ABOUT SEVEN YEARS ago, after completing undergraduate studies as a concert pianist, Marié Abe spent a summer traveling solo across Europe. She fell in love somewhere around Budapest. By the time she reached Portugal her life had changed dramatically.

Abe is now an accordionist.

From Hungarian dance bands to Roma buskers, the accordion beckoned to her across Eastern Europe. “I began seeking out accordion music, and it is virtually everywhere,” says Abe, a petite, exuberant woman whose custom-built Italian accordion, when strapped to her back, is occasionally mistaken for a massage table. As she grows increasingly virtuosic on what is sometimes said to be the only instrument you hug, Abe joins a soulful, culturally kaleidoscopic, geographically all-encompassing tradition.

A musician since the age of three, when she received special dispensation from the instructor to attend a Yamaha piano school for five-year-olds and up, near her home in Tokyo, Abe joined the College of Fine Arts last fall as an assistant professor of music, specializing in musicology and ethnomusicology. With a PhD in ethnomusicology from the University of California, Berkeley, Abe has a range of research interests, including the politics of space, and chindon-ya, a style of Japanese marching music used as a form of advertising.

But her love affair with the accordion grows only stronger as Abe, who wears a silver accordion charm around her neck, hones her own edgy, new-wave sound and forges musical collaborations with recording artists in the United States and Japan, in a range of genres.
“Some people assume the accordion is all polka, all the time,” says Abe, who puts the blame for this misperception squarely on The Lawrence Welk Show, which debuted in 1951 and ran on network television for 30 years.

Abe knows as well as anyone the vastness of the accordion diaspora. She was coproducer of Public Radio International’s Squeezebox Stories, a musical and social history of the accordion, hosted by The World’s Marco Werman. That documentary, spawned by a dinner party conversation between Abe and a journalist, profiled immigrant accordionists through stories of zydeco dance halls, Mexican norteño clubs, and Arab master musicians.

Abe and coproducer Julie Caine traveled the length and breadth of California for a year doing research. To Abe, the accordion embodies the immigrant experience—it is musical shorthand for the old country.

**A ONE-MAN BAND**

The accordion as we know it was created in Austria in the 1800s, and it caught on among migrants for its ease, hearty sound, and versatility: an accordionist was a one-man band. Culturally promiscuous, the accordion is sometimes mournful, often upbeat, occasionally raucous, its portability somewhere between a guitar and a piano. Here is just a partial list of styles that accordions, in incarnations grand and petite, with buttons or keys, might be played: Argentinian tango, Austrian Schrammelmusik, Basque music, polka, Chilean cueca, klezmer, Cajun, zydeco, French bal musette, Italian tarantella, American Tejano, Korean trot music, South African Boeremusiek, Greek rebetiko, English dance music, and the rasguido doble sounds of Brazil.

Abe teaches many of these traditions in her Musical Cultures of the World class. Her students, who are taught basic zydeco steps, are often stunned to learn that zydeco giant Buckwheat has collaborated with Keith Richards and Eric Clapton.

Abe owns several accordions, piano-style and push-button, but her prize instrument was handcrafted to order in Castelfidardo in east-central Italy, where she traveled to meet with the artisans who made the town famous for crafting accordions.

“I have two other accordions at home in Tokyo,” says Abe, who visits Japan twice a year. One is a three-row diatonic button accordion, the kind used in Mexican and Colombian music. The other is an Argentinian tango instrument called the bandoneón. “I played in an Argentine band in California,” she says. “The basic principle is the same, but they play with the accordion on their knee.”

The only child of a chef-social worker mother and businessman-jazz aficionado father, Abe came to Boston from San Francisco, where she played accordion in a trio at Tartine Bakery & Cafe. She was so at home there she became a bread taster for the celebrated bakery. “It was a populist band,” says Abe, whose group cultivated a lively following. “They gave us free rein. We played some klezmer, some Parisian, a little of everything.”

But beyond the regular gig, Abe and her musical “partner in crime,” violinist Dina Maccabee, hunted down world music to transcribe and arrange. Abe’s “omnivorous hunger” for genres was fed during gigs with a string of groups, including Thorny Brocky; the Japonize Elephants; Ramon and Jessica, Tango No. 9, Campo Santo theater company, Marzouk Mejri, and Gnut.

Last spring Abe teamed up with the Boston-based Debo Band in time for the Ethiopian pop group’s first record contract. The band’s performance at last summer’s Lincoln Center Out of Doors festival in New York City drew raves from New York Times critic Alastair Macaulay, who wrote, “Every number it played deepened my delight.” In this powerhouse ensemble, Abe’s keyboard accordion strains enrich the tight interplay of saxophone, trumpet, electric fiddle, guitar, drums, voice, and a mean tuba.

Debo Band rocked Great Scott in Allston in December, where Abe, dressed in a flowered shift, bright red tights, and boots, sat center stage looking blissful and urging soulful chords from her piano accordion.

Abe never tires of performing, and she never tires of expanding her repertoire. When it comes to accordion, she says, the possibilities are infinite.