

“Cajun Music,” in *Grove’s Encyclopedia of Music* (New York: Grove’s, 2001).  
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.

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 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. The duo of Cajun fiddler Dennis McGee and black Creole accordionist Amédé Ardoin brought a strong, rural blues element into Cajun music. “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.

By the 1930s, changes in Cajun 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.

In the 1950s, the emergence of rock and roll and country music once again attracted young Cajun 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, especially the Newport Folk Festival which invited several traditional Cajun bands to perform there in the 1960s. Other festivals, including the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife and the National Folk Festival, featured traditional Cajun music in the 1970s and '80s, helping to inspire a renaissance of the genre 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 musicians, such as Beausoleil, the Mamou Playboys and the Ossun Express, who are replacing their elders on the active South Louisiana dance hall circuit. The Cajun music of these younger musicians reflects their contemporary influences as the blending process at the heart of this tradition continues.

- ANCELET, Barry Jean. *Cajun Music: Origins and Development*. Lafayette: USL Center for Louisiana Studies, 1989.
- ANCELET, Barry Jean, and Elemore MORGAN, Jr. *The Makers of Cajun Music*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984.
- ANCELET, Barry Jean, Jay EDWARDS, and Glen PITRE. *Cajun Country*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991.
- BERNARD, Shane K. *Swamp Pop: Cajun and Creole Rhythm and Blues*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996.
- BROVEN, John. *South to Louisiana: The Music of the Cajun Bayous*. Gretna: Pelican Press, 1983
- GOULD, Philip. *Cajun Music and Zydeco*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992.
- OSTER, Harry. Liner notes, *Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians* (Louisiana Folklore Society A4, 1958).
- SACRE, Robert. *Musiques cajun, creole et zydeco*. Que sais-je? Paris: Press Universitaires de France, 1995.
- SAVOY, Ann Allen. *Cajun Music: A Reflection of a People*. Eunice: Bluebird Press, 1985.
- STRACHWITZ, Chris, and Les BLANK. *J'ai été au bal: The Cajun and Zydeco Music of Louisiana*. 84 min. Brazos Films, 1990. Videocassette.
- WHITFIELD, Irene Thérèse. *Louisiana French Folk Songs*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1939; rpt. New York: Dover Publications, 1969.