Zydeco / Zarico: The Term and the Tradition, in *The Creoles of the Gulf Coast,* ed. James Dormon (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996)
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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. Lawrence W. Levine describes a similar blending process in Afro-American music that produced "a hybrid with a strong African base (Levine 1977: 24). 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 Africa, the closest parallel is the high-life tradition, born of the influence of the colonial French on native African culture. 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.

Among the most important influences in this new blend was percussion. This new music was hard-driving polyrythmic dance music. Early planters tried with more or less success to prohibit drumming on the plantation (Epstein 1977: 52). For one thing, planters supposedly feared that slaves would use a secret language of drums to communicate among themselves. For another, drumming was the heartbeat of African cultural expression. Eliminating the practice would help to assimilate any reluctant subjects. Yet, it is impossible to prevent people from drumming in real life. There are too many opportunities to improvise. A log, box, table or chair can easily become a drum with the simple addition of two sticks. Even without any additional objects, the body can be used to produce rhythmic sounds: hands on thighs, clapped hands, stomping feet, etc. Put several people doing complementary rhythms together with such improvised "drums" and the result is remarkably close to the polyrhythmic beat of an African musical event. This critical African tradition may also have been reinforced by an overlap with native American drumming. In any case, it survived to provide a beat for zydeco and Cajun music, as well as rock, rhythm and blues, jazz, soul, hip hop and other black-influenced American music styles.

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. The word *creole,* which originally meant simply "native or homegrown, not imported," served, among other things, to distinguish "esclaves africains" [African slaves] from the more valuable "esclaves créoles" [Creole slaves]. In South Louisiana, where the French language is an important cultural identity marker, French-speaking blacks often call themselves "Créoles noirs" [black Creoles] or "Créoles de couleur" [Creoles of color] to distinguish themselves from French-speaking whites, who might be either "Créoles français" [French Creoles] or "Cadiens" [Cajuns], as well as from English-speaking blacks who were called "nègres américains" [American Negroes]. Historically black Creoles spoke a French-influenced Creole dialect. Many who live in the old plantation belt along the Mississippi River and on the western edge of the Atchafalaya Basin still speak a version of that Creole dialect. Eventually most of

those living on the southwest prairies came to speak a French dialect resembling that of their Cajun neighbors. Today many members of the older generations still speak French or Creole or both, as well as the English they learned in school, while members of the younger generations tend to speak little or no French or Creole.

Because its first language was French or Creole, the zydeco tradition remained a mystery to most outsiders. 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 traditional songs. The spelling *zydeco* was the first one to appear in print. It was first used by record producer Mack MacCormack to transcribe the sound he heard from musicians in the Houston area in the early 1960s and is the most widespread. Most record companies favor it, including Chris Strachwitz's California-based Arhoolie Records which released most of "Zydeco King" Clifton Chenier's major recordings. This spelling comes from an Anglo-American's attempt to render the flapped [r] in *les haricots.* The [z] sound would then come from the liaison with the "s" of "les" as in *les hommes* or *les hôtels.* Although contemporary French grammar frowns on this liaison because the "h" in *haricot* is now considered aspirate, Cajun and Creole French dialects preserve the former pronunciation of *les haricots* without the aspirate "h."

So then, what's in a name? Sometimes that depends on how you spell it, and who's doing the spelling. Québecois filmmaker André Gladu drew criticism from Strachwitz for entitling his 1984 film on Louisiana black Creole music *Zarico.* Strachwitz maintained that the standard spelling of the term was *zydeco,* and that derivations unnecessarily cloud the issue and dilute the potential for interest. Gladu claimed this was a colonialistic foul and countered with the explanation that *zydeco* is based on superimposed English phonetics, while *zarico* respects the tradition's own French language connection by using French phonetics to render the term. Ironically, this French connection is the result of an earlier colonial influence. Thus, the politics, not to mention the economics, of culture spilled over into the realm of linguistics. The debate over whether to spell the term according to precedent or to perceived cultural appropriateness continues. This question is complicated further by the recent discovery of apparent African influences that may need to be taken into account.

Folk spellings and folk etymologies often develop to explain or rationalize words and expressions whose origins or exact meaning have become unclear, especially among people who had no way of knowing what a word looked like until relatively recently when they learned to read. The attempts of folks to make sense of a term which has strayed, for one reason or another, from its original usage often yield related, though indirectly connected meanings, much like "for all intents and purposes" can become "for all intensive purposes," and "taking something for granted" can become "taking something for granite." Similarly, in South Louisiana, the name given to the nocturnal witch-rider, the widely perceived cause of what is medically described as sleep apnea, is *couche-mal,* literally "sleep poorly," an adaptation of *cauchemar,* French for "nightmare."

In the same way, words sometimes survived the efforts ante bellum planters to eliminate African languages among their slaves, but shifted slightly in the process. In Louisiana French Creole animal tales, for example, the dupe of Lapin [rabbit] is name Bouki. The word *bouki* is Wolof for "hyena," traditionally the hare's dupe in West African animal tales. No traditional storytellers report knowing the original meaning of

bouki, yet the term has survived and been extended to cover generally any foolish character or person. Another African survival, *gumbo,* is still used in its original sense to refer to okra, but also has come to mean the soupy dish it is used to make. Similarly, *congo* came to mean "dark" or "black," and by extension, "water moccasin," a snake which is dark grayish brown or black in color, by association with the color of the slaves who came from that area of Africa. The popular Cajun song "Allons danser, Colinda," in which a singer exhorts a young lady named Colinda to dance with him while her mother is not around, is a borrowing from Creole tradition (Bernard and Girouard 1992). The calinda or kalinda was an African dance slaves performed despite the interdictions of their masters (Epstein: 30-33), and the expression *"Allons danser calinda"* probably meant "Let's dance the calinda."

The explanation that zydeco comes from the expression "Les haricots sont pas salés has generally been "taken for granite" by musicians, record producers and scholars. A collection of traditional Creole music recorded in by French ethnomusicologist Jean-Pierre LaSelve (1980) on Rodrigue, a remote island in the Indian Ocean, includes an intriguing song entitled "Cari zarico," a group song accompanied by clapping hands, stamping feet, drums and a triangle, with the following verse:

Idée moi, idée toi, Azéline.	I'm thinking the same thing you're thinking, Azéline.
Cari zarico.	Hot bean soup.
Quand la lune fé séga mouliné.	When the moon dances the séga, we'll harvest.
Cari zarico.	Hot bean soup.

(LaSelve 1980)

Despite the literal translation, it seems safe to assume that bean soup was not uppermost on the singer's mind; courtship was. Yet the singers used the expression "cari zarico" as a repetitive, seemingly unrelated chorus throughout the song. When asked about this, LaSelve explained that singing about beans is part of a musical tradition called "séga zarico" which exists on Rodrigue and several other Creole-speaking islands in the Indian Ocean. The traditional dance associated with this music re-enacts the planting of beans, the woman walking backwards pretending to make a hole with her heel by stamping on the floor, and the man walking toward her placing an imaginary seed in the hole and covering it with his foot. The obvious connection between beans and dance, harvest and fertility rituals among Indian Ocean Creoles suggests that a look beyond the surface of the Louisiana Creole zydeco tradition might prove interesting.

Louisiana Creole and Rodrigue Creole cultures share similar origins and development patterns. They were both colonized by French planters in the 18th century. The first slaves brought to the Indian Ocean islands wre not from the nearby East African coast, but from the west coast, the same area exploited for the American slave trade. Both cultures speak closely related varieties of French-based Creole. Both share preoccupations derived from a comon heritage, such as the setting sun and the rising moon, stemming from both harvest rituals and ordinances which forbad slaves to be away from the plantation after dark. From Rodrigue, we hear:

Soleil couché, maman, la lune levé, no allé. The sun is setting, mother, the moon is

	rising, we go.
O hé, la saison là.	O hey, the season (the time) has arrived.
La saison, la saison, la saison là, no allé.	The season, the season, the season (the time) has arrived, we go.
O hé, la saison là.	O hey, the season (the time) has arrived.

(LaSelve 1980)

and from Louisiana:

O soleil après coucher,	Oh the sun is setting,
O la lune après lever.	Oh the moon is rising.
Mmm, mon nègre est pas arrivé	Mmm, my man has not arrived.
Mmm, malheureux, nègre,	Mmm, unhappy one, man,
O c'est malheureux...	Oh it's sad...
O mais quinze jours passés,	Oh fifteen days ago,
O les promesses tu m'as fait,	Oh the promises you made to me,
O chère amie, mon nègre.	Oh dear friend, my man.
O soleil apé coucher	Oh the sun is setting
To connais la promesse tu me fais moi	You know the promise you made to me
Sur un jeudi soir qui passé.	On a Thursday night past.
O la lune après lever,	Oh the moon is rising,
O soleil après coucher,	Oh the sun is setting,
Mmm, là-bas chez Moreau.	Mmm, over at Moreau's place.
O cherche ton candi, nègre...	Oh seek your candy, man...

(Lomax 1934)

In Louisiana, instrumental dance bands play waltzes and two-steps. In Rodrigue, they play waltzes and ségas. In both cultures, they are built around an accordion, a fiddle and a triangle. Since they share so many elements, it is at least plausible that their preoccupation with beans is more than coincidental. English blues scholar Samuel Charters alluded to a similar realization in his book *The Roots of the Blues: An African Search* when, faced with a ceremonial procession in Banjul which looks for all the world like the black Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans, it occurs to him that "To Weh Bakaweh" (a traditional Mardi Gras chant) "must be African, a phrase from one of the languages along this coast, though I was never able to locate it" (Charters 1982: 69).

The languages of West African tribes affected by the slave trade may provide some clues as to the origins of zydeco, though they are admittedly still vague. In at least a dozen languages from this culture area of Africa, the phonemes [za], [ré], and [go] are frequently associated with dancing and/or playing music, most notably among the Yula where "a zaré" means "I dance" (Sigismund 1963) With the cultural and circumstantial evidence enhancing the case, it is tempting to pursue the link between these tribal languages and the proverbial expression concerning unsalted beans. The recurring refrain

supposedly about unsalted beans may be built upon older sounds, no longer understood, and now distorted into more familiar, intelligible words, changing the denotation while preserving the connotation.

Levine maintains that "in America as in Africa Negro music, both vocal and instrumental, was intimately tied to body movement" (1977: 16). 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 term is used to exhort dancers, as in the opening dialogue between zydeco king Clifton Chenier and his brother Cleveland on their classic recording of the tradition's title song, "Zydeco est pas salé:"

Clifton: Hé, toi. Tout quelque est correct?	Hey, you. Is everything all right?
Cleveland: C'est bon, *boy*.	It's good, boy.
Clifton: Tout quelque chose est magnifique, hein?	Everything's wonderful, eh?
Cleveland: O oui. Qui to veux dire avec ça?	Oh, yes. What do you mean by that?
Clifton: Allons les haricots/zydeco, nègre!	Let's z-------, man!
Cleveland: Allons couri à la yé.	Let's run after them.
	(Arhoolie 1082)

If zydeco meant only beans, then Clifton's last sentence would not be grammatically sound: "Let's go the beans, man!" Yet neither the late Clifton Chenier nor his Creole compatriots were in the habit of speaking nonsense in their own language. If, however, zydeco is taken to be verb, with "les" being a direct object pronoun, instead of an article, Clifton makes much better sense: "Let's zydeco them, man!" or "Let's go zydeco, man!" One connotation seems to be associated generally with Creole music and dancing. There are many other examples of this usage, such as "Nous autres va zydeco," "Zydeco tout la nuit," or in English, "Zydeco, baby!" Zydeco down!" and "We're going to zydeco all night long." Community musicians are described as zydeco kings, queens and princes. Community dance events, which provide the primary opportunity for courtship, are announced as zydecos. Dance events are also referred to as "la-las" or simply French dances, to distinguish black Creole events from disco, soul or rhythm and blues gatherings.

Clifton Chenier's classic song, recorded in the 1950s, is thought by some to have given a name to this musical style. It is based on "Hip et Taïau," a French Acadian folksong about two thieving dogs:

C'est Hip et Taïau, [cher],	It's Hip and Taïau, dear,
Qu'a volé mon traineau, [cher].	That stole my skid, dear.
Quand [ils ont] vu j'étais chaud, [cher],	When they saw that I was mad, dear,
Ils ont ramené mon traineau, [cher].	They returned my skid, dear.
	(cf. Whitfield 1939 [1969]: 106)

Clifton's version continues to tell basically the same story in fractured form, but adds seemingly unrelated bridges ostensibly about unsalted beans:

O Mama!	Oh Mama!
Quoi elle va faire avec le nègre?	What's she going to do with the man?
Les zydeco est pas salé.	The beans/zydeco aren't salted.
Les zydeco est pas salé.	The beans/zydeco aren't salted.
T'as volé mon traineau.	You stole my sled.
T'as volé mon traineau.	You stole my sled.
Regarde les Hip et Taïau...	Look at Hip and Taïau...

(Arhoolie 1082)

The occurrence of the expression, "Les zydeco sont pas salés," in the seemingly unrelated bridges of several Louisiana Creole songs from the 1934 collection of Alan Lomax as well as in modern zydeco music suggests origins even beyond its functional folk etymology. In one Lomax recording, Wilbur Charles, a Creole migrant farm worker, concludes an unusual song, again borrowed from French Acadian tradition, about Italians lying in ditches apparently ill from having eaten rotten bananas with the following verses:

Quoi il n-a? Quoi il n-a avec ma femme?	What's the matter? What's the matter with my wife?
Ma femme, elle est malade, couchée côté de les vieux Dégos.	My wife is sick, lying next to the old Italians.
Dégos.	Italians.
Les haricots sont pas salés.	The beans/zydeco aren't salted.
Quoi il n-a, mon cher ami?	What's the matter, my dear friend?
Quoi il n-a?	What's the matter?
Les haricots sont pas salés.	The beans/zydeco aren't salted.
O yaïe! O mon nègre!	Oh yaïe! Oh my man!
Les haricots sont pas salés.	The beans/zydeco aren't salted.
Pas mis de la viande, pas mis à rien,	Didn't put meat, didn't put anything else,
Juste des haricots dans la chaudière.	Only beans in the pot.
Les haricots sont pas salés.	The beans/zydeco aren't salted.

(Lomax 1934)

The beans are unsalty because the cook has no meat to add to the pot. Before the days of refrigeration, a common way of preserving meat was to salt it away. Adding this salt meat to sauces, soups and beans provided seasoning as well as protein. "Les haricots sont pas salés," then, may refer to hard times and, by association, to the music that helped to endure them. One is also left to wonder what the singer's wife is doing laying in the ditch with the old Italians in the first place, sick or not. Thus "Les haricots/zydeco sont pas salés" seems also to appear in situations that feature frustrated courtship, or unhappy relationships. In English-speaking African American tradition, this music is called the

blues, whether it be a "low-down" blues lament which relieves by purging or a jumping, juking blues which relieves by distracting.

The laments and field hollers that were in English in the rest of the plantation south were in French in South Louisiana. Consequently, zydeco's bluesy side is sometimes based on melodies and rhythms which resemble those of the Southern blues tradition. Other times, the confluence of European and Afro-Caribbean rhythms and sources produced haunting songs in 3/4 time which function equally well as blues laments and as waltzes. Creole fiddler Canray Fontenot explained that as late as his own youth and young adulthood, in the 1930s and '40s, the blues were considered barroom music, and respectable families did not allow the blues to be played at their house dances (Fontenot 1977). Musicians circumvented this proscription by converting their blues tunes into acceptable dance forms such as the waltz. Fontenot's recording of "Les barres de la prison" is an excellent example of this style (Arhoolie 1070).

An important step in the development of what is now called zydeco was juré tradition, recorded in Louisiana by Alan Lomax during 1934. The Louisiana Creole counterpart of French Acadian "danses rondes" and Anglo-American play party songs, these unaccompanied group songs were performed for dancers during times when instrumental music was either proscribed (Lent or periods of mourning) or simply unavailable. They resemble the Rodriguais séga zydecos in style and beat as well as in the frequent, seemingly unrelated reference to beans in the chorus or bridge. *Juré* is apparently derived from the French word for "sworn" or "testified," though Epstein notes that a similar word, Juddy, was reported by seventeenth-century trader Ben Jobson as used to refer to "professional" musicians in Guinea and Benin (Epstein: 4). In Louisiana, jurés are the Louisiana French parallel for shouts and spirituals resulting from the blending of Afro-Caribbean, French-Acadian and southern Protestant traditions. Some texts were religious, as in the case of "Feel Like Dying in [Joining] His Army," a bilingual recording made by Lomax in 1934:

O Lord, Lord, Lord, my God.	
Feel like dying in [joining] His army.	
O oui, mon cher ami, o quoi tu vas faire?	Oh yes, my dear friend, oh what will you do?
Feel like dying in [joining] His army.	
O quoi tu vas faire, comment, hein, petit monde?	Oh what will you do, how, eh, dear one.
Feel like dying in [joining] His army.	
O oui, ma petite, si to pries pas...	Oh yes, my little one, if you don't pray...
Feel like dying in [joining] His army.	
O si to pries pas, tu vas brûler dans l'enfer.	Oh if you don't pray, you'll burn in hell.
Feel like dying in [joining] His army.	

(Lomax 1934)

Others were secular, often adapting the story line of French-Acadian folk songs to a highly syncopated Afro-Creole style. In a similar vein, Gilbert Chase reported that "The English musician Henry Russell, who lived in the U.S. in the 1830s, was forcibly struck by the ease with which a slave congregation in Vicksburg, Mississippi, to a 'fine old

Psalm tune' and by suddenly and spontaneously accelerating the tempo, transformed it 'into a kind of negro melody'" (1966: 235-36; quoted in Levine: 26). This is the case with Clifton Chenier's signature song "Les zydeco est pas salé," and with several of the Lomax recordings, such as "Je veux me marier, je peux pas trouver," based on the French Acadian song, "Je veux me marier, mais les poules pendent pas." Compare the two:

French Acadian:

Je veux me marier,	I want to marry,
Je veux me marier,	I want to marry,
Je veux me marier,	I want to marry,
Mais la belle veut pas.	But my sweetheart does not.
La belle veut,	My sweetheart accepts,
La belle veut,	My sweetheart accepts,
La belle veut,	My sweetheart accepts,
Mais les vieux veut pas.	But her parents do not.
Les vieux veut,	Her parents accept,
Les vieux veut,	Her parents accept,
Les vieux veut,	Her parents accept,
Mais j'ai pas d'argent.	But I have no money.
J'ai pas d'argent,	I have no money,
J'ai pas d'argent,	I have no money,
J'ai pas d'argent,	I have no money,
Et les poules pend pas.	And the chickens aren't laying.

(traditional; e.g. Gilmore 1970)

juré:

Je veux me marier,	I want to marry,
Je peux pas trouver,	I can't find,
O, c'est malheureux.	Oh it's sad.
Je veux me marier,	I want to marry,
Je peux pas trouver,	I can't find,
Mais comment donc je vas faire?	What am I going to do?
Je veux me marier,	I want to marry,
Je peux pas trouver,	I can't find,
Mais Mam et Pap veut pas.	And Mother and Father don't want.
Je veux me marier,	I want to marry,
Je peux pas trouver,	I can't find,
Mais o, c'est malheureux.	Well oh, it's sad.
Je veux me marier,	I want t marry,

J'ai pas d'argent,	I have no money,
J'ai pas de souliers,	I have no shoes,
Mais o, c'est malheureux	Well oh, it's sad.
Comment donc	What then
Tu veux moi, je fais,	Do you expect me to do,
Mais comme un pauvre misérable...	Well, like a miserable wretch...

(Lomax 1934)

The French Acadian version is lyrically and rhythmically structured in typically European-influenced fashion. The juré is lyrically reformulated and impressionistic, with a fragmented storyline, uneven lines, and a completely retooled melody, all of which comes from the African influences of its singers' past. The juré version preserves the basic theme of the young suitor whose courtship is frustrated because he has no money, but develops the story in a completely different way.

Juré singers provided dance music during times of Lent or official mourning periods when instrumental music was forbidden, or whenever musicians simply could not be found or afforded. The French Acadian counterpart to this tradition was called *danses rondes,* or round dancing. In Anglo-American tradition, this was sometimes called play-party singing. ("London Bridge" and "Ring around the Roses" are two well-known examples of play-party singing.) Lomax called juré style "the most African sound I found in America." The singers are accompanied only by improvised percussion (stamping feet, clapping hands, spoons rubbed on corrugated washboards...) and a vocal counterpoint.

Sexuality is a common feature in African tradition and survives in Afro-American cultural expression. "Jazz" and "rock" which describe other related African-American musical styles originally were euphemisms for making love in the black oral tradition. The connection between music and dance and sexuality and courtship may give additional clues to the origins and meaning of zydeco. In "J'ai fait tout le tour du pays," based on the French Acadian "J'ai fait tout le tour du grand bois," the story line concerns another frustrated young lover who cannot visit his sweetheart again because he is poor (his clothes are tattered, his horse is sickly...), but the bridge is a complaint ostensibly about unsalted beans. If one considers that zydeco has possible roots in courtship and fertility ritual music and dancing, however, a possible relationship appears between the bridge and the verses which describe frustration in courtship.

J'ai fait tout le tour du pays	I went all round the land
Avec ma jogue au plombeau	With my bottle on the pommel
Et j'ai demandé à ton père	And I asked your father for
pour dix-huit piastres, chérie.	for eighteen dollars, dear.
Il m'a donné que cinq piastres.	He gave me only five dollars.
O Mam, mais donnez-moi les haricots.	Oh Mama, give me the beans.
Mais o chérie, les haricots sont pas salés.	Well, o dear, the beans ain't salted.
O Mam, mais donnez-moi les haricots.	Oh Mama, give me the beans.
Mais o yé yaïe, les haricots sont pas salés.	Well, o yé yaïe, the beans ain't salted.
Toi, comment tu veux je te vas voir	You, how do you expect me to visit you.

Mais quand mon chapeau rouge est fini.	When, my red hat is worn.
Toi, comment tu veux je te vas voir	You, how do you expect me to visit you.
Mais quand mon suit est tout déchiré?	When my suit is all torn.
O Mam, mais donnez-moi les haricots.	O Mama, give me the beans.
Mais o yé yaïe, les haricots sont pas salés...	Well, o yé yaïe, the beans ain't salty...

(Lomax 1934)

Again, compare the French Acadian source with its even lines and lyrical narrative style:

J'ai fait [tout le] tour du grand bois	I went all around the land
Avec ma [jogue] au pombeau,	With my bottle on the pommel,
Mon [pe]tit [cheval] blanc tout blessé	My little white horse lame
Et mes culottes rapiécetées.	And my clothes in tatters.
Comment tu [veux] que [je vas te] voir?	How do you expect me to visit you?
Tu [restes l'autre] bord du grand bois.	You live on the other side of the woods.
Comment tu [veux je te] marie?	How do you expect me to marry you?
J'ai [rien qu']une paire de souliers.	I have only one pair of shoes.

(Whitfield 1939 [1969]: 96-97)

Juré and zydeco may be even more directly linked to courtship and its results. The Rodrigue Island dance tradition described earlier is obviously associated with courtship rituals. In ante bellum Louisiana, part of the planters' systematic efforts to eradicate their slaves' African heritage included outlawing slave dances like the calinda. The pretext that they were lewd and lascivious was not entirely unfounded, however, especially from a European point of view. Descriptions of these dances suggest that they may have been associated with African courtship and fertility rituals (Levine 16; Epstein 30) Contemporary black Creole dance styles associated with zydeco are often considered suggestive, to the say the least, by Cajun and Anglo-American observers. Zydeco lyrics are often more than suggestive. It doesn't take blues scholars long to figure out the sexual metaphors in such songs as Clifton Chenier's version of the Blind Lemon Jefferson classic, "Black Snake Blues." Nor is there much doubt about the meaning of Canray Fontenot's "Joe Pitre a deux femmes" [Joe Pitre has Two Women], Buckwheat Zydeco's "Give Me a Good Time Woman," Boozoo Chavis's "I'm Going to Dog Hill" ("...where the pretty women're at..."), and Clifton Chenier's version of "I'm a Hog for You, Baby" ("...rooting, rooting, rooting around your door..."). Much of African American expressive culture features double-entendre and sexual imagery, often using foods as euphemisms for female sexual organs (e.g., cabbage, cookie, cake, candy, jelly roll, shortening bread) (Levine 242-243). More recent zydeco hits are even more obvious: "I Want a Big Butt Woman" and "Take Off Your Clothes, Throw'em in the Corner."

There is an unmistakable tendency toward soul and rhythm-and-blues among contemporary Louisiana Creole musicians. Yet the same band leaders who insist on singing English lyrics and adding saxophones, trumpets and electric guitars in their groups demonstrate their deep understanding of the essential tradition when they play what they sometimes call "du vrai zydeco" [real zydeco]. After receiving a Grammy Award in 1984 for his album "I'm Here," Clifton Chenier commented, "Soul didn't get

me that Grammy. Rock-and-roll didn't get me that Grammy. Zydeco got me that Grammy" (1984). Ironically, producer Chris Strachwitz had a hard time convincing Chenier to record zydeco for his first Arhoolie Records releases in the 1960s and '70s (Strachwitz 1980). Chenier wanted to record rock and blues. He was quick to notice, however, that zydeco was what distinguished him from the rest of the crowd of musicians. Whether he was in a local dance hall or on the main stage of a major festival, he never failed to include some of the "real stuff" which featured his brother Cleveland on frottoir and Robert St. Judy on drums. The rest of the Red Hot Louisiana Band dropped out while Clifton and the percussionists beat out a jumping rhythm. Clifton transformed his piano accordion into a melodic drum, using it almost like a complicated version of an African thumb piano. The "real stuff" was also marked by exclusively French vocals and a percussive frenzy that clearly reveal that the style originated in the cultural creolization of Afro-Caribbean and Franco-American traditions.

Whatever its linguistic origins, zydeco is, like the blues and rock and roll, a product of the American blending process with a strong African base. But like its fellow Louisiana product, jazz, zydeco has an important French element. A few years ago, anthropologist Alan Lomax predicted that zydeco could become as big as reggae, another result of the creolization process. At the time, that was hard to believe because of the language barrier of hard-core zydeco. Yet, what had been a gradual drift towards English lyrics accelerated during the 1980s, as young Creoles were less and less capable of performing in French. Beyond South Louisiana, Queen Ida's 1982 Grammy, Clifton Chenier's 1984 Grammy for "I'm Here!" (one of the most English-oriented of his career) and Rockin' Sidney's 1986 Grammy for "Don't Mess With My Toot Toot" have lots of folks, from Patti LaBelle and Fats Domino to John Fogarty and Paul Simon, interested in zydeco.

Of course, what pop zydeco for national consumption gains in understandability, it loses in some other important areas, including contact with its French elements and intangibles that might be attributed to the social warmth (and even heat) of South Louisiana Creole dance halls. But the form is undeniably enjoying national attention. In South Louisiana, a veritable army of young Creole bands have become interested in the music of their heritage, and it is clear that zydeco has taken its place as part of the national music scene.

If there is a problem with today's zydeco, it is ironically, rooted in the success of its major figure. To understand zydeco today, one must understand Clifton Chenier. Born in the country near Opelousas in 1925, Clifton and his brother Cleveland left Louisiana in 1946 to work in the post-war boom in east Texas. Later, they moved back to Louisiana, though Clifton never completely gave up his foothold in the Houston area.

The Chenier brothers were among the first to popularize their adaptation of the older juré tradition. They turned what had been an unaccompanied group singing tradition into instrumental dance music, performed on an accordion and frottoir. They may not have invented zydeco, but they certainly defined it with every performance. At first, they played for neighborhood house dances while holding down regular jobs. They decided to devote themselves to music full-time when Clifton was fired from his job in an east Texas oil refinery because he could not and would not climb a tower. When he went back the next day to ask for his job, he played his accordion around the sandwich wagon while waiting for the foreman, and picked up more money during the lunch hour than he

had made working hard all week. Clifton and Cleveland quickly became very popular on the weekend dance hall circuit. Former owners of abandoned dance halls throughout southwest Louisiana speak proudly of the times that he played at their place.

Clifton's zydeco was culturally between Houston and New Orleans, between the blues and jazz, between the delta and the gulf. It was an ideal illustration of anthropologist C. Paige Gutierrez's notion that French Louisiana is actually south of the South (Gutierrez 1992: 4). In the 1950s, the influence of rock-and-roll and rhythm-and-blues imposed changes and Clifton succeeded in translating his percussive zydeco sound into modern terms. The group grew to include electric guitars, a bass, drums, a saxophone, and even a trumpet, as Clifton carefully built what he perceptively named the Red Hot Louisiana Band. Together, they strained the floor joists under most of the area's dance halls during the straight four-hour sets which are still common (even necessary) among performers who play real music for real people in South Louisiana. There is little time for stargazing when folks want to dance.

The principles of the local zydeco music scene will tell you that the recipe for success was (and still is) to make a record and get it played on local radio and jukeboxes. It's not clear whether Clifton had a plan for getting ahead, but he had the goods and, whether you're making better mousetraps or playing hotter accordion, people will beat a path to your door. After recording a couple of tunes for Specialty Records in 1955, he drifted from one regional company to another. He finally returned to the national scene in 1964 with Chris Strachwitz's Arhoolie label for whom he made his most memorable recordings. The Arhoolie releases also attracted the attention of young, hip whites in South Louisiana's urban, college-town center, Lafayette. Some overcame their nervousness at being the only whites for blocks to hear the master in his own element, in black clubs such as the Blue Angel and the old Bon Ton Rouley. Clifton's growing popularity soon raced past racial barriers and he became a mainstay of un-air-conditioned student hangouts such as Willie Purple's and the legendary Jay's Lounge and Cockpit.

Clifton believed that his hot zydeco sound could also transcend regional and cultural barriers and he made annual forays to the edges of America. He recorded for numerous labels, including Tomato, Blue Star, Jinn, and Free Bird, and was the subject of several films, including Les Blank's *Hot Pepper.* The fears of those who expected Lawrence Welk-style music from his piano accordion was invariably and immediately laid to rest. The list of musicians Clifton played with during those years reads like a who's who of American blues men and women, old and new, from Big Joe Turner to Big Mama Thornton, B. B. King to Johhny Winter, Ray Charles to Elvin Bishop, Lightnin' Hopkins to Gatemouth Brown. Aware of Europe's long fascination with American jazz and blues, Clifton arranged tours of France, England, Germany, Scandinavia, and Switzerland.

Throughout all of this, Clifton managed to blend success with real life, playing concerts for concert audiences and dances for dance hall audiences. He was keenly aware of his status as a culture hero. In 1971, the King of Zydeco first delighted audiences by appearing with a very conspicuous rhinestone-studded crown (e.g. Gould 1992:xix). By the 1975 Tribute to Cajun Music festival in Lafayette, all the members of his Red Hot Louisiana Band had smaller, prince-sized crowns as well. Yet, the King of Zydeco maintained a warm closeness with his bread-and-butter constituency on the local zydeco

circuit, regularly holding court over the bandstand rail in little dance halls throughout South Louisiana.

Clifton Chenier dominated the world of zydeco, as his title "King of Zydeco" implies. He was such a creative genius that he transformed anything he played into his own, including pure blues, country, rock, western swing and big band tunes. He was so important to the tradition he helped to define that after his death in 1987, the zydeco community fell into disarray. There was a power-vacuum at the top. A well-intentioned attempt to stabilize the situation made by one of Clifton's heirs, Alton "Rockin' Dopsie" Rubin, only made things worse because of the volatile cultural politics of the times. Eventually, several musicians emerged to provide some much-needed leadership. Musicians such as Delton Broussard, John Delafose and Preston Frank brought forward a renewed rural style, featuring the simpler, single-row diatonic accordion. Wilson "Boozoo" Chavis, one of Clifton's colleagues from the 1950s, came out of retirement to assume the position of elder statesman with a few new hard-driving old-style zydeco recordings. A new generation of musicians such as Stanley "Buckwheat" Dural and his protégé Nathan Williams, as well as the Sam Brothers and Clifton's own son C. J. Chenier, have distinguished themselves with excellent musicianship in the urban tradition developed by Chenier, characterized by the use of a chromatic piano-key accordion. An even younger generation led by the creative forces of musicians such as Terrance Simien, Zydeco Force, and Beau Jocque are exploring new trends, using a variety of instruments, including a chromatic three-row button accordion.

Yet it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between what passes for contemporary zydeco and the rock, soul and blues it imitates. Clifton was such a huge presence that it was difficult to see past him to explore the sources he used and the styles that had influenced him. Unlike the young Cajun musicians who were reviving Cajun music with a strong sense of history and language, exploring the unaccompanied ballads and instrumental dance tunes of centuries past, it seems that most young Creole musicians see only as far back as the Zydeco King. And when these young musicians look back for inspiration from his recordings, they assume that everything he did was zydeco, though he knew the difference. So their own music goes off in as many directions as his experiments, but often without a clear sense of what is the "real stuff." Furthermore, the tradition's poetic quality suffered in the shift from French to English lyrics. 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. Though there is still work to be done in this area, today no one really notices who's drinking out of the water fountain and where people are sitting on the bus. The black Creole community has begun to explore its special nature, apparently feeling that it can now afford such "luxuries" as culture and language. As organizations such as Creole, Inc., have emerged to lead this effort, so are there musicians who reflect its early results. Lynn August, who grew up with zydeco, turned to rock and popular music and recently returned to the music of his heritage, has released several recordings which include jurés he learned while exploring the historical recordings of Alan Lomax (e.g. *Creole Cruiser,* Black Top 1074).

Zydeco may be tempted by its brush with national appeal and move into the fast lane, developing in new directions which distance it from the traditions which gave it birth. Old-time French zydeco might then be relegated to a few South Louisiana versions of jazz's Preservation Hall where only a handful of nostalgia groups play the old stuff, while contemporary groups produce wave after wave of experimental new sounds. Or the tradition may preserve itself and develop in its own terms enough to continue stirring its pot of "unsalted beans." The current generation will, as it always does, determine the future.

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