

Cajuns in Film

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Film is an expensive medium. In addition to attempting to make art, filmmakers must also look for ways to recoup their backers' investments. The success of a movie depends in large part on its ability to attract the attention of viewers quickly and then hold it for an hour or two. Consequently, filmmakers have developed shorthand techniques to present key information about characters and contexts. Ideally these are based on archetypes. In reality, they are all too often based on stereotypes or caricatures, especially when the story involves the white Anglo-American hero who finds himself threatened by people from other backgrounds.

Ethnic groups have long appeared in documentary and feature films. African Americans, as faithful "darkies" or rebellious "niggers," have shucked and jived or threatened the honor of white women since D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. Native Americans, as drunken "Injuns" or wild "savages," have attacked innocent wagon trains, scalping the men and abducting the women, since the earliest westerns. We all became fluent in the stereotypes of movie language. The Irish love to drink and fight, the French chase women and kill each other in honorable duels, the English keep a stiff upper lip and a lid on their emotions. Germans are cold and ruthless, Italians are excitable lovers and brutal gangsters, Mexicans are shiftless, fat and greasy, and Jews are angst-ridden penny-pinchers.

Eventually, the movie industry achieved some variety and subtlety in the presentation of ethnic groups. Films such as *In the Heat of the Night*, *Little Big Man*, and *The Milagro Beanfield War* challenged head-on our racial and cultural prejudices. Francis Ford Coppola and Woody Allen have given thought-provoking explorations of their own cultures.

For Americans, the South has provided a convenient setting for us vs. them confrontation in the movies as well as in the news. In his book *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth*, Edward D.C. Campbell describes "the 'Southern,' – as much a Hollywood genre as the Western." Indeed, white Southerners, caricatured as eccentric, dueling, romantic planters in earlier films, have more recently become dim-witted, xenophobic, politically corrupt, racist bootleggers. And while movies such as *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) have challenged the old one-dimensional portrayals, others such as *Deliverance* have perpetuated the stereotypes. Jack Temple Kirby has traced the depiction of the South in stages: the Post-Reconstruction South (of D. W. Griffith), the Progressive South, the Embarrassing New South, the Grand Old South, the Visceral South, Dixie Mellow, the Devilish South, Dixie Redux and Demise, Re-redux and Reconciliation, with a caveat that developments continue (Kirby 1978).

Over the years, South Louisiana, described by anthropologist C. Paige Gutierrez as "south of the South," has received similar treatment in feature films and documentaries. An exotic wilderness with clear cultural, ethnic and linguistic boundaries, the region has what it apparently takes to produce a Hollywood stereotype: the Cajuns are Catholics in the Bible Belt; many speak French in this English-speaking country; and in a

land dominated by genteel, even Puritan standards, they are consistently described as drinking, dancing, brawling gamblers.

A few years ago, bigger-than-life chef Paul Prudhomme helped to launch a Cajun food fad. Immediately, the media supermarket offered a spicy stereotype instead of the real culture to the American public. Ersatz Cajun restaurants across the country began serving cayenne-laced everything. A national Pizza chain developed something called New Orleans-style Cajun pizza and a Milwaukee brewery introduced a cayenne-flavored beer “brewed in the time-honored Cajun tradition.” In New York’s LaGuardia Airport, I saw a fast snack outlet for a nut mix called Cajun Fire. Predictably, along with the hoopla came a wave of television and film crews.

But they were not the first. Cajun country was “discovered” by Hollywood early in the development of the film industry. The first Tarzan movie was filmed near Morgan City and in the 1920s, Dolores Del Rio starred in a film adaptation of Longfellow’s “Evangeline.” Since then, a few dozen films have been set among Louisiana’s Cajuns, with results ranging from curious and haunting to bizarre and threatening.

The Cajuns made it onto Hollywood storyboards as a people among whom a hero can get into exotic trouble, thus providing an interesting alternative to the third world, with two fringe benefits: film crews don’t need passports or electrical current adapters; and this alternative will not yet get them in trouble. Unlike Blacks, Jews, American Indians and other cultural and ethnic groups, the Cajuns are concentrated in a relatively small region, and they have not learned to complain as a group. Portrayals of the Cajuns invariably are built around violence, racism, xenophobia, alcoholism, ignorance, isolation and inbreeding. Traditional occupations such as trapping and fishing are almost exclusively used as the context for Cajun characters and thus set them in a rural, rustic, isolated, underdeveloped, and extremely wet world.

The swamp is a hauntingly beautiful, photogenic landscape. Except for *Casey’s Shadow* (1977), about a Cajun horse trainer on the prairies, and *The Big Easy* (1987), about an Irish/Cajun cop in New Orleans, the Cajuns have been portrayed as swamp dwellers, in documentaries as well as features. In fact, if one were to believe the silver screen, one would think that most of South Louisiana is under water. *Louisiana Story* takes place in the swamp around Bayou Petit Anse. *Thunder Bay* is set in a Gulf Coast fishing village and offshore, *Live and Let Die* uses dry land as little more than a hurdle for James Bond in a speedboat. In *Southern Comfort*, errant National Guardsmen find themselves lost in a seemingly endless swamp. In *No Mercy*, Richard Gere and Kim Basinger jump from a dock along the Mississippi River in Algiers into a nearby swamp (an interesting trick in the New Orleans metropolitan area). Basinger incidentally finds ingenious ways to remain wet through most of the movie, partly because of her physique, and partly, one supposes, because of her Cajun background. And so on, and on...

Robert Flaherty’s 1948 documentary *Louisiana Story*, about the arrival of the oil industry among the Cajuns, echoes some of the notions established by Longfellow’s *Evangeline*. Set on Bayou Petit Anse, the film presents the Cajuns as inhabitants of the “forest primeval,” living in harmony with nature, quietly paddling along the natural curves of the bayous, far from the hustle and bustle of the urban mainstream. Standard Oil funded *Louisiana Story*, in part to vaunt the progress brought by the oil industry. In hindsight, the message is quite the opposite. Now as we watch the arrival of the noisy machines that violate the silence, cutting unnaturally straight lines across the swamp, we

are aware of such pressing contemporary ecological issues as salt-water intrusion, siltation and erosion.

[clip: *Louisiana Story*; paddling through bayou to arrival of machines]

The Cajun family is fascinated by this new technology but understands little about it. For a while, a peaceful coexistence appears possible. The boy is obviously enthralled by the rig which must look for all the world like Oz to him. He fishes from the platform and is befriended by the Anglo-American drillers. The rig and its crew eventually prove to be a strain on the family as well as the environment. Stakes driven into the ground and drill bits rammed over and over again into the hole suggest the rape of the land. When a blowout threatens the well, the father distances himself from the situation, suspicious and fearful of its effects on his land and his family. His son, on the other hand, is drawn to it. His attempts to “cure” the problem with salt and spit come across as quaint, but superstitious, especially when compared to the industrious efforts of the drilling crew.

[clip: problem with father]

[clip: salt/spit scene on rig]

In *Thunder Bay* (1953), James Stewart stars as an Anglo-American dreamer/adventurer who designs, builds, operates, and brings in the first successful offshore oil well in the Gulf of Mexico. Though similar to *Louisiana Story* in some ways, this film shows considerably less indulgence toward the resident Cajuns. When their sleepy fishing village is invaded by the slick, aggressive oil men, they revolt, struggling haplessly and hopelessly against progress which is eventually rammed down their ungrateful throats. The Cajuns are portrayed as ignorant and superstitious, not unlike the image developed in Flaherty’s well-intentioned docu-drama.

[clip: speech from cabin; crowd running away from Stewart with dynamite]

They are also superstitious and naïve, assuaged in defeat by the discovery of the “golden shrimp” that are attracted to the new platform at night.

[clip: golden shrimp clog valves]

During the 1970s, something happened to change Hollywood’s image of the Cajuns from idyllic, naïve swamp dwellers to hostile, cunning swamp stalkers. This may have had something to do with the concurrent shift that took place in the portrayal of Southerners (described by Kirby in *Media-Made Dixie*) from the romantic racists of *Gone With the Wind* to the violent racists of *Hurry Sundown* and *Mandingo*. The entire nation watched as the South publicly confronted its sins during the Civil Rights struggle, and the violence in the news was translated onto the silver screen. Several other factors may have contributed to the emerging image of the violent Cajuns. The Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, created in 1968, launched a campaign to preserve Louisiana’s French language and culture after decades of neglect. This effort included a highly visible public relations campaign that called attention to the Cajuns as a cohesive

and different ethnic group. The effort to preserve the group's native French language went against the nationalistic current that had characterized the first part of this century, perhaps best expressed by former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt when he said such things as "There is room for but one language in this country and that is the English language," and again "There is no such thing as a hyphenated American, no such thing as a French-American, or German-American or Spanish-American. Those who feel French or German or Spanish should go home." Cajun music contributed significantly to the movement at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival. By the 1970s, Cajun musicians were exporting their French waltzes and two-steps to enthusiastic crowds at college campuses and folk festivals throughout America. The Cajuns had become a highly visible minority celebrating its difference.

Les Blank's 1971 documentary *Spend It All* portrayed the Cajuns as a hard-living, hard-playing people who enjoyed a wonderfully exotic cuisine and danced uninhibitedly to intense, soulful music sung in French. Blank was obviously fascinated with the Cajuns, viewing them as a refreshing alternative to the bland, rootless American mainstream, and his films enshrine this fascination. His documentary technique was exciting and innovative. In the tradition of Michel Brault and Richard Leacock, Blank made ingenious use of the hand-held camera, following the action, surprising his audiences and himself with the spontaneous discoveries he made through the lens. Blank was based in California and his innovative documentary was certainly not unknown among filmmakers.

Spend It All intends to be non-fiction. Unlike Flaherty who directed real people in composed scenes designed to recreate reality, Blank filmed what was actually happening in front of his camera without direction. Yet, as in all documentaries, there is no purely objective truth here. Blank's interests and curiosity led him to point his camera in certain directions and not in others. Further, logical connections were discovered and created in the editing room. In the end, even non-fictional films are in no small way the result of the vision and understanding of the filmmaker. Blank's admiration for the earthy values he found among rural Cajuns is due in part to his own disenchantment with the American melting pot. Furthermore, if he made a film about the Cajuns, it was not to show how they are the same as everyone else, but how they are different. He had no interest in showing Cajuns going to work at ordinary jobs in ordinary cars on ordinary highways, or cooking on ordinary stoves in ordinary kitchens, or watching television or going to the bank, or shopping at Winn Dixie. In the end, he did not make a film about the Cajuns. He made a film about what he found unusual and exciting and different about the Cajuns.

[clip: traiteur scene to pulling tooth scene]

Unfortunately, when audiences in Peoria, or Chicago, or Tallahassee, or Laramie view Blank's documentary, they see it as a film about the Cajuns. This is a problem common to documentaries, especially those filmed not in some aboriginal tribe where everything really is different, but in America where many things are similar, the eccentricities of a culture end up defining it.

[clip: definitions to "Work hard, make a little money and spend it all."]

In *Spend It All*, the Cajuns are portrayed as a rural, hunting and gathering society living off the bounty of the land. There is little indication of long-term labor. People are shown hard at work catching shrimp, crabs, oysters and fish, but the cottage industry of selling seafood appears to be an afterthought, as the fishing process is followed by the construction of a home-made sign: Shrimp for sale. There are no shots of an urban center. The documenter's own technique is partially responsible for some of this portrayal. To take advantage of natural light, Blank shot almost exclusively outside. This makes for beautiful cinematography, but gives the impression that Cajuns cook, eat, and do most everything else outside.

Blank was also a male filmmaker fascinated by the male dominated public performance aspects of Cajun culture, such as festive cooking, horse racing, storytelling, and music. This approach focused on Cajun machismo, with the all-out stretch run at the quarter horse track used as a metaphor for the all-out "bon temps" philosophy that obviously intrigued Blank. In this highly impressionistic view, the complexity of contemporary Cajun society is ignored. Cajun women and their role in Louisiana French society, for example are all but neglected.

In 1975, another documentary focused on rural and small-town (Mamou, Eunice and Basile) Cajuns. *The Good Times Are Killing Me* was produced by TVTV, a group based in California and New York experimenting with the use of new highly portable television equipment, the first mini-cams. Their documentary was edited from hundreds of hours of relatively inexpensive videotape recorded with the help of community leaders such as Paul Tate, Revon Reed and Dewey Balfa. Local projections of raw footage drew praise from locals. The final version, however, portrayed the Cajuns as a strange tribe of vulgar, hard-partying, drunks, the front-line in a losing battle for cultural and ethnic survival in America. Nathan Abshire, an impoverished, alcoholic musician, embittered and despondent about his son's recent arrest for the burglary and theft of a drugstore, is defined as "everybody's idol." Louis Landreneau is presented dressing as a woman, complete with brassiere and pantyhose, wig and makeup, under the careful supervision of his mother, without explaining that he is preparing for his community's Mardi Gras celebration. Cajun women finally appear on the screen, in a beauty shop scene set up by one of the women crew members with the assurance that the vulgar jokes they were telling would not be used in the documentary; they were.

[clip: joke + "I hope my husband doesn't hear this."]

By the time the woman's husband heard the whole sordid conversation on television, the crew was safely back in California. The Mardi Gras is eventually presented with no explanation other than the definitions gathered by the fascinated but unenlightened crew from drunken participants.

[clip: definition of Mardi Gras + "What are you going to do now?"]

The Good Times Are Killing Me was prominently funded by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. It aired nationally on the PBS network in 1975, attracting much attention to the Cajuns, to the chagrin of most of those involved on the local level. Local contact person Dewey Balfa wept when he saw the result of his collaboration. Council for the

Development of French in Louisiana Chairman James Domengeaux threatened a class action suit against TVTV. The suit was never filed.

In the 1970s, several movies echoed the presentation of the Cajuns in these and other documentaries. *Live and Let Die* (1973), from the same period, develops the Southern genre of the inept sheriff as in the Smoky and the Bandit movies and the “Dukes of Hazzard” television series. James Bond’s pursuit of a heroin kingpin leads him, among other exotic places, into the Louisiana bayous where he encounters a fat, stupid Cajun sheriff who is baffled by the witty, sophisticated debonair Bond. *Casey’s Shadow* (1977) featured a run-down Cajun horse trainer with few redeeming values. He abuses alcohol, his children and eventually his prize racehorse in his attempts to win a million dollar race and a little pride. the influence of Les Blank’s racetrack scenes from *Spend It All* are hard to ignore.

More importantly, in 1975, Walter Hill was involved in two movies that featured the Cajuns. In addition to portraying the New Orleans Creoles as decadent, eccentric and sexually deviant, *The Drowning Pool* has Harper, played by Paul Newman, roam the “steamy back roads and bayous of Louisiana” where he encounters a few odd, exotic Cajuns who describe themselves as “coonasses.” *Hard Times*, the story of a bare-knuckle fighter, contains an episode in which a Cajun goes back on a bet, not impossible, but highly improbable in a culture characterized by an abiding respect for the rules of the game.

In 1981, Hill took on the Cajuns head-on in *Southern Comfort*. In this film, a disparate troop of National Guardsmen on manœuvres in the Atchafalaya Basin “borrow” a few pirogues from a Cajun hunting camp to cross a channel that does not appear on their maps. When they are halfway across, the Cajuns appear out of the woods and call for their boats. One of the Guardsmen sprays the Cajuns with blank machine gun fire for a joke. The Cajuns, however, are not in on his joke and return real fire, killing the sergeant in charge. The remaining Guardsmen escape to the other side, but the Cajuns pursue them. Without their leader, the Guardsmen are “lost in a malignant landscape, quarrel among themselves as they are relentlessly pursued by an enemy they can’t see don’t know or understand.” (“Bayou Guardsmen,” New York Times Sept. 25, 1981, C20:1)

Using South Louisiana as an obvious metaphor for Vietnam, *Southern Comfort* is a story about the ineptitude of these ill-trained American troops in a “foreign” and hostile environment. The guardsmen find themselves in a war with the swamp-wise Cajuns who are almost invisible, gliding effortlessly through the scenes while the guardsmen fumble and fall and wander in circles. Even nature seems to act against them.

[clip: trees falling, leading to quicksand scene, then to “I’m not supposed to be here.”]

Eventually all are killed but for the two guardsmen who have protested their cohorts’ behavior.

Southern Comfort could have been about territory and trespassing, if director Hill’s Cajuns had not pursued the two remaining guardsmen in the Cajun camp in the end. Hill, who conceived of this film after meeting some Cajuns during the filming of *Hard Times*, may have a somewhat faulty understanding of the culture. Instead, *Southern Comfort* degenerates into a primitive struggle for survival that has lost its point. When

the remaining guardsmen finally make it to the community camp, the Cajuns proclivity for raucous festivities takes on new and threatening meanings. Images from a traditional hog butchery are manipulated and enhanced to appear confusing and threatening, and the sounds of Cajun music, singing and dancing are used to cover up the sounds of violence.

[clip: behind trees to the end]

The choice of Cajun country as a setting for this film about the lack of understanding between the U.S. troops and “hostile foreigners” is remarkable. The appearance of clearly marked U.S. military vehicles in the last scene is a shocking reminder of who’s who after all.

The Cajun French language has long been an important ethnic identity marker, one which has not always had positive connotations when juxtaposed with the Anglo-American mainstream. Though the plot in *Louisiana Story* is the product of Flaherty’s own observations and imagination, the Cajun characters are played by real people. Consequently their speech is natural and authentic, shifting from accurate Cajun French to accented English as spontaneously as in real life. Hollywood’s treatment of language is another matter. In *Thunder Bay*, Gilbert Roland as Teche Bossier sounds more like Maurice Chevalier than a Cajun, and Antonio Moreno as the aggrieved father sounds, well, Hispanic. In *Southern Comfort*, however, language becomes a barrier, an irritant, a problem. When the guardsmen happen upon a Cajun swamper in the course of their flight, some of them assume that he is one of those responsible for the death of their sergeant and capture him. (Like the stereotypes concerning Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, and some other ethnic groups, one supposes Cajuns must all look alike.) When he insists that he does not speak English, they torture him to force a confession.

[clip: capture to explosion of cabin]

The 1980s saw a new set of films with Cajun episodes or settings. Of these, *No Mercy* (1986), *Angel Heart* (1987), and *The Big Easy* (1987) use cultural markers such as language, music and cuisine to define and set off the Cajun and Creole characters. In *No Mercy*, the French language intensifies the exotic, thus threatening nature of New Orleans and Algiers (not in northern Africa, but across the river) for Chicago cop Eddie Jillette on a quest to investigate and eventually avenge his partner’s brutal murder by the villain Losado.

[clip: “They don’t even talk like us” to “Anybody speak English here?”]

Losado is presented as a sort of French Creole Mafioso. His exclusive and abusive relationship with the sultry Cajun beauty Michelle is underscored by the fact that they speak (subtitled) French to each other. [clip] Jillette abducts Michelle and escapes with her into the swamp. They discover a camp where she teaches him to eat crawfish after which they fall asleep exhausted by their flight. [clip] They are awakened the next morning by two Cajuns bearing shotguns who have the following exchange, in flawless Cajun French:

“Tu veux la piquer?” (You want to screw her?)

“Oui, dans la bouche.” (Yes, in the mouth.)

[clip]

Nevermind the meaning. The lines are not even subtitled. They are threatening simply by virtue of the fact that Jillette can't understand them, confirming his boss's warning as he was leaving Chicago. Speaking a language other than English is a badge of non-standard ethnicity. Losato's French already set him off; the Cajuns' non-standard dialect is beyond the pale. Lack of understanding naturally leads to fear and hate.

Angel Heart is set among the Black and French Creoles of New Orleans, characterized as usual by a steamy decadence and voodoo. Director Alan Parker uses the standard stereotypes. It rains throughout the film, and Brooklyn private eye Angel's daughter turns out to be named Evangeline Proudfoot. She even reports to him that “Mama waited, Mama died,” echoing the fate of Longfellow's heroine. In one remarkable scene, Angel pursues the truth, and what we later learn is himself, into Cajun country, defined by cock fights and horse races. In a striking manipulation of another cultural marker, one of Angel's contacts is boiled alive in a pot of gumbo. He later declines an invitation to eat with his client Louis Cyphere explaining, “Cajun cooking kills me.”

The Big Easy features Dennis Quaid as Rémy McSwain, a free-wheeling New Orleans Irish-Cajun cop whose accent bounces back and forth between suburban New Orleans yaf (which sounds a little like Brooklynese) and Cajun English dialect à la Justin Wilson: “I was just passing myself down to get breakfast.” The accent is so inauthentic and implausible that it is difficult for many who live in South Louisiana to suspend belief enough to enjoy the film. In fact, many movie-goers from the area took to counting his mispronounced uses of “cher / chère”. A series of strange murders eventually leads Rémy and assistant D.A. Anne Osborne to uncover a ring of corruption in the New Orleans police department. She is “not from here,” and Rémy undertakes to smooth her rough edges as soon as he meets her. They soon fall for each other despite their best efforts.

The Big Easy is a cinematic tourist brochure, with every image designed to remind viewers that they are watching a fad-fueled film about the Cajuns and New Orleans, the Big Easy, counterpart to New York, the Big Apple. Interestingly, no one in New Orleans can remember the referring to the place that way before the release of the film. New Orleans also appears to be the capital of Cajun culture, an image grudgingly tolerated by tourism-conscious entrepreneurs of the City that Care Forgot. A first victim is found in the fountain in the Piazza d'Italia. A riot outside the scene of a subsequent murder in Storyville (which incidentally has been out of existence for decades) turns into a party even before the police leave. Another victim is discovered in a warehouse, not just any warehouse, but one used to store Mardi Gras floats. As Rémy discusses his plight with Ms. Osborne in his kitchen, there is a “How to Eat Crawfish” poster conspicuously located on the wall behind them. On their first date, they eat at Tipitina's (actually a local dancehall), served by a Paul Prudhomme look alike, with zydeco music in the background. Rémy's apartment is predictably strewn with bachelor clutter, but not just any clutter, Irma Thomas, Dr. John and Cajun music records. On their way to talk to Daddy Mention, the leader of the Black Creole underworld, they cross a jazz parade. Osborne eventually tries Rémy for taking a payoff (despite the obvious conflict of

interest). He beats the rap and his victory party includes Cajun music on the porch of his mama's house and dancing in the yard, along a bayou, of course. As he discusses strategy with his NOPD staff, he makes his points with a stuffed alligator. And so on...

The Southern film genre frequently includes a considerable amount of graphic violence. The region undeniably is characterized by a certain amount, but films may misunderstand its nature. Studies by Southern scholars such as John Shelton Reed and Lynwood Montell have shown that violence in the South tends to be confrontational and interpersonal rather than random or gratuitous. People involved in violent situations usually know each other and understand why they are at odds. Assault and homicide are often considered to be appropriate resolutions to a problem among people who do not always feel it necessary to include institutional law enforcement or judicial agencies in their conflicts. However, it is easy to see that what seems to make perfect sense on a Saturday night between two people who share a similar social and cultural background can take on other, more evil meanings when presented out of context by misinformed filmmakers to uninitiated audiences in movie theaters across the country.

Recent studies seem to show that violence functions in a similar way south of the South (Ancelet, Brasseaux) and that filmmakers similarly misunderstand its nature there (Allain). At first, the Cajuns were generally presented à la Longfellow as a pastoral people living a rustic but gentle life in the Eden of Louisiana, in image *National Geographic* endorsed around the same time in articles about these anachronistic, isolated French-speaking swampers. In 1953, *Thunder Bay* portrayed the Cajuns as hostile but ineffective, backward, and even pitiful in their struggle against the arrival of the offshore oil industry in such scenes this caricature of Cajun dueling traditions

[clip: in the ring]

Then things began to change. In *Easy Rider* (1969), it happens that the Southern rednecks who blow Captain America and his sidekick to smithereens for no real reason are Cajuns. In the television adaptation of Ernest Gaines' *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, an old Cajun is paid to gun down Miss Jane's adopted son. This is the beginning of a fairly consistent image of the Cajuns as violent, unpredictable, racist xenophobes. While it is true that the Cajuns developed racist attitudes, especially after the Civil War when they were expected to firmly occupy the second-to-last rung of the social ladder, it is also true that Cajuns and Black Creoles have lived as neighbors for hundreds of years and have shared musical, culinary and oral traditions. Such subtleties, however, are apparently difficult to preserve in a script.

Southern Comfort reinforces the image of Cajuns as violent xenophobes as anonymous swampers conspire with nature to methodically kill members of the National Guard troop. In all fairness, the Cajuns do have a legitimate reason to retaliate against the guardsmen who sprayed them with blank fire, but the revenge factor is carried to such an extreme that this justification is soon compromised. When the Cajuns follow the two surviving guardsmen into the camp at the end, they trample what little justice may remain in their cause. *No Mercy* continues in this vein with the Cajun swampers threatening Jillette and Michelle with violence when they discover them asleep in the cabin. Michelle is a rare woman in the usually macho-oriented portrayal of the Cajuns. But she is

obviously a victim, apparently happy to accept Jillette's rather bleak proposal in the end, exchanging one abusive male for another.

[clip: proposal]

Television frequently recycles images with little room for subtlety. The violent Cajun on film becomes even worse on television. In the early 1980s, the Cajuns appeared in several weekly series, including *Knight Rider* and *Stunt Man*, both produced by Glen Larson with similar results. If films such as *Southern Comfort*, *No Mercy* and *The Big Easy* were the result of second generation stereotypes, these television programs represent a third generation. The *Knight Rider* episode is typical. Kitt and his talking computerized car go to South Louisiana to break up a drug-smuggling ring. They are assisted in their efforts by a hauntingly beautiful dark-eyed Cajun woman. Unbeknownst to her, her boyfriend (or spouse) is involved in the ring. When he learns that she is inadvertently working against him, he confronts her, demanding loyalty. She refuses, insisting on doing what is right, so he beats her up. She protests and his response is, "Well, you know how us Cajun men are." He knocks her out and leaves her for dead on the floor of the cabin which he then sets afire. The revived *Mission Impossible* also gave similar treatment. Cajun country seems to provide an exotic alternative to Appalachia and the big city ghetto as a place for television heroes to solve problems.

All cultures are used and abused by Hollywood. Yet, some have more than one perspective available. We know that New York is not all slums and bums because we occasionally see Rockefeller Center and Park Avenue. There is, however, a remarkable consistency in the portrayal of the Cajuns in film. One of the most troubling things about his presentation is that I didn't leave much out. Except for obvious B- pornographic films such as *Gator Bait I* and *II*, I have covered most of the films that touch on the Cajuns, documentary and fictional. Even Robert Flaherty's widely respected *Louisiana Story* presented the Cajuns as backward, isolated and superstitious swamp dwellers with few indications of contemporary civilization. And Flaherty's black and white documentary is not exactly a regular in the videostore trade or on the cable systems. The problem is that many people are impressed, to an important extent, by what they see on television and at the movies. It is true that some people know better than to believe everything they see on the screen. But for others, this may be the only source of information about such matters, the only time the subject comes up. What does the general public know about the American Indians, or people in Appalachia, or the Inuits. More people likely saw *Witness* than read a carefully documented description of the Amish.

Nevertheless, no amount of complaining will resolve this issue. In fact, complaints are invariably ignored by media executives who cannot be bothered with such trivial concerns as accuracy. When the *Knight Rider* episode aired, a few dozen people I know joined me in complaining to NBC. We all received the same form letter explaining that we had misunderstood the intent of the program. One way for Cajuns (and other ethnic groups) to repair Hollywood's faulty image is to take the media into their own hands, to tell their own stories. This is of course difficult since television and film production is expensive. Cable and community-access television have opened new opportunities, but generally do not reach beyond the region. But South Louisiana has begun to produce its own interpreters. Some have learned to work with filmmakers;

instead of simply giving an interview, they are positioning themselves as consultants. Some have begun to produce their own documentaries and films to define the people and the culture from the inside.

California-based record producer Chris Strachwitz teamed up with filmmaker Les Blank to produce a documentary on the history and development of Cajun music and zydeco called *J'ai été au bal*. Blank, who had always avoided narration in his documentaries was talked into using it in this film. In fact, the very structure and movement of the film are based on the narration provided through interviews with insiders such as Marc Savoy, Michael Doucet and myself. In a quest for accuracy, Strachwitz willingly subjected his project to constant editorial input from his major consultants.

WLAE public television in New Orleans aired *Cajun Crossroads*, a carefully documented local production by Karen Snyder, heavily based on interviews with the historians, linguists, sociologists and folklorists who are just now discovering the nature of Cajun culture and who all served as editorial consultants on the project. *Crossroads* avoids the usual speed of media presentation which tend to flit from one image to another, supposedly to keep the attention of the audience. This locally produced documentary dares to dwell on characters and issues long enough to present the culture in its complexity.

Some documentaries are not so much about the Cajuns as about facets of Cajun life. Patrick Mire and Charles Bush have produced two documentaries that represent a more unselfconscious look at Cajun folklife from the inside. *Anything I Catch* explores the tradition of handfishing and includes both exciting footage of this disappearing practice and engaging commentary about the relationship between natural and cultural resources. Going far beyond the portrayal of the country Mardi Gras as a mindless drunk, *Dance for a Chicken* traces the complex history of the celebration and shows the rich diversity of its contemporary versions as found in communities across South Louisiana, including the variety in songs and dances, costumes and masks, ceremonial begging traditions and ritual floggings. This fascinating documentary shows indirectly but effectively how communities define themselves through cultural expression.

[clips]

The first step toward producing fictional films is writing the stories. Ernest Gaines, a Black Creole from Pointe Coupée parish, has had several of his novels adapted for television movies. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974), his saga of a Black family in Louisiana from slavery to the civil rights movement, preceded both *Roots* and *Souder*. In Gaines' story, it is a Cajun who is hired to kill Miss Jane's son when he returns from the North to preach change. When Gaines was a child growing up near New Roads, Cajuns were the bogeymen who would come to get him if he did not behave. Gaines eventually came to be writer-in-residence at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, at Lafayette, in the heart of the Cajun country. It is little wonder that his later portrayal of the Cajuns had more depth. He had come to know many. *In A Gathering of Old Men*, there are good ones and bad ones, clever ones and foolish ones, racist ones, confused ones and some who resist the prejudices of the past: portrayal much closer to the complexity of real life.

[clip: family scene]

As a novelist, Gaines has limited control over the story as it finally appears in the media. Cajun filmmaker Glen Pitre should be less frustrated in this regard, having chosen to work directly in the medium. Other frustrations such as limited financing make up the difference, however. Pitre's first films were in Cajun French, with local actors. An avid student of oral history, he sought inspiration in the stories of his own family and region. *Fièvre jaune* is the story of a yellow fever epidemic and the effect that the ensuing quarantine has on a close-knit family and community. *Huit piastres et demie le barril* is a docu-drama about a shrimpers' strike, ingeniously illustrating the oral history simultaneously from the two opposing points of view. Both stories are about confronting pressures that threaten to rip apart families and communities, reflecting the Cajuns' long history of surviving upheavals with a strong sense of social cooperation and solidarity.

These low-budget exercises eventually attracted the attention of Robert Redford's Sundance Institute which gave Pitre the contacts and the momentum he needed to tackle a read commercial film. With outside support and outside funding came outside pressures. The project's title was eventually changed from the lyrical *Acadian Waltz* to *Belizaire, the Cajun*, apparently because supporters wanted to capitalize on the popularity of Cajun cooking and music. The story is set in mid-nineteenth-century Louisiana and features a *traiteur* (faith healer / folk medicine man) who is typical of the traditional trickster hero in Louisiana French oral tradition. In fact, the film owes much to folktale style and structure. *Belizaire* Breaux eventually breaks up a vigilante movement that is exiling "undesirable" Cajuns to Texas and wins the girl and a bit of booty in the end, in the tradition of the folk hero. The story is told from the inside. It is not about a visitor among the Cajuns. It is not so much about the Cajuns. It is rather set among the Cajuns and consequently includes rich ones and poor ones, heroes, rascals and villains. And like its predecessors, it is fundamentally about the preservation of community.

[clip: negotiating a penance]

As a historical drama, however, *Belizaire* avoids the contemporary image problem. The story about being Cajun in today's world had not been filmed until recently when Patrick Mire took on the challenge in *Dirty Rice*. Based on his own original screenplay, the film deals with the return of a young Cajun man to his family rice farm after learning about the wide world. There he faces the kinds of decisions that are the stuff of real-life dilemmas for many young Cajuns today who have to negotiate a place for themselves between the pressures of the past and those of the future. And again, it is a story about the preservation of the community and of social and culture values.

The image of the Cajuns in film is obviously faulty. Three factors could help rectify this image problem. One involves developing an informed public in South Louisiana. Sometimes in our haste to entertain visitors, we create a poor long-term impression, representing ourselves as carefree party animals interested in little more than "laissez le bon temps rouler." Another involves telling our own stories from the inside. We have many interesting stories and many great storytellers. And we know the subtleties from the stereotypes. We just need to start developing them ourselves. Still

another involves working more closely with outside film makers to provide accurate information about ourselves. It is unlikely that film makers who have presented this area poorly in the past did so because they had it in for us. In most cases, any errors they may have made were based on misunderstandings and misinformation, coupled with a desire for the sensational. We should not neglect to consider the impact of these films on our cultural and social ecology. The state's film commission is in a position to do more than recruit film projects wholesale. We try to entice film crews to come to Louisiana because they spend lots of money on hotels, meals and production support. But do we really want to be in the movies at any cost?

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