

The Survival of French Culture in South Louisiana

by Barry Jean Ancelet

“What’s your name? Where’re you from? Who’s your daddy?” When you first meet someone from south Louisiana, these are the questions you will probably hear. And you have to answer them before you can get along about your business. They are not rhetorical questions but quite serious ones designed to elicit information which helps to place you in the world of the Cajuns and Creoles. If you are from the inside, they want to know where you fit; if from the outside, they want to know how you got in and why. Such concerns could be thought of as xenophobic, but they are not. Rather they are simply part of a ritual to establish relationships — one which is used by a people whose history of tragedy and turmoil has taught them to be careful. Such questions function as boots for a people used to high water.

The French founded Louisiana in 1699. At first there were just a few forts perched precariously along the rivers of the frontier. Eventually,

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Young and old perform during Cajun Mardi Gras at Fred’s Lounge in Mamou, Louisiana. Photo by Philip Gould



however, there developed a society of French colonials. To distinguish themselves from immigrants, those born in the colony called themselves Creoles, a word meaning "home-grown, not imported." Exiled after French Acadia became English Nova Scotia, the Acadians arrived in south Louisiana between 1765 and 1785, where they isolated themselves in order to reestablish their society along the bayous and on the prairies. In this area by the 19th century, the people of varied French cultures, enriched by the native American Indian tribes and immigrants from Germany, Spain, Italy, Ireland, England and the new United States, created a "melting pot" which came to be called Cajun. The descendants of African slaves added a few ingredients of their own and borrowed from the pot to improvise a language, a culture and an identity which they came to call Creole.

In 1803, when Napoleon sold Louisiana to Thomas Jefferson in the biggest real estate deal in history, the territory, which stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada, was divided up by politicians. Artificial, arbitrary boundaries ignored cultural regions and historical settlement patterns. The new State of Louisiana included the piney hills of the north and east, populated by English-speaking farmers, the bayous and prairies of the south, where French-speaking Cajun and Creole farmers lived, the rich alluvial plains along the Red and Mississippi Rivers — home of the aristocratic planters and New Orleans, with its multilingual, multicultural urbanites.

When the time came for statewide laws to be enacted, the very cultural and linguistic diversity which had created the rich new blends put a strain on the state's arbitrary borders. Early versions of the state constitution made valiant attempts to legitimize the French language, but as America charged on, the road signs to nationalism were all in English. By the turn of the century, the battle cry of President Theodore Roosevelt, "One nation, one language!" thundered across the land. The approach of World War I induced a quest for national unity which suppressed regional diversity. In 1916, when mandatory English language education was imposed throughout the state, children in southern Louisiana were punished for speaking the language of their fathers and mothers in school, as French was trampled in a frontal assault on illiteracy. Over several generations, Cajuns were eventually convinced that speaking French was a sign of cultural illegitimacy. Those who could, joined the headlong rush toward the language of the future and of the marketplace, becoming more American than Yankees. Everything emanating from outside their culture — including the English language — was imitated and internalized. Western Swing, for example, replaced Cajun music in the dance halls, while black Creoles, who had preserved their language and traditions largely in isolation, were increasingly diverted toward the national civil rights movement as their most pressing struggle. The discovery of oil produced an economic boom, which brought both groups out of the 19th century just in time for the Great Depression. Huey Long's new highways and bridges — first shared by horse-drawn buggies and horseless carriages — now opened the countryside to link the bayous and prairies of south Louisiana with the rest of America.

South Louisiana was humming down this newly paved road toward homogenization. But was this the right road? Stress cracks appeared on the social surface: alcoholism and suicide among musicians and artists; juvenile delinquency among children who could no longer speak to their grandparents because of the language difference and, preoccupied with television, would no longer speak to their parents; selfdenigration among a people who now called themselves "coonasses."



Louisiana's French cultures were beating a fast retreat, bearing the stigma of shame.

Then, in the late 1940s, the tide seemed to turn — particularly among the Cajuns at first. Soldiers in France during World War II had discovered that the language and culture they had been told to forget made them invaluable as interpreters and increased their chances for survival. After the war, returning GIs, aching from foreign battles in faraway places, sank into the hot bath of their own culture. They drank and danced to forget. Dance halls throughout south Louisiana once again blared the familiar and comforting sounds of homemade music. The glowing embers of the Cajun cultural revival were fanned by political leaders like Dudley LeBlanc and Roy Theriot, who used the 1955 bicentennial of the Acadian exile as a rallying point for the revitalization of ethnic pride. The message of 1955 was that the Cajuns had survived the worst; their culture and language, albeit injured, were nevertheless alive.

In 1968, the State of Louisiana officially fostered the movement with the creation of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL), knighting former Congressman James Domengeaux as its chairman. The message of 1968 was clear: it was officially all right to be Cajun again. But the movement was not without its problems. CODOFIL found itself faced with the monumental task of creating a quality French language educational program from scratch. Older Cajuns who had once written, "I will not speak French on the school-ground" a few thousand times had learned the lesson well and thus avoided inflicting on their own children what had long been considered a cultural and linguistic deficiency.

The mandate of CODOFIL, as a state agency, covered the entire state, right up to its old artificial borders. For this reason, CODOFIL was forced to water its wine and pressed only for the establishment of French as a second language in the elementary schools. A dearth of native-born French teachers compounded the problem, and CODOFIL opted to import teachers from France, Belgium and Quebec as a stop-

Cajun fiddler Lionel Leleux and accordionist Don Montoucet play for an elementary school in Loreauville, Louisiana. Photo by Philip Gould

gap measure. This, along with a broad program of cultural exchanges, brought the Louisiana French experiment to the attention of the Francophone world. Meanwhile, activists on the home front felt that the indigenous language and culture were once again being forced into the shadows, as many Cajuns dutifully echoed past criticisms, apologizing that their language was “not the real French, just broken Cajun French.”

On the other hand, the Cajuns were no longer alone in their battle for identity. For their own reasons, France, Belgium and French Canada became interested in fanning the fires of self-preservation along the bayous. They invested millions of *francs*, *piastres*, and dollars to create a life-support system in the hopes that French culture and language might ultimately survive in south Louisiana. Along with money and teachers came hordes of tourists eager to visit this long-lost, long-forgotten, “exotic” place where, against all odds, French had somehow survived. This contact with outsiders has shown the Cajuns that, contrary to their childhood lessons, their French “works just fine” to communicate with folks who speak “real” French. And now that institutionalized segregation has diminished, black Creoles as well are becoming increasingly interested in preserving the French parts of their culture.

Visitors to south Louisiana, invariably bringing their own cultural baggage, often find their expectations frustrated by the reality of the situation. French Canadians, for instance, who come to find in Cajuns a symbol of dogged linguistic survival in a predominantly Anglo-Saxon North America find virtually no open Anglo/Franco confrontation or animosity in cultural politics comparable to the Canadian experience. Those French who seek quaint vestiges of former colonials find instead French-speaking cowboys (and Indians) in pickup trucks. They are surprised at the Cajuns’ and Creoles’ love of fried chicken and iced tea, forgetting that this is also the South; their love of hamburgers and Coke, forgetting that this is America; and their love of cayenne and cold beer, forgetting that this is the northern tip of the West Indies as well. American visitors usually skim along the surface, too, looking in vain for traces of Longfellow’s *Evangeline* and a lost paradise, where past and present meet like the sky and water on the horizon.

To understand today’s Cajuns and Creoles, one must take a long, hard look at their culture and history. Friendly, yet suspicious of strangers; easygoing, yet among the hardest nuts of all to crack; deeply religious, yet amusingly anti-clerical; proud, yet quick to laugh at their own foibles; unfailingly loyal, yet possessed of a frontier independence, Cajuns are immediately recognizable as a people, yet defy definition. As the saying goes, “You can tell a Cajun a mile away, but you can’t tell him a damn thing up close.” Black Creole culture is just as complex, involving more than the obvious confluence of African and French heritages. Before the Civil War, most black Creoles were slaves on French plantations, but others, called *gens de couleur libres* (free men of color), held positions in the business and professional communities and sometimes even owned plantations and slaves. Further, many generations of intermarriage with whites and American Indians produced an intricate, internal caste system within black Creole society, based on one’s color of skin, dialect and family history.

The most consistent element in south Louisiana culture may well be an uncanny adaptability. Cajuns and Creoles have always been able to chew up change, swallow the palatable parts and spit out the rest. This selectivity has indeed become the principal issue of cultural survival in French Louisiana. Earlier, change had been slow, organic and pro-

Cajun fiddler Dewey Balfa from Basile, Louisiana. Photo by Robert Yellin



gressive. Now, much of it is imported at a dizzying pace. The fight to save the language looms large because many fear that, if it is lost, the culture will go with it, which raises some questions. Can it be translated into English without loss of cultural identity? To be sure, Cajuns and Creoles will eat gumbo and crawfish forever, but is "Jolie Blonde" sung in English still Cajun music? And where does one draw the line between Creole zydeco music and Afro-American rhythm-and-blues?

In the midst of this debate are signs of renewed vigor. Young parents are deliberately speaking French to their children. Young authors are writing in French on purpose. Louisiana teachers are replacing the imported ones. Even a few films have been produced locally with French soundtracks. Cajun music, once dismissed as "nothing but chanky-chank," has infiltrated radio, television and the classroom. "Zydeco King" Clifton Chenier, who recently received both a Grammy and a National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Award, has inspired a new army of black Creole musicians. With festivals and recording companies watering the roots at the local and national levels, young musicians are not only preserving the older traditional music but improvising to create new songs within that tradition.

Yet, while the French language struggles to maintain its role in the cultural survival of south Louisiana, certain inevitable changes in style reflect modern influences. Young musicians would be less than honest if they pretended that they never listened to the radio. Thus, the sounds of rock, country and jazz are incorporated today as naturally as were the blues and French *contredanses* of old, as Cajuns and Creoles constantly adapt their culture to survive in the modern world. Such change, however, is not necessarily a sign of decay, as was first thought; on the contrary, it is more likely a sign of vitality. Because the early effects of Americanization were too much and too fast, the melting pot boiled over. But the cooks of south Louisiana culture have since regained control of their own kitchen and continue to simmer a gumbo of rich and diverse ingredients.

Suggested reading

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Conrad, Glenn R., ed. *The Cajuns: Essays on their History and Culture*. Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, Center for Louisiana Studies Publications, 1978.

Dorman, James H. *The People Called Cajuns*. Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, Center for Louisiana Studies Publications, 1983.

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Savoy, Ann Allen, ed. *Cajun Music: A Reflection of a People*. Eunice, Louisiana: Bluebird Press, 1985.

Selected recordings

Festival de musique acadienne, '81, Live (Swallow 6046).

J'étais au bal (Swallow 6020).

Louisiana Cajun French Music from the Southwest Prairies, vols. 1 and 2 (Rounder 6001 and 6002).

Louisiana Cajun Music, vols. 1 through 5 (Old Timey 108, 109, 110, 111, 114).

Zodico: Louisiana Creole Music (Rounder 6009).

Selected films

Cajun Visits, by Yashia and Carry Aginsky. 30 min. color sound (French and English). Flower Films, El Cerrito, California.

Dry Wood and Hot Pepper, by Les Blank. Two parts; 91 min. color sound (French and English). Flower Films, El Cerrito, California.

Le Son des Cajuns, by Andre Gladu and Michel Brault. Four parts; 1116 min. color sound (French). Office National du Film (Canada).