

Continuity and Change in Contemporary Cajun and Creole Culture

Barry Jean Ancelet

In 1805, François Perrin du Lac wrote of the Acadians in Pointe Coupée, Louisiana, that they were “[b]orn without much industry, they appear to be in the same state of mediocrity they were in when they arrived in the colony. Without much ambition or desire, they live in a situation nearing poverty on their habitations where they mostly cultivate small plots of land with outside help... they never let a stranger in without offering refreshments but one must be hungry to eat the dishes they prepare” (qtd in Henry and Bankston 2002: 69). In his memoir published in 1855, S. S. Prentiss described the Cajuns as “the poorest, most ignorant set of beings you ever saw...” (qtd in Dormon 1983: 35). In an article in *Harper’s Weekly* from 1866, A. R. Waud described the Acadians of Louisiana as ignorant and unambitious. Mr. Waud had little more than disdain for the Acadians. He observed, “These primitive people are the descendants of Canadian French settlers in Louisiana; and by dint of intermarriage, they have succeeded in getting pretty well down in the social scale... Without energy, education, or ambition, they are good representatives of the white trash, behind the age in everything. The majority of all the white inhabitants of these parishes are tolerably ignorant, but these are grossly so... To live without effort is their apparent aim in life, and they are satisfied with very little, and are, as a class, quite poor.” (Waud, qtd in Brasseaux 1992: 101) According to another 19th century observer, Albert Rhodes, “They detest innovation, and the steam plough and the few-fangled sugar-houses are not in favor. To adopt them involved outlay, risk, much thinking and fretting. It is simpler to give them wide berth, and digest well by day and sleep well at nights. This is Acadian philosophy...” (Rhodes, qtd in Brasseaux, 1992: 102-103). Travel writer Charles Sealsfield was no fan either, including in his account of an emerging America in the mid-nineteenth century, his description of the Cajuns he encountered as “uncouth, sexually challenged liabilities to progress and well-being” (qtd in Ostendorf 1999: 532). A WPA writer described the Cajuns as “uncultured... impetuous, highly inflammable, ultra-sensitive [and] unrelenting in hatreds.” He also observed that Cajun men had “dull, rather unimaginative eyes.” (qtd in Bernard 2003: xxi). In the 20th century, Hollywood perpetuated this perception. In *Thunder Bay* (1953), when their sleepy fishing village is invaded by the slick, enterprising oil men, the Cajuns revolt, struggling haplessly and hopelessly against progress which is eventually rammed down their ungrateful throats. The Cajuns are portrayed as ignorant, superstitious, and resistant to innovation and change, not unlike the image of the father in Robert Flaherty’s well-intentioned docu-drama, *Louisiana Story* (1949), though his son does embrace the arrival of technology in the end. Subsequent movies such as *Casey’s Shadow*, *Live and Let Die*, *Hard Times*, *The Big Easy*, and most recently *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, have done little to dispel or balance this image. And then, there’s the “coon ass” thing that I’m not even going to get into.

These extraordinary portrayals run directly counter to the way that Cajuns have been described by other observers with deeper knowledge of their culture. The Acadians and their descendants the Cajuns have been nothing if not innovative. As historian Carl Brasseaux notes, the French settlers who became the Acadians

learned quickly in their new frontier context to depend only on their own efforts (Brasseaux 1987). They were the first European settlers in the New World to vote, filling what was essentially a power vacuum produced by a lack of *seigneurs* and clear governmental and ecclesiastical authorities. They arrived in what is now Nova Scotia between 1632 and 1680 and already by the 1650 census several heads of household ran the census takers off telling them the information they were seeking was none of their business. With their colony punted back and forth between England and France until 1713, they learned to ignore what colonial authority there was on both sides, continuing to trade with New France while under English rule and with New England while under French rule.

The Louisiana Cajuns, heirs of this fierce sense of independence, have continued to depend on their own self-sufficient strategies for survival in their Nouvelle Acadie (Brasseaux 1992, Ancelet 1991). A tight social co-op system enabled them to survive by networking the community's resources. Cooperative *boucheries* provided fresh meat regularly to community members before refrigeration. They fused French and Spanish cooking strategies with African Creole influences and native products to produce a new and widely respected culinary tradition, of which Paul Prudhomme and Emeril Lagasse represent only the tip of the iceberg. *Ramasseries* gathered community members to bring in a sick neighbor's crop. Barns and houses were often raised by a gathering of neighbors and family members. The styles of those barns and houses were adapted, with influences especially from African-Creole neighbors, to respond to the conditions of the subtropical climate. Benefit dances gathered contributions for those in need. It is with this sense of social cooperation that Cajuns responded to the call for help in the destruction caused by hurricanes, including Audrey, Betsy, Hilda, Juan, Lily and Katrina. More recently, according to Henry and Bankston, "Many authors note the evolution from marginal rural settlers to well-integrated, productive members of a modern society" (2002: 71). Jim Bradshaw wrote in a local newspaper editorial, "And lots of Cajuns are doctors, lawyers, architects, accountants, even college professors. You'll find Cajuns selling shoes at Sears, running gasoline stations, driving taxis, flying airplanes, working at chemical plants, operating computers, stringing telephone lines, raising crops and cattle, delivering the mail and running restaurants... doing the same things as people everywhere" (qtd in Henry and Bankston 2002: 71). Recent books by scholars such as Carl Brasseaux and Shane Bernard and films by filmmakers such as Pat Mire, Glen Pitre and Charles Richard describe and examine the actual complexity, innovation and industry that are characteristic of Cajun culture and society.

Cajuns and Creoles have continued to invent and innovate their material culture, developing new specialized boats, traps, sorters, peelers, and flash-freeze-driers for the crawfish industry. They have improvised and retooled into existence endless varieties of cooking contraptions, including the so-called Cajun microwave smoker, and any number of steamers and boilers and barbecue pits and grills and deep fryers mounted on outdoor kitchen tables and pickup truck beds and trailers, as well as improved oyster knives, shrimp peelers and fish scalers. They have invented land-leveling planers for use in their rice fields, multi-key accordions and literally thousands of adaptations and improvements to oilfield equipment. This

innovation takes place not only in academic and engineering labs, but also in machine shops and welding shops and personal workshops through Acadiana.

In 1984, I wrote, in *The Makers of Cajun Music*:

An unfortunate number of ethnographers have found themselves baffled by Cajun culture. As soon as they get a fix on it under laboratory conditions, it shifts, changes, even mutates, if necessary, to escape sharply focused scrutiny. Undeniably, this is due, in part, to an independence of character. Cajuns delight in watching predictions concerning their future go skimming harmlessly by. This is also due to a healthy cultural identity. Contrary to devolutionary opinion, it is simply too early for an autopsy on the Cajuns. Inorganic ethnographic methods that do not take this life and growth into consideration miss the mark. The Cajuns' frontier experience taught them that adaptation was the key to survival. They developed a lifestyle based on that lesson and survived. And they continue to survive, with a tenacious sense of identity.

I still believe that to be true. These descendants of the Acadian diaspora make liars of observers like A. R. Waud every day. Diasporas are complex events. They represent the scattering of a human community due to tragic, catastrophic causes. Yet, they often end up producing valuable new communities, along with social and cultural hybrids that survive and even thrive, in no small part because of the innovation and adaptation that are required for that survival. New Orleans has recently experienced such a diaspora caused by Katrina and its messy aftermath. This will produce new cultural combinations that we cannot even imagine yet. There are Yats and Ninth Warders who were evacuated to places like Phoenix, Salt Lake City and Cape Cod. How long they stay there will be anyone's guess. Some are insisting on returning as New Orleans is cleaned up and rebuilt. Others may prefer to stay to take advantage of what may be a vast improvement in job and housing opportunities in the places where they have landed. Real-life counterparts of Ignatius Reilly, forced out of their familiar neighborhoods for the first time ever, may find that the world has interests they never knew.

There have been other massive migrations (forced and unforced) that have affected the culture and social structure of this nation. The fact that there are people of so many races and ethnicities on this continent is the result of the long-term immigration of Europeans, Africans and Asians. After the Revolutionary War, the descendants of those who first established the original thirteen colonies headed west across the Appalachians, displacing the Native Americans who lived there (Jackson 1881; 2003). After the Louisiana Purchase and the War of 1812, new waves of people poured into the middle of the country. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 was used to force untold numbers of Native Americans from their homelands to strange lands across the continent, including those who were sent down the infamous Trail of Tears to Oklahoma where they retooled themselves as cowboys. After the Civil War, untold numbers of former slaves headed north, while many in the rest of the country headed west. After the Great Flood of 1927, Southerners

again headed north. During the Great Depression, people from the dust bowls and the South once again headed out in all directions. After World War II, rural folks headed into cities. Each time, those who were migrating brought with them aspects of their culture. They influenced and were influenced by their new contexts in ways that eventually came to be part of the ever-evolving cultural scene. For example, places like Chicago and New York became important centers for new versions of imported blues and jazz, Detroit eventually produced Motown, and Bakersfield and Austin became the homes of fascinating country music alternatives. More specifically to Louisiana, Cajuns and Creoles flocked to southeast Texas and Houston and the Bay Area of California in the early part of the 20th century, establishing dancehalls and restaurants that featured music and food from South Louisiana with new twists and twangs. During the oil bust of the 1980s, Cajuns and Creoles sought employment and shelter in urban centers such as Atlanta and Denver, where they also continued to celebrate their music and food.

In one sense, Cajun and Creole cultures have survived on the margins by resisting change. In another, they have thrived on the margins based on a surprisingly strong sense of identity, and on a clever survival strategy that incorporated and integrated change. There are reasons for this. According to my colleague, Carl Brasseaux, between 60 and 70 percent of the French peasants who eventually became the Acadians came from a twenty-mile radius around Loudun in northern Poitou province (Brasseaux 1987). This demographic fact, which was determined after an exhaustive examination of early colonial records, helps to explain the intensely resilient cultural and social identity of the Acadians. When the British exiled them from Nova Scotia in 1755, it was with the expressed intent of dispersing them among the British colonies so that they might be absorbed and acculturated. This did not happen. Instead of eliminating the Acadian identity, the exile galvanized it. Those Acadians who arrived in Louisiana between 1764 and 1788 were expected to dissolve into French Creole society. This did not happen. They preserved their cultural and social specificity well past the French and Spanish periods. Under pressure from the fierce nationalism that accompanied World War I, they were expected to melt in the American pot. This did not happen. Cajuns found ways to negotiate the mainstream and continue to celebrate their traditions and language. Those living in the southwestern parishes recently affected by Hurricane Rita were there because they returned and rebuilt after Audrey.

On a related note, consider the following story: Boudreaux was hosting a couple of his old Army buddies for a few days, one from New York and the other from Missouri. While he was showing them around the old homestead that he had just inherited from his dad, they found themselves in an old, abandoned barn. One of the visitors pried open a door and they saw an old antique tractor in there, frozen in rust and covered with cobwebs. The guy from New York said, "Let's call a museum." The guy from Missouri said, "Let's call an antique shop." Boudreaux called his brother-in-law instead. Three days later, he was bush hogging his pasture.

When France sold Louisiana to the young United States in 1803, the federal government, as well as the government of the new Louisiana Territory and a few years later the State of Louisiana, began systematic efforts to Americanize us, including the replacement of our native French language with English, the language

of the future. This was designed to eradicate the tenacious sense of identity forged by our Acadian ancestors in the cauldron of the New World beginning in the early 17th century, galvanized by a number of other social traumas including the Grand Dérangement, and subsequently a chronic succession of hurricanes, floods, droughts, economic depressions, and wars, as well as the Americanizing effects of social boons, such as various agriculture-, oil- and war-economy related booms, improved transportation, and public education. Recently, some scholars from historians, such as Shane Bernard, to anthropologists, such as Marc David, have suggested that these factors affected contemporary Cajun identity far more directly than the events of 1755, and that there is little evidence of traditionally transmitted Acadian identity among the Cajuns. This may be, *et pourtant*, here we are, now in the beginning of the 21st century, still self-identifying as Cajuns and Acadians.

There is undeniably considerable renewed interest in the Cajun/Acadian connection, through any number of factors that evolved in the 20th century. The filming in Louisiana of the 1929 silent movie *Evangeline* reinforced and expanded the effects of Longfellow's 19th century poem into a nascent cultural tourism industry. The 1955 bicentennial celebration of the exile brought Acadian issues back to the fore and brought Cajuns into contact with Acadians in ways that would continue to develop through the first *Colloque sur l'Acadie* and the subsequent *Congrès Mondial Acadien* series. At the same time, it is also undeniable that contemporary Cajun culture has evolved from Acadian to Cajun in its own ways over the centuries as Carl Brasseaux has made clear in his studies. During the first *Congrès Mondial Acadien* in Moncton in 1994, far-flung representatives from the Acadian diaspora gathered to celebrate our enduring identity. The emotional reunions initially led many to focus on our commonalities, including last names, language features, and social co-op patterns. But rather quickly it became apparent that in many ways, music and cuisine for example, Acadian and Cajun cultures had evolved beyond their common origins. Like twins separated at adolescence and later reunited, participants in scholarly conferences and family reunions alike have come to understand that both our similarities and differences are important and interesting to consider. What we have in common despite centuries of separation must be powerfully important to our cultural DNA. The ways we have come to differ also reflect important influences acquired in our various contexts. It is nature and nurture on a societal scale. The connections that have been made through these Acadian gatherings have renewed, or perhaps more accurately, reinvented real, affective ties in the spirit of what Louder and Waddell described as *l'archipel retrouvée* (2007).

If we have survived more or less well, it may be because we have learned to negotiate the margins by constantly adapting and innovating solutions to the pressures from the dominant cultures in our contexts. With all due respect to the fictional yet ubiquitous *Evangeline*, her long-suffering, passive reaction is hardly the model for what got us to this point. Our own real-life ancestors recreated a society with the meager resources they had available, deftly negotiating a way through good times and bad. Their quietly heroic efforts are much more representative of what has worked, based on both the persistence and resistance that have sometimes been direct, more often indirect, characterized by a sort of socio-cultural judo. Experts

have consistently predicted our imminent demise via acculturation and assimilation since 1755, and here in Louisiana especially since the Louisiana Purchase from France in 1803 and statehood in 1812 and again after the Civil War and again after World War I and after 1916 when the state banned the use of French in its new compulsory public education system, and after the 1921 revision of the state constitution eliminating the legal status of French, and the 1927 flood, which brought a deluge of aid and influence in English from the national level reinforced by another round of national aid and influence after the economic crash of 1929, and the development of the oil industry in the 1930s, which brought yet another flood of money and Americanizing influences, and World War II, which brought yet another layer of Americanization. And yet, some of us are still standing, confounding the predictions of linguists, sociologists and politicians by our simple stubborn presence and persistence. Reporters and scholars alike frequently ask me how much chance there is, realistically, for French to survive into the future. I have come to think that the real question is how could it be that there is any left at all in the present, after all those well-organized and systematic efforts? *Et pourtant, on est encore là, moins qu'avant, mais néanmoins encore là malgré tout.* Never mind helping us, I sometimes wonder what might happen if they would just stop hindering us.

This spirit of adaptation at the heart of our survival is evident in any number of cultural and social expressions. Consider the contemporary evolution of Cajun house types and foods, such as porches and peppers, both of which reflect ongoing input from our constantly evolving context. So-called Acadian houses feature practical responses to the drastically different climate found in South Louisiana by the newly arrived exiles, the most important of which were inspired by African Creoles. Houses were made drier and cooler by raising them off the ground on piers; porches kept the sun off the outside walls and provided breezy outdoor living space; and windows and doors were designed to provide as much cross-ventilation as possible within the simple living spaces of early houses. Some of these features have become stylized in what are now considered and called Acadian-style houses. Sometimes the Acadian connection is only nominal, as Cajuns live in townhouses, apartment complexes, trailer parks and ritzy subdivisions.

It is ironic that some of the most iconic foods now associated with Cajun culture, gumbo and rice and gravy, both owe their existence in Louisiana to African Creole culture. A popular joke suggests that a true Cajun is someone who can look over a rice field and determine how much gravy it will take to cover it. Yet rice was brought to Louisiana from western Africa through the Carolinas, as was gumbo, the West African word for okra, and the subsequently the soupy dish made with it. Gumbo has often been used as a metaphor for the cultural blending process that has occurred in South Louisiana. This process is responsible for the houses we live in, the foods we eat, the stories we tell and the music we dance to. The term Cajun is useful to describe the results of this creolization on Acadian culture. And this process continues to produce new culinary innovations, such as crawfish eggrolls, crawfish tamales, microwave roux, and some things that strain the imagination. And all the while, we can also enjoy hamburgers and fried chicken with iced tea and Dr. Pepper, without feeling that we are betraying our Cajun-ness.

Cajun Music

An important version of this cultural creolization is Cajun and Creole music, which I will take some time to examine as an extended example of continuity and change in the context of Cajun and Creole culture. Here again, we have not only survived on the margins; we have actually thrived by dancing on them and through them, integrating influences from outside sources and improvising new styles from within. For this to work best, the process must be organic and continuous, preserving and creating in the same motion, in the same moment, producing music that is at once surprisingly new and reassuringly connected. As Dewey Balfa so eloquently put it, "Tradition is not a product, but a process. It's like a tree. One must water the roots so that the tree can support new growth. Both are critically important." Recent analyses of historical and contemporary Cajun and Creole music lyrics, made possible by the acquisition of early fieldwork collections, especially the Lomax collection from 1934, as well as parallel collections from the Acadian Maritime provinces and western France, have shown that oral poetics have evolved from unaccompanied ballads to dance music lyrics, condensing the format while preserving the essence of the messages. I have found no direct references to the exile experience anywhere in traditional Cajun music lyrics, not counting those developed consciously by contemporary performers such as Zachary Richard, Bruce Daigrepoint and Joel Sonnier. Yet much of Cajun music poetics seems to reflect the effects of that trauma, including loneliness, estrangement from home, being alone on the road, broken families, and lost loves. But then, so do the blues and old-time country music, which also clearly influenced Cajun music along the way.

As any living tradition, Cajun music has undergone several stylistic shifts over the last century. Some of these have been due to the creativity of individual artists, as in the case of Amédé Ardoin, Dennis McGee, Harry Choates, and Iry Lejeune, among others. And there are other stylistic shifts owing to a change in the context of the music. These changes can be social, as in the evolution from house dances to public dance halls. They can also be technological, as heard in the effects of amplifying what had necessarily been an acoustic tradition, or in the effects of recording what had previously been a highly innovative tradition, and broadcasting what had been a highly local tradition. Another important shift occurred with the development of festivals and concerts, in the effects of performing for people who are sitting and listening rather than dancing and courting, performing for crowds much larger than any in previous experience, on a four-foot-high stage outdoors rather than on a one-foot-high bandstand indoors. The stylistic shifts that resulted from these contextual changes can be heard by comparing the earliest commercial recordings from 1928 to 1938 with those that followed World War II. One hears such changes as the development of individual lead instrumental solos and the addition of electrically based instruments such as the steel guitar.

Traditional performers instinctively renegotiate their performances according to context in ways that are not entirely unrelated to the contextualist approach as described by scholars such as Abrahams, Georges and Goldstein. Getting back to Mr. Waud and his fellow critics from earlier, without innovation or a certain ambition, how did we get from playing in house dances and country dance halls to playing on festival stages and in concert halls? And how did we get from the

Balfa Brothers' traditional "Parlez-nous à boire" to Feufollet's rocking "Parlez-nous à boire"? How did this happen? When one compares Ralph Rinzler's field recordings of Dewey Balfa and the Balfa Brothers before their appearances at the Newport Folk Festival and the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife with what the group recorded commercially afterwards, one clearly hears stylistic changes including fancier fiddling, tighter arrangements and the addition of high harmonies. Performing on the same stage as the likes of Bill Monroe, Vassar Clements, and Tommy Jarrell, the Balfas learned several things about how to play before a festival crowd, including an intensified, fancier fiddle style and simple harmonies that added to the texture of their performances. They also learned about visual dynamics and communicating to the crowd, previously unimportant when performing before a few dozen couples in a house dance or dance hall where everyone was primarily dancing and courting. They also learned about song selection and a sense of closing. Traditional dances always ended with a waltz to give courting couples one last close dance together, but they found that festival performances end better with a rousing two-step, that songs such as "*T'en as eu, t'en auras plus*," "*Les veuves de la coulée*," "*Les flammes d'enfer*," or "*The Bosco Stomp*" were more likely to generate a rousing burst of applause and maybe an encore, concepts that were unknown in the dancehalls.

The experience that groups such as the Balfa Brothers, the Ardoin Family and McGee and Courville had gained on the folk festival circuit was deliberately used by organizers of the first Tribute to Cajun Music in Lafayette, Louisiana, in 1974. These festival veterans ironically had much more experience in this new context than the region's most popular dance bands of the time, such as Blackie Forrestier's Cajun Aces and Belton Richard's Musical Aces. The generation of young Cajun and Creole musicians that was attracted back to its roots was attracted at least initially by means of the festival-influenced sound. In addition to the obvious extensions of the Balfa family tradition – Christine Balfa's Balfa Toujours and grand-nephew Courtney Granger – many contemporary bands such as Michael Doucet and Beausoleil obviously learned more than music from the Balfas. Michael also learned Creole licks from Ardoin Family Band fiddler Canray Fontenot, as well as other Cajun fiddle styles from Dennis McGee, Varise Conner, Lionel Leleux and Hector Duhon. In later Beausoleil recordings, Michael Doucet's brother David joined the band after a foray into bluegrass and old-time country, flat-picking Cajun melodies in a style clearly influenced by another of Ralph Rinzler's discoveries, Doc Watson.

The effects of contextual shifts are clearly evident today in the music of young bands, such as Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys, who have continued to experiment. Their early sound was clearly a self-conscious preservation of Balfa-influenced fiddling and repertoire. They were hailed as an example hope for the future of traditional music, of how young musicians could continue to be interested in playing the old stuff. Soon enough, however, their youth caught up to their love of tradition. To stay interested as musicians who have taken to the road full-time, they began to experiment. Initially, these experiments were organic, taking place within the tradition. That is, style was shifting within the traditional repertoire. They redid traditional standards in four-part harmony and re-arranged openings for crowd effect. Later, in a search for challenging complexity, they added new tunes they ran

into on the road in other parts of the Francophone world, such as “La Pointe aux Piques,” which they learned in Québec. They strung together two or more traditional tunes in tour-de-force medleys, and re-arranged songs for obvious dramatic effect. These strategies have influenced the next generation, as is evident in the arrangements of the younger Cajun music group Feufollet.

Eventually, fiddler David Greely learned to play a swamp pop-style saxophone to accompany accordionist Steve Riley’s forays into zydeco. Riley’s early Savoy-influenced accordion licks have also been clearly affected by Clifton Chenier’s zydeco and Wayne Toups’ southern rock and ZydeCajun fusion. When they pulled these changes along with a big red chromatic accordion out of the bag onstage at the Cajun Music Festival in 1994, the South Louisiana crowd experienced a moment not unlike the one experienced by the Newport Folk Festival crowd in 1965 when Bob Dylan plugged in to play “Like a Rolling Stone” there. When festival producers heard their new licks, there was general consternation and concern that traditional Cajun music’s fair-haired band was sliding toward the progressive side. But it may have been a natural progression from Aldus Roger’s take on Clifton Chenier’s signature song. A remarkable exchange of emails with band manager, bassist, and Dewey Balfa student Peter Schwarz demonstrated that band members were keenly aware of such issues as the effects of changing contexts, audience expectations at home and on the road, and the tensions between artistic and cultural integrity.

Perhaps the most important contemporary contextual change has to do with the shift from primarily French-speaking audiences to primarily English-speaking ones. On the one hand, whereas Zydeco has readily translated itself into English in the last twenty years (often with dire lyrical results), there has been the persistent notion that French lyrics are an integral feature of Cajun music. It may be impossible to preserve enough cultural specificity while changing something as fundamental as its language of expression. But some sort of evolution seems inevitable, for better or worse. Some, who could fairly be considered traditionalists, including the Mamou Playboys, have experimented with the process more or less satisfactorily. These experiments have produced interesting music. That music’s attachment to Cajun tradition is up for debate.

There can be a sense of cultural guilt that accompanies such efforts. Nevertheless, one can only wonder how long singers will continue to sing words they don’t understand for audiences who increasingly don’t understand them either. One of the Mamou Playboys’ recent albums, *Happytown*, otherwise filled with revivals of old Lomax material as well as original material in French, also features the ultra-modern, all-English radio hit, “Seems to Me,” featuring modern trappings such as synthesized vocal tracks. Those who measure the durability of the French base of this musical tradition by how devoted the performers are to preserving it may have underestimated the importance of changing contexts and audience, as well as the tradition’s drive to survive by any means necessary. And yet they followed this with *Bon Rêve*, which represented a remarkable return to the tradition and to the concept of creating within it, including exclusive French lyrics, as in Sam Broussard’s original “*Bon Rêve*,” an impressionistic evocation of Creole fiddler Canray Fontenot’s life, and the band’s *a capella* version of “*La chanson des Savoy*” from the 1934 Lomax collection in four-part harmony that closed the album. Their

cd *Domino* continued in this vein, with original songs such as Steve Riley's "Elise" (named for his daughter) and his "*Pays des étrangers*," all remarkably evocative of consistent Acadian concerns of being separated from one's home and loved ones. More recently, *Grand Isle* continued in the same vein, producing innovative new takes on traditional songs, as well as new songs that sound ancient but address such contemporary themes as coastal erosion ("Grand Isle"), linguistic erosion ("Danser sans comprendre"), and the nefarious effects of the BP oil spill ("C'est trop").

Musicians from the so-called Louisiana French renaissance generation, such as Michael Doucet and Zachary Richard, continue to create new songs and recycle old ones that reflect traditional and contemporary values. Wayne Toups recently came back from several forays into swamp pop and R & B to record traditional and original songs in French on *Little Wooden Box* and *Reflections of the Past*. It appears that key players continue to perceive that Cajun music needs to be in French, but this does not mean that there is a lack of innovation. Groups such as the Pineleaf Boys, the Lost Bayou Ramblers, Feufollet, Bonsoir Catin, the Lafayette Rhythm Devils, Acadien, and many others continue to produce new songs and revitalize old ones in a seamless integration of ancient and thoroughly modern sounds and styles. A few, including Kirby Jambon and Rocky McKuen, are even exploring the possibilities of Louisiana French hip-hop. New Orleans-based Sweet Crude is experimenting in indie pop directions that would have been hard to anticipate. They all continue to produce music that is as playful and challenging as we expect young music to be. At the same time, it is as respectful and grounded as we hope it would be. This young Cajun and Creole music is a perfect example of what Dewey Balfa meant when said that he wanted to preserve not the music itself but the process that produces the music so that musicians will continue to innovate and improvise new forms that both surprise us and reassure us at the same time. To those who nevertheless think that there is little hope for the future, I say I would not want the responsibility of telling these all those talented young Cajuns and Creoles.

At the same time, it is also true that there have always been many Cajuns and Creoles who have elected to play music other than Cajun and Creole music, from swamp poppers, such as Rod Bernard and T.K. Hulin, to country rockers, such as Doug Kershaw and Marc Broussard, to R&B singers, such as Camille Thierry of Cookie and the Cupcakes and Camille Bob of Lil Bob and the Lollipops, to even more eclectic options, such as Dickie Landry's minimalist jazz or Lauren Daigle's Christian rock. There are also many Cajuns who prefer to listen to rock or soul or country or classical music. This brings up an interesting point. What do we do with an imaginary guy named Chad Guidry who doesn't care for Cajun music or dancing, who doesn't like gumbo and is allergic to seafood, who lives in a townhouse with no yard, who never hunts or fishes, who no longer speaks French, and who attends religious services at the First Baptist Church, but self-identifies as Cajun? Does it help if he switches to the Acadian Baptist Center in Pointe Noire or the Vatican Baptist Church? What if he moved to Denver or Atlanta during the oil bust of the 1980s and stayed because he found he liked it there? Conversely, what do we do with an actual guy named Dirk Powell who was born in Ohio, but moved to Louisiana when he married Dewey Balfa's daughter, who speaks Cajun French fluently, who plays great Cajun music and makes a great gumbo? Is the Powell

namesake carried by his daughters Amelia and Sophie destined to join those of some of our other great Cajun musicians, such as Lawrence Walker, Nathan Abshire, Octa Clark and Dennis McGee?

The rest of that passage from my conclusion to *The Makers of Cajun Music* in 1984 was this:

Cajun music, [one of] the most conspicuous expressions of Cajun culture, exemplifies this survival. It has usually been studied as a folk music, but, for the Cajuns, it is simply their music, based on the same sense of identity and adaptation as the [rest of] the culture. Cajun music has refused to conform to values that would stagnate or change it from the outside. In [the 20th] century, for example, it has gobbled up influences from the blues and bluegrass, from country and rock, from swing and jazz, outlasting the Charleston and the Twist, devouring the palatable parts and spitting out the rest. Rarely conforming to notions of what it should be, Cajun music continues to be what an unruly lot of Cajun musicians insist on playing every weekend, at house dances and in dance halls, on front porches and on main festival stages. Like Cajun culture, it is a clear reflection of the people who live it. It is, to the dismay of the soi-disant elite, art in the hands of the people.

In the 1999 re-edition of the book, *Cajun and Creole Music Makers*, I added:

There has been a virtual renaissance of Cajun culture. There are aggressive new immersion programs to regenerate the French language among the young. Cajun cuisine found a place at America's ethnic table when Chef Paul Prudhomme introduced it to the country. Reporters covering the Republican National Convention in New Orleans in 1988 spilled over into Cajun country and fueled an increasing fascination with everything Cajun. All this attention has not come without some cost. Movies and television programs, such as "The Big Easy," along with well-intentioned but uninformed journalists, have caricatured the Cajuns beyond recognition. Some of this distorted image from the outside has been internalized; one can actually go fishing in a Cajun-brand bass boat using Cajun-brand crickets and preserving the catch on Cajun-brand ice. We now eat Cajun food in Cajun restaurants, whereas before we just ate étouffée at Thelma's or gumbo at Don's. Asked if he regretted that the Cajuns had been "discovered," musician and traditional sage Marc Savoy once answered, "I'm sorrier that the Cajuns have discovered themselves."

This renewed popularity of all things Cajun has had some curious effects on the music scene. Some Cajuns now go Cajun dancing, wearing sweat bands around their heads and doing steps that have been invented recently to provide for the demand for complexity placed on the tradition by local platoons of the national folk-dance army. And now that Cajun music reaches out to folk festivals and concert halls around the country and the world, some who fall in love with it decide to play it, creating such bands as the Minnesota Bone Tones and Seattle's Les Femmes d'Enfer. Bands such as La Femme Alligator and Vermonton Plage thrive playing Cajun music in

France. There are dozens of bands playing Cajun music in even more unlikely places, including Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and, perhaps most ironically, England. Many back home wonder what it means when people who are not from a culture play the music that is an important part of the identity of that culture, much in the same way that many African Americans wondered a century ago what it meant when white guys started playing the blues.

Meanwhile, some Creoles express frustration about their rich cultural contributions getting tagged as Cajun, including gumbo, though the name of the vegetable and the original culinary practice come from the Creoles' African origins. Initially this discontent produced some challenging rhetoric calling for such things as the un-naming of Lafayette's Cajun Dome. Since then, the argument has been refined to encourage raising the level of Creole consciousness. Creole restaurants, dance halls and festivals now proclaim their specificity with the term. Zydeco, on the other hand, perhaps as much because of its exotic sound as its driving beat, has so fascinated fans throughout the rest of the country that many often lump all of South Louisiana's French-influenced music, including Cajun music, under that rubric. Contemporary zydeco bandleaders, such as Stanley "Buckwheat" Dural and Nathan Williams, carefully avoid being misidentified as Cajun musicians. Meanwhile, some young Cajun musicians, notably Wayne Toups and his ZydeCajun band, have adopted much zydeco repertoire and style, as well as the chromatic accordion, into their regular performances. And performers of old time Creole music, such as Alphonse "Bois sec" Ardoin and the Poulard brothers, consistently insist on distinguishing their music from zydeco. Some young zydeco bands have drifted perilously close to African American styles such as rhythm and blues, rock, rap and funk. There are a few notable exceptions, including Geno Delafosse, whose late father John led the return among country zydeco bands to the simpler sound of the diatonic accordion, and Lynn August, who returned to explore his urban zydeco roots after an early career on lounge and church organs. Boozoo Chavis, the fiery old zydeco innovator from the 1950s, came roaring back from retirement when the death of Clifton Chenier left the Creole community in a state of disarray that included several ill-conceived attempts to crown a worthy successor. Chavis also favored the diatonic accordion, inspiring a new surge of youthful talent led by Zydeco Force and Beau Joque in that direction.

And further:

Hundreds of young musicians have emerged to perform the music of their ancestors. Both Cajun and Creole music continue to evolve in their own terms. Interestingly, those terms have become remarkably complex as many of today's young musicians are drawn in new unexplored directions. Michael Doucet's 1998 Grammy joined Clifton Chenier's from 1984 in the regional trophy case. Some bands, such as Beausoleil, the Mamou Playboys, and Nate Williams and the Zydeco Big Timers, have become so popular on the road

that they are not frequently available to their original constituents. And extracting a career out of Cajun music or zydeco can put unexpected strains on what was once a traditional music performed for weekend dances by musicians who worked hard at regular jobs all week. Dewey Balfa often said that he never wanted to play music for a living. But now many young touring bands, including his daughter Christine's Balfa Toujours, find themselves negotiating complex contracts with travel riders and performance clauses to stay in business. Many have contracted professional management agencies on the East and West Coasts. There is now what is commonly called a festival season when folk festivals around the country book Cajun and Creole bands. Meanwhile, there are still lots of other musicians, such as Walter Mouton's Scott Playboys, Paul Daigle's Cajun Gold and Donnie Broussard's Louisiana Stars, who still perform primarily for weekend dances and local festivals. Still others find themselves somewhere in between. Horace Trahan, Robert Jardell, and Cory McCauley for example, have toured with D. L. Menard's Louisiana Aces and other groups, but can be found more usually back home in a local dance hall, at a benefit dance, or a local festival.

Some young bands, such as Steve Riley's Mamou Playboys, Steve LaFleur's Mamou, Richard LeBoeuf's Two Step, and Kevin Naquin's Ossun Playboys, have experimented with the tradition, producing remarkable fusions of Cajun and contemporary music, incorporating lead electric guitars, pianos, and saxophones, as well as wah-wah pedals and synthesizers. Wayne Toups' daring arrangements of traditional and original material re-energized Cajun music in the 1980s just as Coteau's had done in the 1970s. Toups has since evolved to include Cajun-influenced country and southern rock sung primarily in English, following a path blazed by the likes of Jimmy C. Newman and Doug Kershaw. Many musicians and observers alike wonder aloud about the nature of this experimentation and where it may lead. It has even shocked some, but we should remember that earlier experimenters, such as Nathan Abshire, Lawrence Walker, and Belton Richard, who were once considered shocking, have now become pillars of what is considered classic Cajun music.

One of the main forums for this discussion is the recently developed festival context. Inspired by such national level events as the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife and the National Folk Festival, several major festivals that pay serious and careful attention to what is happening in the world of Cajun music and zydeco have evolved in South Louisiana. Lafayette's Festival International has brought South Louisiana into contact with its antecedents in Europe, Africa and the Caribbean with ingenious programming. The Zydeco Festival in Plaisance has grown from a funky little community-produced event into a major celebration of Creole culture whose stage annually defines the state of zydeco. Likewise, the Festival de Musique component of Festivals Acadiens et Créoles continues to provide a barometer for the state of Cajun and Creole music. Producers of such festivals often find themselves trying to negotiate the narrow straits between encouraging the culture's self-preservation and meddling with it. Some musicians have even

learned to challenge faulty assumptions with grassroots common sense. Years ago, a festival director from the East Coast would not allow Dewey Balfa to take along his regular steel guitar player, insisting that he preferred “the traditional sound.” Dewey forced him to reconsider with a withering question: “Are you trying to represent my culture as it really is, or as you wish it still was?”

On the one hand, we are excited by bursts of fresh new creative energy; on the other, we are relieved to note that there are still lots of young performers, such as Kevin Naquin, Horace Trahan, Jason Frey, Wilson Savoy, Chris Miller and Luke Huval, who enjoy performing the old stuff. A few years ago, just after Wayne Toups had elevated the Festival de Musique crowd with his radically retooled version of “Johnny Can’t Dance,” Balfa Brothers veteran Robert Jardell and his group Pure Cajun performed the song at the Liberty Theater, declaring that he was going to do it the old way. Both groups received thunderous ovations. If this is, as I insisted in the first edition of *Cajun and Creole Music Makers*, a case of “art in the hands of the people,” then scholars and specialists should not try to, and in fact should not be able to affect it artificially. Conversely, sometimes musicians fail to consider their *de facto* roles as leaders of this critically important cultural revival and give out strange and even troubling messages to those who look to them for direction. One year, a group performed southern rock originals and covers in English for fully a third of its set at the Festival de Musique; they were not invited back. Some take their presence on such stages seriously, even challenging the crowds to think beyond the music to consider what else is at stake. Christine Balfa, for example, is following in her father’s footsteps in more ways than one, becoming an eloquent spokesperson for social and linguistic issues beyond the music.

An important part of the tension between preservation and innovation involves the language of the songs. Many have long thought that if it isn’t in French, it isn’t really Cajun music. Creole musicians don’t seem to feel the same way about zydeco and have readily translated it, only including an occasional French word or phrase, such as “Hé là-bas!” or “Fais attention!”, as cultural markers. Older singers used to improvise songs on the spot, creating them anew and personalizing them with each performance. Now some young Cajun and Creole musicians who are not fluent in the language can only mimic the sounds. Others have taken up the challenge and learned the language well enough to sing convincingly. Still others wonder aloud if Cajun music could retain its integrity if it were sung in English. Heroic efforts are being made to preserve the language, including the highly effective French immersion school programs, but what would it mean if the songs were sung in a language that had been essentially lost by the community? To be sure, we will still call ourselves Cajuns and eat gumbo even if French fades entirely from our culture, but what would this mean? Does any culture survive translation intact?

Dewey Balfa often said, “A culture is preserved one generation at a time.” Cajun music and zydeco have endured into the present generation.

What happens in the next will once again decide their futures. They both have remarkable filtering systems: what works doggedly endures and what doesn't work fades mercifully away. Yet Balfa, who learned about cultural activism from the intellectual descendants of Alan Lomax and Charles Seeger, realized that we should not leave such things entirely to the laws of natural selection and urged that we water the roots so that the tree might have a chance to live. He cautioned that we not try to preserve artifacts, but rather the process that produces the music and its makers.

And if we succeed with that project, the process will continue to produce results that surprise us. Hopefully these results will also continue to reassure us by the clarity of the continuity that they represent.

Works Cited

- Ancelet, Barry Jean, and Elemore Morgan, Jr. *The Makers of Cajun Music*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984. Rev. ed. *Cajun and Creole Music Makers*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999.
- Bernard, Shane. *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003.
- Brasseaux, Carl. *The Founding of New Acadia*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.
- Brasseaux, Carl. *Acadian to Cajun: Transformation of a People, 1803-1807*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992.
- Dormon, James. *The People Called Cajuns*. Lafayette: USL Center for Louisiana Studies, 1983.
- Henry, Jacques, and Carl Bankston. *Blue Collar Bayou*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002.
- Jackson, Helen Hunt. *A Century of Dishonor*. New York: Dover Publications, 1881; rpt. 2003.
- Louder, Dean, and Eric Waddell. *Du continent perdu à l'archipel retrouvé*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2007.
- Ostendorf, Berndt, "Belizaire the Cajun and the Post-CODOFIL Renaissance of Cajun Cultural Capital and Space," in *Space in America: Theory, History and Culture*, ed. Klaus Benesch and Kerstin Schmidt. Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 1999; 529-540.