Originality and Evolution in Cajun Music
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Recently, Wade Falcon asked me to listen to the recordings of Joseph and Cléoma Falcon and the Breaux Brothers that he has been compiling as part of a book project on his family's musical legacy. I was stunned by, among other things, the extent to which the Falcons and the Breauxs had recorded the first versions of songs that later became Cajun music classics, typically attached to other musicians. For example, the Falcon's "Poche Town" sounds like Shirley Bergeron's "Valse de la belle." They were the first to record a version of "Madame Sosthène," which most would associate with Lawrence Walker, Aldus Roger or Belton Richard. Their "La valse Crowley" sounds like "La valse de Eunice," typically associated with Maurice Berzas.

Surprisingly, their "Ne buvez plus jamais" is obviously a version of "J'ai été-z-au bal," one of Iry Lejeune's signature songs, including the opening lines

J'ai été au bal hier au soir, je m'ai tout habillé en noir
J'ai fait serment de pus reboire pour courtiser les filles

which are virtually identical to the opening of Iry's second verse

J'ai été-z-au bal hier au soir, alle était tout habillée en noir
Je fais serment de jamais reboire pour courtiser la fille

I say this is surprising given Iry LeJeune's status as one of Cajun music's most accomplished (and most imitated) oral poets. But Iry's lyrics are noticeably different, focusing more tightly on the experience of going to the dance, including his switching of the roles and his resolution in that second verse. In the Falcon's version, it is the narrator who appears to be in mourning, dressed in black and promising to never drink again when courting. And the resolution of that verse expresses his contrition and acceptance of responsibility for his errors:

Moi, je connais, mais oui, nègre, j'ai pas bien fait avec moi
Mais tout je te demande, mais oui, chère, excuse-moi pour cette fois

In Iry's version, his love interest is the one dressed in black, and then in his resolution, she seems to be once again available, indicated by her blue dress:

J'ai été-z-au bal à soir, alle est tout habillée en bleu
C'est ça l'habit que moi, j'aime pour courtiser ma belle

In the last verses of each version, both narrators end up alone and loveless, nevertheless.

Just as surprising, their "Aimer et perdre" sounds like Nathan Abshire's "Tit monde," and the lyrics include two instances of "Oh, cher tit monde…" Their "La valse des pins" is an early version of "Bayou Teche" and their "Le blues du petit

chien," a confluence of the traditional blues song "Let Me Be Your Little Dog" (whose lyrics eventually found their way into later versions of "Matchbox Blues") is apparently a version of "Pinegrove Blues," both signature Abshire songs. In the first case, "La valse des pins" includes the lyrics:

> J'ai prié jour et nuit pour t'avoir
> Pour t'avoir, chère tite fille, j'ai pas pu

and

> J'ai pleuré, j'ai prié jour et nuit
> Pour t'avoir, tes tits yeux, tits yeux noirs

anticipating Abshire's

> J'ai roulé, j'ai prié pour t'avoir, chère
> Pour t'avoir avec moi à la maison

Compare the second verse of "Le blues du petit chien"

> Ooooh, ayoù t'as resté hier au soir
> Ooooh, ayoù t'as resté hier au soir
> T'as tes cheveux tout mêlés
> Et ton linge te fait pas bien

with the following lines from Abshire's "Pinegrove Blues:"

> Hé négresse
> (Quoi tu veux encore?)
> Ayoù toi, t'as passé hier au soir, ma négresse?
> (J'ai passé dans la barrière. J'étais après me sauver du gros nègre.)
> T'as revenu à ce matin. Ta robe était toute déchirée.

In the face of this evidence, I found myself faced with a question: To what extent is the status of the generally acknowledged oral poets of post-World War II Cajun music challenged by the fact that their lyrics (and melodies) are often obviously derived from earlier sources? An interesting and important clue to a constructive resolution came from the same sources that Wade Falcon so generously shared with me. According to Wade Falcon, during an interview from the 1960s, Joe Falcon was asked how many of the songs he recorded were original to him. He could have claimed them all; who would have known better? But he answered, "Only one." The one entitled, "Went to Texas," according to him. This is the song that eventually came to be called "Voyage d'amour" or "My True Love," in the Balfa Brothers' well-known version, though the lyrics are only faintly similar. All the others, he explained, were songs that were being played by other musicians in the community, and they recorded their own versions of them. So, they were doing

what others had undoubtedly done before and what still others continued doing later. Were any of these oral poets and musicians committing the mortal sin of plagiarism? It would appear from the ways they spoke of what they did – "I made that song" – that they didn't see it that way. Was there something else going on? An even older tradition harking back to the very emergence of literary forms in the Middle Ages may provide some hints.

For example, the first written version of the "Chanson de Roland," one of France's founding literary texts, appeared sometime toward the end of the 11th century, just over 300 years after the fateful battle at Roncevaux Pass, which occurred in 778 A.D. during Charlemagne's retreat from Spain. The oldest extant text was a rather short version of about 4000 verses compared to later versions that developed between the 11th century and the 15th century. The story apparently evolved from scant oral origins. By the time of its initial appearance in print around 1100 A.D., what was first reported in the historical annals as a brief skirmish between the Saracens and Charlemagne's rearguard had become a heroic epic poem used to rouse nationalistic and religious fervor and recruit troops during the Crusades. The shaping process occurred over a period of time between the actual events and the emergence of the eventual written version of the story. This period of time was necessary to sculpt the story to give it the shape it would need to function as it must. The last medieval manuscript of the "Chanson de Roland" was so extended and amplified that it has more than double the number of verses of the earliest version. (Ancelet and Bourdessoule, 2000)

For another example, the Arthurian epic cycle evolved over a period of time as well. Arthur was first mentioned vaguely by early historians. Gildas in *On the Ruin of Britain* (which was about the 6th century Saxon invasion) mentions a warlord at the Battle of Badon (Mount Badon, 500-518 A.D.) In the 9th century, Nennius in *History of the Britons* mentions Arthur as the victor at that Battle of Badon, and later winning a battle at Guinnon with the Blessed Virgin Mary's emblem on his arms. Arthur is also mentioned by William of Brittany in the *Legend of St. Goeznovius* (c. 1019), in which he is described as a warrior king who controlled the Saxons after Vortigern had let them in. The story was further developed and expanded by Geoffrey of Monmouth in *History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1136) in which stories about Arthur are gathered in one account and "improved," as well as Christianized (serpents become dragons, etc.). This Arthurian story is set in the troubled 5th century (425-75). Arthur again appears in the late medieval romances of many writers, including Wace (1155) who first mentioned the Round Table; Chrétien de Troyes (c. 1160-1180) who worked in Perceval and the Grail story (based on the Fisher King legends and resurrection myths), Camelot and Lancelot, the "chevalier de la charrette" who fell in love with Guinivere, Arthur's queen; and Wolfgang von Eschenbach who especially further the developed the Parsival story (c. 1210). In the 15th century, Mallory produced what is generally considered the definitive form of the story in his *Le morte d'Arthur*, resetting it in the equally troubled 12th century immediately following the more recent Norman invasion. Since then, several notable writers from Edmund Spenser, Ben Johnson, John Dryden, and Alfred Tennyson addressed various aspects of the story adding their own spins. In the early 20th century, with England once again on the ropes during the world wars, T. H. White

produced a new full-blown version. Like his acknowledged model, Mallory, he retells the Arthurian cycle in four volumes eventually published together as *The Once and Future King* (1939), again resetting the story, this time in the High Middle Ages among Saxons and Normans, and reinventing it with wit and humor, as well as constant references to modern times.

None of these retellings were considered plagiarisms. In fact, during the Middle Ages, as written tradition was evolving from oral tradition, certain story cycles called "matters" were considered appropriate for the development of literature. It was expected that serious writers would address these important "matters," recycling, adding to and improving the stories.

In *No Direction Home,* Martin Scorcese's 2005 documentary on Bob Dylan, legendary folk singer Pete Seeger described a similar situation in the American folk music community as late as the 1960s:

> The moment I became acquainted with old songs, I realized people were always changing them… Think of it as an age-old process. It's been going on for thousands of years. People take old songs, change them a little, add to them, adopt them for new people. It happens in every other field. Lawyers change old laws to fit new citizens. So, I'm one in this long chain, and so are millions of other musicians.

John Cohen, of the New Lost City Ramblers, seconded this notion:

> Traditional songs gave us ideas and attitudes about life that we could borrow from, that you could build your songs on.

In fact, Dylan has continued to use this strategy to produce his new versions of such blues classics as Hambone Willie Newbern's "Rollin' and Tumblin'" (1929) with eleven original verses without the hummed chorus and a truncated instrumental line (*Modern Times,* 2006), compared to Newbern's original two verses.

Compare Newbern's version:

And I rolled and I tumbled and I cried the whole night long
And I rolled and I tumbled and I cried the whole night long
And I rose this mornin' mama and I didn't know right from wrong ...

And I fold my arms lord and I walked away
And I fold my arms lord and I walked away
Said "that's all right sweet mama your trouble gon' come someday"

The song was covered numerous times, including Muddy Waters' classic version from 1950, which had four verses and a hummed chorus.

Waters' version:

Well, I rolled and I tumbled, cried the whole night long
Well, I rolled and I tumbled, cried the whole night long
Well, I woke up this mornin', didn't know right from wrong

Well, I told my baby, before I left that town
Well, I told my baby, before I left that town
Well, don't you let nobody, tear my barrelhouse down

Well, ahh, mmm-hmmm, owww, oww ooo, aww, oww, oh
Aaa, mmm-hmmm, oww, oh oh oh owww, oww ooo, aww, oww, oh

Well, if the river was whiskey, and I was a divin' duck
Well, if the river was whiskey, and I was a divin' duck
Well, I would dive to the bottom, never would I come up

Well, I could a had a religion, this bad old thing instead
Well, I could a had a religion, this bad old thing instead
Well, all whiskey and women, would not let me pray

Compare Dylan's:

I rolled and I tumbled, I cried the whole night long
I rolled and I tumbled, I cried the whole night long
Woke up this mornin', I must have bet my money wrong

I got troubles so hard, I can't stand the strain
I got troubles so hard, I can't stand the strain
Some young lazy slut has charmed away my brains

The landscape is glowin', gleamin' in the golden light of day
The landscape is glowin', gleamin' in the golden light of day
I ain't holding nothin' back now, I ain't standin' in anybody's way

Well, I did all I know just to keep you off my mind
Well, I did all I know just to keep you off my mind
Well, I paid and I paid and my sufferin' heart is always on the line

Well, I get up in the dawn and I go down and lay in the shade
I get up in the dawn and I go down and lay in the shade
I ain't nobody's house boy, I ain't nobody's well trained maid

I'm flat out spent, this woman been drivin' me to tears
I'm flat out spent, this woman been drivin' me to tears
This woman so crazy, I swear I ain't gonna touch on another one for years

Well, the warm weather is comin' and the buds are on the vine

The warm weather is comin' and the buds are on the vine
Ain't nothing so depressing as trying to satisfy this woman of mine

I got up this mornin', saw the rising sun return
Well, I got up this mornin', saw the rising sun return
Sooner or later, you too shall burn

The night's filled with shadows, the years are filled with early doom
The night's filled with shadows, the years are filled with early doom
I've been conjuring up all these long dead souls from their crumblin' tombs

Let's forgive each other darlin', let's go down to the greenwood glen
Let's forgive each other darlin', let's go down to the greenwood glen
Let's put our heads together, let's put old matters to an end

Now I rolled and I tumbled and I cried the whole night long
Ah, I rolled and I tumbled and I cried the whole night long
I woke up this morning, I think I must be traveling wrong

Getting back to the issue of Cajun music in the 20th century, it would appear that a similar strategy was in play in what was in many ways the end of a pre-literate society. Recording songs beginning in 1928 amounted to capturing them in a way similar to what writing would have done, had any of those musicians might have done had they been able to write what they were singing. In addition, there are a number of cases that indicate that at least some of the songs that were been recorded then were being improvised and adapted from earlier ballad and folksong tradition. For one thing, a number of Louisiana French ballads and folksongs are clearly translations and transformations of English-language songs. Lanese Vincent and Sidney Richard's "J'ai marié un ouvrier," recorded by Alan Lomax in 1934, is a version of The Anglo-American ballad "The House Carpenter's Wife." Caesar Vincent's "Travailler, c'est trop dur," recorded by Harry Oster in 1957, which was borrowed and tweaked by contemporary Louisiana French musicians such as Zachary Richard and Michael Doucet, whose versions were eventually covered by a host of popular singers, from Julien Clerc to Alpha Blondy, appears itself, on further scrutiny, to be at least partially related to a version of an Anglo-Appalachian song "Working's Too Hard" (as heard in a version recorded by Boyd Asher). Compare:

Travailler, c'est trop dur et voler, c'est pas beau
Passer demander la charité, c'est quelque chose je veux pas faire

and

Oh, working's too hard, boys, and begging's too poor
If I go to stealing, to the workhouse I'll go

Another passage from Asher's song resembles lines from D.L. Menard's "La porte d'en arrière," which is also about rambling around and ending up in jail. Compare:

When I have money, friends all around
When I've no money, no friends to be found

and

J'ai eu un tas d'amis quand j'avais de l'argent.
Asteur j'ai pus d'argent, mais ils voulont pus me voir.

Additionally, what had been longer songs in previous unaccompanied Louisiana French tradition were being pressed into service to become dance music lyrics. In one case that appears to expose the process, John Bertrand crammed most of the lyrics of the well- known French folksong, "La fille du géolier" into a three-minute waltz (c. 1930). Most performers realized that longer ballad lyrics needed to be shortened and intensified to fit into the recently emerging tradition. For example, Dennis McGee seems to have drawn from French *malmariée* song tradition to improvise his "Jeunes gens compagnards" (1929). Later Shirley Ray Bergeron's "Valse de la belle" (1962) evoked French folksongs about a suitor being rebuffed by a girl who is too young to court.

So, these storylines seem to have been in the air, as Joe Falcon honestly admitted in his interview. The first generation of Cajun musicians to be recorded apparently drew on this existing corpus of material, transforming ballads and folksongs into dance music lyrics. Subsequent generations apparently continued to do the same thing, recycling, adding to, and "improving" those songs recorded before World War II to eventually produce their own versions. These more recent versions ended up becoming what we consider today to be classics by the likes of Nathan Abshire, Iry LeJeune, Austin Pitre, Lawrence Walker, Aldus Roger, and Belton Richard. Not plagiarisms, but rather the results of a long-established process that these musicians inherited from much earlier times, stretching all the way back to the transition from orality to literature, when literary forms and notions of authorship were flexible and cumulative. Social anthropologist Jack Goody has written extensively (1987) on the mutability of orality and oral tradition and the subsequent "stability" that replaces it with the advent of literacy and of media recording devices. That sort of flexibility seems to have lasted well into the 20th century in Louisiana French tradition.

When commercial companies began to record Cajun music in 1928, there was considerable confusion concerning copyrights and originality. In many cases, the first musician to record a traditional song copyrighted it as his own, though many other musicians had been playing it for generations. Sometimes, songs may have even been previously recorded, as is the case with the version of "Jolie Blonde" that Harry Choates claimed in the late 1940s, despite the fact that it had been first recorded by the Breaux Brothers in 1929. In other cases, songs that had been known and recorded by one title were recorded and claimed under other titles, creating a tangle of overlapping claims. While the Breaux Brothers attached one set of lyrics to

the tune associated with "Jolie Blonde" in their home base in the Rayne/Crowley area, the Lejeune clan from the Pointe Noire area attached a different set of lyrics to the same tune and called it "La fille de la veuve." Angelas Lejeune's "Valse de la Pointe Noire" from the 1930s has been recorded and claimed by many since then, including Nathan Abshire and Dallas Roy as "La valse de Kaplan." The same tune structure was changed from 3/4 time to 4/4 time to produce the "High Point Two Step." In some cases, musicians who accepted flat rate payments from record producers found that they had sold their rights to the songs, whether they were original or not, and whether they meant to or not. In many of these cases, the songs were from traditional sources anyway; they were old when those who claimed them were in diapers. One of the problems hidden in this situation is that, if a song is registered as traditional, there are no songwriter's or publisher's royalties to be paid, so the recording company simply keeps that percentage and makes more profit, and the song wasn't theirs either. This has led many musicians and publishers to make claims of originality that they had to know were not true.

Other times, motives seem less clear. During a dispute over song rights in 1995, record producer Eddie Shuler infamously produced a contract dated 1943 for a song he refers to as "Crowley Waltz," first recorded by the Hackberry Ramblers in 1935 (Bb B-2173), now more commonly known by the title "La valse de la belle," as recorded in the early 1950s by Shirley and Alphé Bergeron for Lanor Records. Shuler's documentation refers to a variant title, "Walker's Waltz." I suspect this was from "Breakdown de la Louisiane," a 1929 recording by the Walker Brothers (of whom young Lawrence Walker was a member) with a similar tune. That in itself would predate the 1943 date Shuler gives it in his contract. Moreover, this contract dated 1943 includes a zip code. This is remarkable, of course, since zip codes were not established by the U.S. Postal Service until 1963.

Unfortunately, the big publishing/licensing concerns, BMI and ASCAP, don't do a good job of sorting out these conflicting claims, as can be discovered by a simple search of just about any common title in the Cajun music repertoire, which one will find can be claimed by numerous performers. And the issue is even more complex, since there are lots of songs that are clearly and demonstrably the result of individual creation, such as those of the contemporary generation of performing songwriters, including Zachary Richard, Wayne Toups, Steve Riley, David Greely, Kristi Guillory, Blake Miller, Louis Michot, and Jourdan Thibodeaux, as well as those written by Pierre Varmon Daigle for Paul Daigle. Pee Wee Trahan sat down one day not so long ago and wrote "Lache pas la patate." Jean Arceneaux pulled over into the Mowata Store parking lot one night on his way back home from Eunice and wrote "Tard dans la vie." So, there is a considerable history of original composition. But there has also been a lot of borrowing and recycling, some of which is part of an ancient strategy of oral tradition, and some of which is indeed motivated by baser instincts. It is often difficult to sort all of this out, but eventually, one would think, it might be a good idea.

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