

# Cajun Music:

## A Louisiana French Tradition

by Barry Jean Ancelet

Cajun music is a Louisiana hybrid, a blend of cultural influences with an identity which accordion maker and musician Marc Savoy of Eunice describes in culinary terms: "It's a blend of ingredients, like a gumbo in which different spices and flavors combine to make a new taste." Indeed, like Cajun cooking and culture in general, Cajun music blends elements of American Indian, Scots-Irish, Spanish, German, Anglo-American and Afro-Caribbean musics with a rich stock of western French folk traditions.

Most of Louisiana's French population descends from the Acadians, the French colonists who began settling at Port Royal, Acadia in 1604. They remained outside mainstream communication between France and its larger, more important colony, New France, though their isolation was frequently disturbed by the power struggle between the English and French colonial empires. Acadia changed hands back and forth until the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, when England gained permanent possession of the colony and renamed



Cajun Fiddler, Dewey Balfa. Photo by Robert Yellin.



it Nova Scotia. The Acadians were eventually deported from their homeland in 1755 by local British authorities after years of political and religious tension. In 1765, after 10 years of wandering, many Acadians began to arrive in Louisiana, determined to recreate their society. Within a generation these exiles had so firmly reestablished themselves as a people that they became the dominant culture in South Louisiana, absorbing other ethnic groups around them. Most of the French Creoles (descendants of earlier French settlers), Spanish, Germans, and Anglo Americans in the region eventually adopted the traditions and language of this new society, thus creating the South Louisiana mainstream. The Acadians, in turn, borrowed many traits from these other cultures, and this cross-cultural exchange produced a new Louisiana-based community – the Cajuns.

The Acadians' contact with these various cultures contributed to the development of new musical styles and repertoire. From Indians, they learned wailing singing styles and new dance rhythms; from Blacks, they learned the blues, percussion techniques, and improvisational singing; from Anglo-Americans, they learned new fiddle tunes to accompany Virginia reels, square dances and hoedowns. The Spanish contributed the guitar and even a few tunes. Refugees and their slaves who arrived from Saint-Domingue at the turn of the nineteenth century brought with them a syncopated West Indian beat. Jewish-German immigrants began importing diatonic accordions (invented in Vienna in 1828) toward the end of the nineteenth century when Acadians and Black Creoles began to show an interest in the instruments. They blended these elements to create a new music just as they were synthesizing the same cultures to create Cajun society.

The turn of the twentieth century was a formative period in the development of Louisiana French music. Some of its most influential musicians were the Black Creoles who brought a strong, rural blues element into Cajun music. Simultaneously Blacks influenced the parallel development of zydeco music, later refined by Clifton Chenier. Although fiddlers such as Dennis McGee and Sady Courville still composed tunes, the accordion was rapidly becoming the mainstay of traditional dance bands. Limited in the number of notes and keys it could play in, it simplified Cajun music; songs which could not be played on the accordion faded from the active repertoire. Meanwhile, fiddlers were often relegated to playing a duet accompaniment or a simple percussive second line below the accordion's melodic lead.

By the mid-1930s, Cajuns were reluctantly, though inevitably, becoming Americanized. Their French language was banned from schools throughout South Louisiana as America, caught in the "melting pot" ideology, tried to homogenize its diverse ethnic and cultural elements. In South Louisiana, speaking French was not only against the rules, it became increasingly unpopular as Cajuns attempted to escape the stigma attached to their culture. New highways and improved transportation opened this previously isolated area to the rest of the country, and the Cajuns began to imitate their Anglo-American neighbors in earnest.

The social and cultural changes of the 1930s and 1940s were clearly reflected in the music recorded in this period. The slick programming on radio (and later on television) inadvertently forced the comparatively unpolished traditional sounds underground. The accordion faded from the scene, partly because the old-style music had lost popularity and partly because the instruments were unavailable from Germany during the war. As western swing and bluegrass sounds from Texas and Tennessee swept the country, string bands which imitated the music of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys and copied Bill Monroe's "high lonesome sound" sprouted across South Louisiana. Freed from the limitations imposed by the accordion, string bands readily absorbed various outside influences. Dancers across South Louisiana were shocked in the mid-1930s to hear music which came not only from the bandstand, but also from the opposite end of the dance hall through speakers powered by a Model-T behind the building. The electric steel guitar was added to the standard instrumentation and drums replaced the triangle as Cajuns continued to experiment with new sounds borrowed from their Anglo-American neighbors. As amplification made it unnecessary for fiddlers to bear down with the bow to

Cajun Musicians Sady Courville, Mark Savoy and Dennis McGhee.







be audible, they developed a lighter, lilting touch, moving away from the soulful styles of earlier days.

By the late 1940s, the music recorded by commercial producers signalled an unmistakable tendency toward Americanization. Yet an undercurrent of traditional music persisted. It resurfaced with the music of Iry Lejeune, who accompanied the Oklahoma Tornadoes in 1948 to record *La Valse du Pont d'Amour* in the turn of the century Louisiana style and in French. The recording was an unexpected success, presaging a revival of the earlier style, and Iry Lejeune became a pivotal figure in a Cajun music revival. Dance halls providing traditional music flourished, and musicians such as Lawrence Walker, Austin Pitre and Nathan Abshire brought their accordions out of the closet and once again performed old-style Cajun music, while local companies began recording them. Cajun music, though bearing the marks of Americanization, was making a dramatic comeback, just as interest in the culture and language quickened before the 1955 bicentennial celebration of the Acadian exile.

Alan Lomax, a member of the Newport Folk Festival Foundation who had become interested in Louisiana French folk music during a field trip with his father in the 1930s, encouraged the documentation and preservation of Cajun music. In the late 1950s, Harry Oster began recording a musical spectrum of Cajun music which ranged from unaccompanied ballads to contemporary dance tunes. His collection, which stressed the evolution of the music, attracted the attention of local activists, such as Paul Tate and Revon Reed. The work of Oster and Lomax was noticed by the Newport Foundation, which sent fieldworkers Ralph Rinzler and Mike Seeger to South Louisiana. Cajun dance bands had played at the National Folk Festival as early as 1935, but little echo of these performances reached Louisiana. Rinzler and Seeger, seeking the unadorned roots of Cajun music, chose Gladius Thibodeaux, Louis "Vinesse" Lejeune and Dewey Balfa to represent Louisiana at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival. Their "gutsy," unamplified folk music made the Louisiana cultural establishment uneasy, for such "unrefined" sounds embarrassed the upwardly mobile Cajuns who considered the music chosen for the Newport festival crude – "nothing but chanky-chank."

The instincts of the Newport festival organizers proved well-founded, as huge crowds gave the old-time music standing ovations. Dewey Balfa was so moved that he returned to Louisiana determined to bring the message home. He began working on a small scale among his friends and family in Mamou, Basile and Eunice. The Newport Folk Foundation, under the guidance of Lomax, provided money and fieldworkers to the new Louisiana Folk Foundation "to water the roots." With financial support and outside approval, local activists became involved in preserving the music, language and culture. Traditional music contests and concerts were organized at events such as the Abbeville Dairy Festival, the Opelousas Yambilee and the Crowley Rice Festival.

In 1968, the state of Louisiana officially recognized the Cajun cultural revival which had been brewing under the leadership of the music community and political leaders, such as Dudley LeBlanc and Roy Theriot. In that year, it

Cajun Musician Joe Falcon with his wife Cleoma Breaux Falcon. Photo by Lauren C. Post, Courtesy of Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Louisiana State University.



Hector Duhon and Octa Clark have been playing Cajun music together for over fifty years. Al Gody, Louisiana Office of Tourism



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#### *Suggested reading*

Conrad, Glenn R., ed. *The Cajuns: Essays On Their History and Culture*. Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies Publication, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 3rd revised edition, 1983.

Post, Lauren. *Cajun Sketches*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Whitfield, Irene Therese. *Louisiana French Folk Song*. New York: Dover, 1969.

#### *Suggested recordings*

*J'étais au bal: Music from French Louisiana*. Swallow 6020.

*Louisiana French Cajun Music from the Southwest Prairies*. Rounder Records 6001 and 6002.

*Louisiana Cajun Music*. Old-Timey Records 108, 109, 110, 111, 114, 124, and 125.

#### *Suggested films*

*Le sons des Cajuns*, by André Gladu, Michel Brault, Jacques Bouchard. Four 30 min. color video programs. 5225 Rue Berri, Montreal, Quebec H2J 2S4.

*Dedans le Sud de la Louisiane*, by Jean Pierre Bruneau. 60 min. color sound. Bayou Films, Rt. 3, P.O. Box 614, Cut Off, Louisiana 70345.

*Huit Piastre et Demi*, by Glenn Pete. Cote Blanche Production, 113 W 69th St., Cut Off, Louisiana 70345.

created the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) which, under the chairmanship of James Domengeaux, began its efforts on political, psychological and educational fronts to erase the stigma Louisianans had long attached to the French language and culture. The creation of French classes in elementary schools dramatically reversed the policy which had formerly barred the language from the schoolgrounds.

Domengeaux's efforts were not limited to the classroom. Influenced by Rinzler and Balfa, CODOFIL organized a first *Tribute to Cajun Music* festival in 1974 with a concert designed to present an historical overview of Cajun music from its origins to modern styles. The echo had finally come home. Dewey Balfa's message of cultural self-esteem was enthusiastically received by an audience of over 12,000.

Because of its success the festival became an annual celebration of Cajun music and culture. It not only provided exposure for the musicians but presented them as culture heroes. Young performers were attracted to the revalidated Cajun music scene, while local French movement officials, realizing the impact of the grassroots, began to stress the native Louisiana French culture. Balfa's dogged pursuit of cultural recognition carried him farther than he had ever expected. In 1977, he received a Folk Artists in the Schools grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to bring his message into elementary school classrooms. Young Cajuns, discovering local models besides country and rock stars, began to perform the music of their heritage. Yet, they did not reject modern sounds totally. Performers such as Michael Doucet and Beausoleil are gradually making their presence known in Cajun music, replacing older musicians on the regular weekend dance hall circuit and representing traditional Cajun music at local and national festivals.

Cajun music seems likely to live for sometime to come. The renewed creativity within the tradition, as opposed to slavish imitation of older styles, makes predictions of its disappearance seem hasty. Purists who would resist new instrumentation and styles ignore the fact that change and innovation have always characterized Cajun music – the introduction of the accordion in the late nineteenth century, for instance, or the adding of other instruments in the 1950s, and the influence of the blues, swing, and rock. As Dewey Balfa points out, "When things stop changing, they die. The culture and the music have to breathe and grow, but they have to stay within certain guidelines to be true. And those guidelines are pureness and sincerity." The blending and cultural fusion at the heart of the development of Cajun culture continue to be essential to its music.