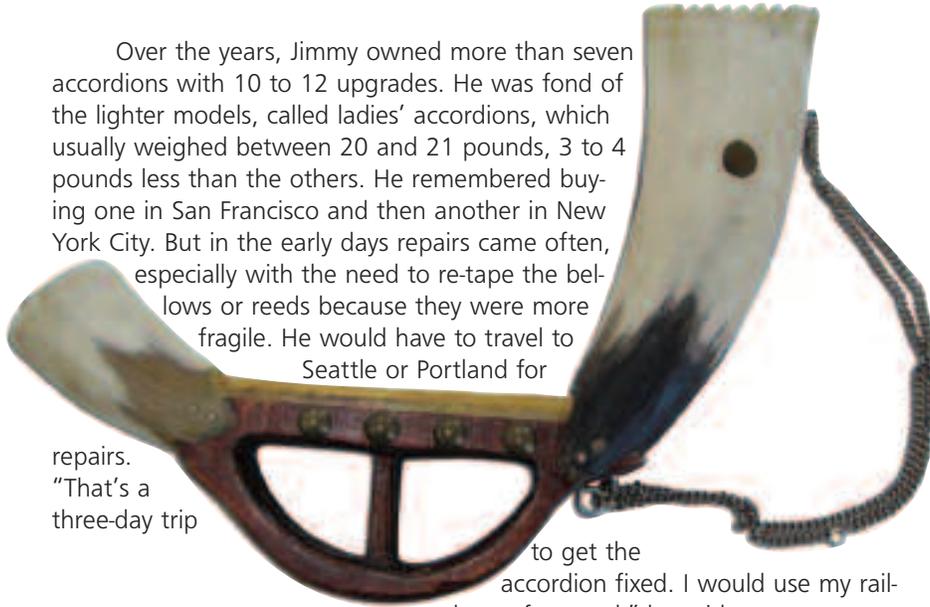


The Far Side

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Over the years, Jimmy owned more than seven accordions with 10 to 12 upgrades. He was fond of the lighter models, called ladies' accordions, which usually weighed between 20 and 21 pounds, 3 to 4 pounds less than the others. He remembered buying one in San Francisco and then another in New York City. But in the early days repairs came often, especially with the need to re-tape the bellows or reeds because they were more fragile. He would have to travel to Seattle or Portland for

repairs.  
"That's a  
three-day trip



to get the  
accordion fixed. I would use my rail-  
road pass for travel," he said.

Playing his accordion was a priority for Jimmy. "My mother would always jokingly say his first love was that accordion and she was second," his daughter Marie Day said. "I don't think people realize just how much my father was gone [from home] while we were growing up. If someone needed a musician, he was always there, and he had practices almost every night of the week," she added. "My first memory of my grandfather was when I was learning how to dance the jota," explained his granddaughter, Danielle Day. "When I was little, I had just learned to do the jota. I would be tired, but he would be ready, waiting for me. I remember most of the time he would have his accordion with him. I remember looking forward to getting into the older dance group because that was the one my *aitona* (grandfather) would play for," Danielle said. Marie remembered Jimmy being interested in the music his granddaughter was singing for him. He realized he did not know the piece himself. "He went down to the sidewalk on the Basque Block where they had imprinted the piece and sat next to it, copying it note for note so that he could play it for her," Marie said.

Although his daughters Marie and Anita tried to play the accordion, neither took the same liking to it as their father. Instead they became committed to the Oinkari dance troupe. They would see their father's patience first-hand as the group practiced over and over again, starting from the top to get the steps right.



Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao

Medieval rhythms echo through Boise's Basque music revival. Pictured: banging the txalaparta. Opposite: the alboka, a single-reed hornpipe.

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Ensuring that traditional Basque music lived on in the hearts of young people was a priority for Jimmy. He played for the North American Basque Association's summer camps that brought Basque music and dance to students. His wife, Isabel, coordinated the first one, held in Boise in 1973. Now, the camp is held annually in different locations, alternating between Southern California, San Francisco, Elko and Boise, for example. The camps continue to stimulate new interest and provide instruction to youngsters eager to learn more about their musical heritage.

Jimmy received national and international recognition for his contributions as a musician and teacher of Basque music. In 1985, the National Endowment for the Arts recognized Jimmy and the Oinkari dancers with the Heritage Cultural Award for preserving Basque culture in folk art. His other honors include an Idaho State Folk Arts Award, the Boise Mayor's Award for

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Accordionist Kepa Junkera of Bilbao, a Grammy winner, performed in Boise in 2010. Opposite: souvenir figurine.

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Excellence in the Arts, an America Hall of Fame Award from the Society of Basque Studies in America, Basque of the Year by the North American Basque Organization and the Idaho Governor's Award for the Arts for Lifetime Achievement.

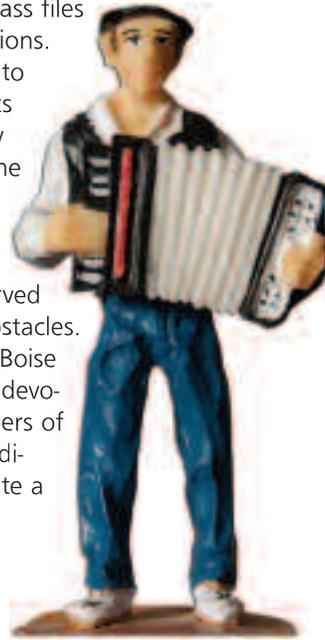
But his biggest prize can be seen in the young musicians who are now playing the instrument that he loved so dearly. Accordion classes at the Basque Center continually draw new students. Dan Ansotegui once played with Jimmy. Now he leads Txantxangorriak, a local music school Jimmy had a hand in starting. The regular accordion class has 14 students ranging in age from 8 to 70. Another eight students are learning to play the tambourine.

Novice accordionist Alexis, 17, raises her trikitixa, familiarizing herself with the weight, pulling and pushing, trying to get a steady sound. Weighing approximately 20 pounds, it hangs awkwardly on the strap around her neck. She is learning one of the most beloved musical instruments of the Basque people, the button accordion. Alexis is Basque and her parents want to pass on their love for the Basque culture in hopes that she in turn will pass on that heritage to her children and grandchildren. Although the first

few notes are a little tentative, the class progresses and Alexis improves throughout the lesson, the music sounding more melodic each time through.

As Alexis finishes up her lessons, the next class files in, gathering metal chairs, unpacking their accordions. She is invited by instructor Dan Ansotegui to stay to accompany the group on their first piece. Students tune their instruments, filling the room with many different musical patterns all at once. And once the class is over, the dancers arrive.

Although she never met him, Alexis benefits from the rich heritage left by an unassuming railway worker named Jimmy Jausoro, who preserved the music of his Basque heritage despite many obstacles. Basque music continues to be played throughout Boise and the surrounding areas because of one man's devotion. His legacy can be seen in the growing numbers of today's young people who to continue to play traditional Basque music and instruments—and celebrate a land that many of them may never see.



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**Carolyn Groom** is a writer and researcher interested in oral histories and traveling. She has a passion to learn about different cultures, then revealing her knowledge in unique ways to bring a new awareness to students of all ages.