



*Ellender Memorial Library
at
Nicholls State University
presents*

**The Ninth Annual
Cajun/Zydeco Music
and Dance Exhibit**

Cajun music and Zydeco: A (Very) Brief Overview

by Barry Jean Ancelet

Cajun music is a Louisiana hybrid, a blend of cultural elements that combined to influence the original western French music brought to North America by those who eventually became the Acadians in the early to mid-seventeenth century and who came to Louisiana after they were exiled from their homeland (now Nova Scotia) by the British in 1755. Before instruments were available, unaccompanied ballads and drinking songs were the only music heard, and the details of these songs from French tradition began to shift to reflect the new American frontier. Later, the traumatic effects of the exile were sublimated in songs about frustrated courtship, lost love and broken families. As the Acadians became the Cajuns in Louisiana, they learned wailing, terraced singing styles from the native Indians. From Africans, they learned about syncopation, percussion, improvisational singing, and how to express their own blues. When they began to acquire instruments, they chose the familiar and popular fiddle and developed techniques, such as a self-accompanying drone, to approximate the sounds in their collective memory from their western French origins which had included flutes and pipes, and they played ancient tunes that had been preserved by humming and whistling. From the Anglo-Americans, they learned new tunes to drive reels, hoe-downs and square dances. The Spaniards contributed the guitar and a few folk tunes. Refugees and their slaves who arrived from Saint-Domingue at the turn of the nineteenth century brought with them a syncopated Caribbean beat. Jewish-German merchant began importing diatonic accordions not long after its invention in Vienna in 1828. These elements blended to create a new music that came to be called Cajun music.

Like the blues and jazz, rock and reggae, the music of the Louisiana black Creoles usually called zydeco is the result of a typically American experience which blended European (primarily French, but also Spanish, German and English), native American and Afro-Caribbean musical traditions. Zydeco, zarico, zodico, zordico, and even zologo represent a few of the spellings used by folklorists, ethnomusicologists, record producers, and filmmakers, as well as dance hall owners and fans, to transcribe the word performers use to describe Louisiana's black Creole French music. Native Louisiana Creoles explain that the word comes from *les haricots* because of the expression, "*Les haricots sont pas salés*" [The beans aren't salty], often heard in a number of traditional songs. However, historical, cultural and linguistic evidence has emerged that seems to indicate that there is much more to the term and the tradition than appears at first glance. In South Louisiana, zydeco refers to dance styles as well as the music associated with them. The meaning of the term has expanded (or survived) to refer also to the music, the musicians, the dance, and the entire social event. Creoles go to a zydeco to dance the zydeco to zydeco music played by zydeco musicians.

The American colonial context was basic to the development of these hybrid music forms. Nothing quite like them developed in Europe where direct contact with African culture is rare and exotic. In America, both European and African cultures were far from home, on new ground. Settlers and slaves learned some old ways from each other and made up lots of new ways for themselves as they carved out a new world on the frontier.

The Ninth Annual Cajun/Zydeco Music and Dance Exhibit

The turn of the twentieth century was a formative period in the development of Louisiana French music, largely because commercial recording companies began producing records of Cajun and Creole music in 1928. These records helped to fix what had been previously a highly innovative tradition; they also made certain recording artists and their styles widely popular. Fiddles were displaced by accordions as the lead instrument in the dance bands that performed for house dances and later in public dance halls. Complex fiddle tunes that could not be played on the relatively simple accordion faded from the active repertoire. Fiddlers were often relegated to playing a duet accompaniment or more often a simple percussive second line below the accordion's melodic lead. "Lafayette," the first Cajun record by Joseph Falcon and his wife Cléoma was typical of the emerging style, featuring an accordion lead with percussive guitar accompaniment and high-pitched, emotionally intense vocals designed to reach back into the noisy dance halls before electrical amplification.

As late as the first part of the twentieth century, Cajun and Creole music featured a wide variety of dance styles that included Old World waltzes, contredanses, *varsoviennes*, polkas, mazurkas, and cotillions, as well as two-steps, one-steps, *baisse-bas*, *la-las*, and breakdowns developed to accompany the contemporary musical styles. The simplification of musical styles brought on in part by modernization and the accordion simplified dance styles as well, leaving the waltz and the two-step as the major steps. In the 1940s, a regional version of the jitterbug became an option on the dance floors. Today, new styles continue to evolve out of these basic forms.

By the 1930s, changes in Cajun and Creole music reflected the growing impact of the Americanization of the Cajuns, a process that included a serious attempt to eradicate the society's native French language and denigrate their culture, fueled by the nationalism that accompanied World War I and the Great Depression. Cajun bands abandoned the accordion in favor of stringed instruments with which they could imitate the socially acceptable sounds of Western Swing and country music. Amplification allowed fiddlers to lighten their bow strokes to produce an airy, lilting style. English lyrics also began to displace the traditional French lyrics. By the 1940s, the Cajun music recorded by commercial producers signaled an unmistakable tendency toward Americanization. Yet an undercurrent of traditional music persisted. It resurfaced with the music of Iry LeJeune in 1948, fueled in part by a desire for the old style among GIs returning from World War II. A revival of traditional Cajun music followed with previously popular musicians such as Austin Pitre, Lawrence Walker and Nathan Abshire following LeJeune's lead back into the cultural mainstream.

Meanwhile, what we now call zydeco evolved from *juré*, group singing accompanied only by improvised percussion (clapping hands, stomping feet, etc.), sometimes referred to in English-speaking black tradition as shouts. Musicians such as Sidney Babineaux, Claude Faulk, Boozoo Chavis, and especially Clifton and Cleveland Chenier put this earlier tradition to instruments in urban contexts such as Opelousas, Lafayette, and Houston just after World War II. Zydeco also borrowed freely from emerging rock and roll, rhythm and blues, and soul

traditions, as well as swing, country, jazz and anything else that may have inspired its definers.

The state of contemporary zydeco is a good barometer for the contemporary black Creole society that has only recently begun to explore the complex and specific nature of its history, culture and language. During the decades following World War II, when the Cajuns became interested in preserving their culture and language, the black Creoles were in the throes of the Civil Rights struggle, and rightly so. Recently, the black Creole community has begun to explore its specificity, especially in the areas of culture and language. As organizations such as Creole, Inc., have emerged to lead this effort, so are there musicians who reflect its early results. New generations of young Creole performers have emerged to fill the void left by the death of Zydeco King Clifton Chenier in the 1980s. Some performers, such as Stanley Buckwheat Dural and Nathan Williams, have continued Chenier's use of the more complex chromatic piano accordion, while others, such as John and Geno Delafosse, Boozoo Chavis and Beaujoque, have revived a rawer, more country influenced style on the diatonic button accordion.

In the 1950s, the emergence of rock and roll and country music attracted young Cajun and Creole musicians away from their traditional roots to perform what came to be called swamp pop. Nurturing for those roots came from the emerging national folk music scene, which invited several traditional Cajun and Creole bands to perform there beginning with the Newport Festival in the 1960s. Other festivals, including the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife and the National Folk Festival, featured traditional Cajun and Creole music in the 1970s and '80s, helping to inspire a renaissance of the genres in South Louisiana. A veteran of this effort, Cajun fiddler Dewey Balfa helped to reintroduce Cajun music to the younger generations in school programs, at locally produced festivals, and on local radio and television programs, performing with his Balfa Brothers Band. The result of these efforts is several new generations of Cajun and Creole musicians who are replacing their elders on the active South Louisiana dance hall circuit. The Cajun and Creole music of these younger musicians reflects contemporary popular influences as the blending process at the heart of this tradition continues.

Sponsored By:

NICHOLLS STATE UNIVERSITY



Houma Terrebonne
Arts & Humanities

Jubilee
6th Annual Festival of the Arts and Humanities at
Nicholls State University

Coca-Cola

