

THE NEW GENERATION OF CAJUN MUSICIANS

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CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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Cajun music is a staple in southern Louisiana. It is not the blues and jazz of New Orleans or the Zydeco washboards and accordions of Opelousas. It is music that was brought to the swamps and bayous of Louisiana by the Acadians, the white descendants that were forced from Nova Scotia in the Great Expulsion in the 1700s.¹ When they moved to Louisiana they expanded on this music that has become a part of life in what is called Cajun Country – the 22 parishes that are identified as the Heart of Acadiana. Among other factors, educational and cultural efforts such as the formation of CODOFIL in 1968 by the Louisiana legislature have seen the last three decades as a new generation for the Cajun heritage. It is thanks to these efforts that there is a new generation of Cajun musicians that are now coming of age. What this means for the area, that is fiercely traditional, is Cajun music is now being revered. Music that has been handed down from generation to generation is being recognized as the unique genre it is without compromising the original integrity of the music – the efforts of CODOFIL seen in this new generation of musicians that were some of the first participants of the French Immersion Program put in place in the public school system in south Louisiana.

¹ “Expulsion of the Acadians.” *Chronicles of America*. Accessed March 25, 2015. http://www.chronicsofamerica.com/new-france/expulsion_of_the_acadians.htm

Lafayette, Louisiana is called the “Heart of Acadiana,” and this, as well as surrounding parishes, is where Cajun music is played live – in local clubs, restaurants, and festivals. Travel a short distance from Lafayette to Opelousas, Mamou, New Iberia, Breaux Bridge, Abbeville, or Grand Coteau to find live Cajun music playing virtually every weekend. It is here we can see the efforts that were – and still are put into preserving the Acadian and French heritage. Educators, government workers, and members of the Cajun community have shared the responsibility of preserving the Cajun heritage.

Introduction

Cajun Country "...includes the 22 contiguous parishes in southwest Louisiana that were identified as the heart of Acadiana by Louisiana House Concurrent Resolution 496 in 1971...bounded by the Gulf of Mexico to the south and Texas to the west. The parishes extend unevenly into the central area of Louisiana where Protestant populace resides. The lower eastern border is the transition area into New Orleans. Baton Rouge marks the upper eastern border. The region covers 14,975 miles, roughly one-third of the state.²

For decades the Cajun music of south Louisiana was confined to the bayou country itself. Lafayette, Louisiana is known as "The Heart of Cajun Country," where the locals put their music and food at the forefront of every occasion. It is no coincidence that the saying, "*Laissez les bon temp rouler,*" – let the good times roll – is a common phrase in Cajun Country that has become the catch phrase for its people. There was a time however, when the Cajun ethnicity and history was in danger of being lost forever, and efforts to prevent this from happening were met with the help of the Louisiana legislature in the formation of CODOFIL.

Throughout this paper we will discuss the differences between generations in the Cajun community with regard to cultural identification through music, as well as the new generation of Cajun musicians that have been emerging over the past 30 years. This generation includes young men and women who bring a unique flavor to the Cajun music gumbo and are determined to keep this tradition alive. We will see how the work of CODOFIL, which filtered down through the public schools, helped this newest generation of Cajun musicians ensure the music lives on, along with their promise for the future of Cajun music since their music is a reflection of the Cajun family, customs, and language. Lastly, in order to have a better understanding and appreciation for the genre

² Clarke, Clifford J., "Assimilationist Views of an Ethnic Region: The Cajun French Experience in Southwest Louisiana," *Social Science Quarterly*, University of Texas Press.

that is Cajun music, there is one aspect of the music that needs to be understood from the outset: Cajun music and Zydeco music are not the same kind of music. In order to understand what has happened over the years in the Cajun culture, it is necessary to look back into the history of what caused this near demise of the inhabitants of the bayou country.

CODOFIL

Within the last 40 years the Cajun culture has re-emerged from near extinction. The Louisiana Constitution of 1921 forbade the teaching and speaking of French in the public school system. It was thought by some legislators of the state that bilingualism would be a detriment to the economy of the state. When literacy rates in Louisiana were compared "...between the French-speaking region and the rest of the state, they asserted that the beginnings of the systems of education among French speakers in Louisiana were retarded due to the natural differences in language between them and the English speakers in the rest of the United States"³ With this denial the ethnic ties to past generations quickly unraveled. The Cajun heritage was in dire straights and being pushed to the back-burner – and eventually out the back door. This attempt of Americanization of non-Anglo-Saxon ethnicities was abandoned in the late 1960s when there was a reversal in sentiment to retain local cultures. The dilemma that presented itself was how to achieve the goal of resurrection of the heritage. Interestingly, in 1967, in order to preserve the Cajun culture and bring it back to the newer generations, the state legislature stepped in again to correct their mistake of abandoning the culture and ethnicity of their people in the formation of CODOFIL – the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana. This action and other measures have been paramount in preserving the Cajun heritage, including the unique brand of music from this area of our country.⁴ More specifically, CODOFIL was created in order to,

³ Natsis, James J., "Legislation and Language: The Politics of Speaking French in Louisiana," *The French Review*, Vol. 73, No. 2, (Dec. 1999) 325-331.

⁴ Sexton, Rocky L., "Too Loud, Too Wild? Negotiating Cajun Cultural Representations," *Ethnology*, Vol 50, No 2, Spring 2011, 117-134.

“...further the preservation and utilization of the French language and culture of Louisiana by strengthening its position in the public school of the State, and [to provide] requirements that the culture and history of French populations in Louisiana and elsewhere in the Americas, shall be taught for a sequence of years in the public elementary and high school systems of the State.”⁵

Bertha Bernard, a former assistant to several mayors in Lafayette, says one of the first steps taken by the government was “Recruiting foreign teachers from France to come to Louisiana to teach French. In turn, France recruited military personnel and instead of doing two years in the military they could come to Louisiana and teach French.” Bernard says, “The legislature approved the funding for CODOFIL, and James Domengeaux was appointed as the leader of the organization. It was his genius that helped preserve our culture.”⁶ As the chairman of CODOFIL, Domengeaux was given carte blanche – he was to do whatever he deemed necessary to bring back what had been tossed aside. The legislature had specific proclamations which included the following:

- a. foreseeing the teaching of French in the first 5 years of elementary school, and three years in high school (Act 408);
- b. requiring that universities and colleges produce qualified teachers in elementary French (Act 458);
- c. recognizing the French language as official and authorizing publications of legal notices in French (Act 256); and
- d. authorizing the establishment of a nonprofit French-language television station (Act 458).⁷

Bernard tells us, “Participants in the program came from France, Belgium, and Quebec. It was a government assisted program, and CODOFIL was under the auspices of the Louisiana Department of Education.” She goes on to say, “Today, with the CODOFIL program and French Immersion in schools, and the Cajun festivals – like

⁵ Hebert, Julie E., “Identifying Cajun Identity: Cajun Assimilation and the Revitalization of Cajun Culture,” Loyola University, New Orleans. <http://www.chn.loyno.edu/>

⁶ Bertha Bernard, interview by K. Herrick, Rodrigue Gallery, March 25, 2015.

⁷ Natsis, James J., “Legislation and Language: The Politics of Speaking French in Louisiana,” *The French Review*, Vol. 73, No. 2, (Dec. 1999) 325-331.

Festival Acadiane, and Festival International de Louisiana – and the young people forming Cajun bands, we have instilled a pride of our French heritage in our children. There is no longer the stigma or shame of being a Cajun – there is pride in our heritage today.”⁸ Bernard’s children are an example of what happened with the Cajun culture before and after CODOFIL. Her two grown daughters were never taught French in the household – they always spoke English. In contrast, her grandchildren were participants in the French Immersion program in public schools, her grandson being in the inaugural class. With the advent of CODOFIL the Cajun heritage has been able to show Cajun music for what it is – a reflection of their deepest feelings and expressions of life and worth preserving for future generations.

⁸ Bertha Bernard, interview by K. Herrick, Rodrigue Gallery, March 25, 2015.

The Great Expulsion

The Cajun culture is like no other, and Cajun music is just as diverse as its culture. In order to understand what makes Cajun music, well Cajun music, it is necessary to understand the heritage of the culture and how it came to present day. This particular brand of music has been passed down over hundreds of years and several generations. Yet it is continually revered and passed down as if it is something precious to be treasured. “Cajun music has been one of the primary forces behind this cultural resurgence, giving Cajuns a focus for movement to recover pride in Cajun culture, to maintain the distinctiveness of Cajun culture while partially assimilating, and to undo years of social and political hostility against Cajuns in Louisiana.”⁹

The heritage of the original Acadians is what has defined the music as well as preserving the music. The ancestors of present day Cajuns were part of the Expulsion of the Acadians – also known as the Great Upheaval, the Great Expulsion, or Le Grand Derangement. This group of Acadian ancestors refused to take an oath of loyalty to Britain. The removal enforced by the British between 1755 and 1764, removed the Acadians from present day Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island – an area known as Acadia. The first group of expulsions went to various British colonies, while the second group of expulsions migrated to Louisiana because it was still French territory at that particular time.¹⁰ Most of the Acadians did not migrate to the area on

⁹ Mattern, Mark, “Cajun Music, Cultural Revival: Theorizing Political Action in Popular Music,” Rutgers University, 1998.

¹⁰ Lennox, Jeffers, “Nova Scotia Lost and Found: The Acadian Boundary Negotiation and Imperial Envisioning, 1750 – 1755,” *Acadiensis*, Vol. XL, No. 2, Summer/Autumn 2011.

their own. Many were loaded into cattle barges and brought down the coast, discarding the sick and dying along the way into the swamps and marshes of Louisiana.¹¹

The Acadians were wanted out of British territory because they wanted to continue to practice the Catholic faith which had been made illegal by the British rule in Canada. They had lived in Nova Scotia since the founding of Port-Royal in 1604. They built their community around the Bay of Fundy and made a vibrant and fruitful life. Since they were left alone by England and France, the people of Acadia grew independent from both countries. In 1755 the Acadians were pressed to make an unqualified oath to England. The Acadians refused to relinquish their church and their lifestyle, so the decision was made; thus the exile from their homeland.¹² Some of the members of Napoleon's army stayed after the war and made rural south Louisiana their home – even though they were of a different French speaking culture. While this group of French was not Acadian, their dialects merged and became what is called Cajun dialect today.¹³ They settled into the mosquito-infested swamps, bayous, and prairies that no one else wanted. With their strange sounding dialect they were frequently rejected by other French already living in Louisiana. Poor, frequently illiterate, with a language and culture that set them apart from others in the state, the Acadians married their own and kept to themselves.

The culture and heritage was passed down from generation to generation in those early days. Isolated, relatively poor and powerless, and bound together by their

¹¹ "Expulsion of the Acadians." *Chronicles of America*. Accessed March 25, 2015.
http://www.chronicsofamerica.com/new-france/expulsion_of_the_acadians.htm

¹² "The Deportation of the Acadians," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Accessed April 25, 2015.
<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/the-deportation-of-the-acadians-feature/>

¹³ Dormon, James, "Louisiana's Cajuns: French Acadians of the South," *American and the Americas*, History Today Press.

circumstances, this group of people were determined to preserve their lifestyle – which included their own version of the French language, their Catholic religion, their traditional ways, and their identity as a group.¹⁴ This pattern continued after the Civil War, and while the South tried to recover from a devastated economy, the Acadians carried on as they always had – living off the land and surviving with meager amenities. Life was hard working in the fields and swamps and relaxation came from time to time in the form of a *bal de masion* – a house dance – as a way to get together and socialize. This was a time for adults. Children were encouraged to go to sleep for the evening; consequently these dances were called a *fais do-do* which means ‘go to sleep.’¹⁵ Cajun music was social music, and the music at these dances in the early days were original songs, written by the people and what their new life was like in the new world. The music itself was simple, but was able to reflect the harshness of life in the bayou. Over time they began to marry non-Acadians and diversified their culture. Non-Acadian spouses learned the language and were absorbed into the population that came to be known as Cajun.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hobbs, Jim, “Introduction to Cajun, Louisiana, Creole & Zydeco Music.”
<http://www.loyno.edu/~hobbs/cca/introduction.html>

¹⁶ Ibid.

Origin of the Cajuns

The word *Cajun* is derived from the French word *Acadien* (which refers to the French settlers of Nova Scotia in the 1600s), and in local parlance is pronounced *Kay-jun* – as most non-French speakers say – which was hard for the Americans to pronounce given how they tended to mispronounce French words. The word eventually became pronounced the way it is said today – and they were seen as “...poor and unambitious, illiterate and unlearned, superstitious, crude; a folk dominated by primitive customs, beliefs, and practices.”¹⁷ While this description did not offend the Cajuns, because they were aware of their differences, it did manage to keep them separated from the rest of the population in the area. We are told “The very word *Cajun* came to mark the separation of the groups; to function as an ethnic boundary marker between the increasingly dominant Anglo-Americans (and those who shared their values) and the minority *Cajuns* in the interior reaches of their south Louisiana domain. An element of class division, then, powerfully influenced the advent of the ethnic Cajuns.”¹⁸

With the advent of the Civil War, a war which the Cajuns wanted no part of, they became more isolated. Few of the Cajuns enlisted in the Confederate army – few owned slaves and most did not care for the treatment they got from the upper crust Anglos. Some were drafted and many deserted. When the Union army showed up the Cajuns welcomed them, but the Union’s plan only included destruction of the South – nothing

¹⁷ Dormon, James, “Louisiana’s Cajuns: French Acadians of the South,” *American and the Americas*, History Today Press.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

else. As a result, independence and wariness of the government and its officials fueled the distrust and contempt they felt toward centralized authority.¹⁹

After the Civil War ended, the Cajuns found themselves dealing with a post-war South. The abolition of slavery left freed black men competing in their territory. Both were poor and outcasts to a degree, and the Cajun response to that was to keep the status quo. When oil was discovered in Louisiana at the turn of the century, the area was overcome with outsiders who took a negative view of the Cajuns. As mentioned earlier, the Cajuns had kept themselves separate from other communities in the rural South, both before and after the war, and since their preferred language was French, communication with the newcomers to the state was tenuous at best. Americanization of the non-Anglo-Saxon ethnic groups was the order of the day, and Cajuns found themselves, or rather their children, being punished for speaking Cajun French. If they spoke French in school, they were "...sent home...to write 200 times, 'I must not speak French on the school grounds!'"²⁰ In an effort to destroy their culture and force the Cajuns conform to American values, making English the prominent language, the French language was stricken from the education system of Louisiana. This was the catalyst that led to the development into the language that gave the Acadians a 'living quality' to their language by base creativity in absolute form.

There was an effort to Americanize the French in Louisiana, and "...the state officially abolished the French language instruction the schools, and local school

¹⁹ "Brief History of the Cajun People," *The George Rodrigue Foundation*.
www.georgerodriguefoundation.org
Accessed April 5, 2015.

²⁰ Natsis, James J., "Legislation and Language: The Politics of Speaking French in Louisiana," *The French Review*, Vol. 73, No. 2, (Dec. 1999), 325-331.

authorities followed by forbidding the speaking of French at school; Cajun ethnic identity was seriously threatened. Not only their language, but their very culture – their music, their folk beliefs and practices – came to be viewed by outsiders (and sometimes by the Cajuns themselves, specially the younger generations) as inferior, primitive, fustic; quaint but essentially backward and benighted.”²¹

A changing and increasingly modern world eroded the base of Cajun ethnicity. Two world wars and technological advancements meant that the isolated world of the Cajuns was quickly coming to an end. Speaking English in school allowed the Cajun school-age children the opportunity to seek employment outside of the bayou, go to college, or even join the military – in these instances French was rarely used. It gave them a chance to interact with outsiders and they became less isolated. This does not mean the Cajun French language vanished. From all accounts children would learn English in school and still spoke French at home. What it means is, as an English educated generation matured, Cajun French was not being passed down to younger generations, and many of the youth found their ancestral roots embarrassing. The Cajun traditions were falling by the wayside; their unique blend of music included. “Cajun music...featuring a simple harmonic and rhythmic structure and sentimental lyrics in French, was considered old-fashioned, even embarrassing. In short, the entire ethnic culture was threatened with extinction, its only remaining practitioners being the older, still isolated, unacculturated fold of rural south Louisiana.”²² Despite the attempts made to Americanize,

²¹ Ibid.

²² Dormon, James, “Louisiana’s Cajuns: French Acadians of the South,” *American and the Americas*, History Today Press.

“The Cajuns remained largely un-Americanized until U.S. involvement in World War II. Swept up in the period’s intense patriotism, Cajuns supported the massive war effort. In doing so Cajun GIs experienced a world much larger than the one back in Acadiana, while loved ones on the home front pulled together to do their part for victory. The war experience coupled with educational and housing programs offered to returning veterans opened up a vast new world of opportunities...to leave the farms, get a good job, earn a decent wage, build a nice house.”²³

As World War II ensued, and the inhabitants of southern Louisiana left for war, the Cajun soldiers stationed in France found that their language and their culture – the one they had been told to set aside – were increasingly valuable in the role of interpreters. These soldiers also saw, that in Europe, French was seen as a language of prestige. After the war, when these soldiers returned home, they reveled in their culture and shared their experiences and discovery of the prominence of their culture. In 1955 a bicentennial was observed of the Acadian exile. It was a stepping stone to reviving Cajun ethnicity – which included their unique brand of music. It took over 20 years, but finally “In 1967, the Louisiana legislature took action by passing Senate Resolution 64, which endorsed a closer relationship with Canada and its provinces. This provided the legal and inspirational basis for the passing of Legislative Act 409 the following year by the State of Louisiana, which called for the creation of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL), with former US Congressman James Domengeaux as its chairman.”²⁴

As discussed earlier, CODOFIL was developed to bring back the traditions and the culture of the Cajun people. There had been an Americanization of the Cajuns, and the exclusively French speaking communities of south Louisiana were gone. The

²³ Bernard, Shane K., and LaBorde Judy, “The Link Between the Acadians and Cajun Culture,” *Genetics and Louisiana Families*, LSU Health Sciences Center

²⁴ Natsis, James J., “Legislation and Language: The Politics of Speaking French in Louisiana,” *The French Review*, Vol. 73, No. 2, (Dec. 1999), 325-331.

communities were more modern and mainstream. The result was widespread and the decline of primarily French speaking Cajuns was a main focus in the formation of CODOFIL. The repression of the French language and culture was to become a thing of the past. CODOFIL was to “Do any and all things necessary to accomplish the development, utilization, and preservation of the French language as found in Louisiana for the cultural, economic, touristic benefit of the state.”²⁵ Domengeaux became president of CODOFIL in 1968 and remained in that position until his death 20 years later. His determination to align the Cajun culture with the importance of their language and music was instrumental in the success of CODOFIL. “Domengeaux’s efforts were not limited to the classroom...CODOFIL organized a first Tribute to Cajun Music festival in 1974 with a concert designed to present a historical overview of Cajun music from its origins to modern styles.”²⁶ For the Cajuns, their version of the French language had always been a factor in bonding them together. Through Domengeaux’s leadership, the Cajun culture reemerged, and with this reemergence came a pride for the way of life in south Louisiana.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ancelet, Barry J., “Cajun Music,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Bill Malone (University of North Carolina Press 2014), 39-42.

What makes music Cajun?

Cajun music is a blend of several elements of cultures – Native American, Scotch-Irish, Spanish, German, Anglo-American, Afro-Caribbean, and western French folk. The Acadians that came to Louisiana from Canada passed their music down through generations and when they moved into the swamps of Louisiana they added some of the other ethnic groups that surrounded them.²⁷ The turn of the 20th century saw a formative development in Louisiana French music. While the fiddle was a prominent instrument, the accordion became the new sound for Cajun music. Since there was a limited number of notes and keys that were available on the accordion, the music itself was simple. It was not uncommon to have a song fade away if it could not be played on the accordion. As a result, having fiddles playing duets with the accordion or simply playing a percussive line below the melody became the norm.

The attempt to Americanize the Cajuns and their culture was also met with an attempt to Americanize their music.

The slick programming on radio (and later on television) inadvertently forced the comparatively unpolished traditional sounds underground. In reality, Cajun music was considered unpolished, but there were still strains of traditional music that persisted. The accordion was no longer as popular since it was unavailable from Germany and the style of music had changed. In the late 1940's, musician Iry Lejeune recorded *La Valse du Pont d'Amour* in turn-of-the-century Louisiana style and French.²⁸

With the success and popularity of this record, Lejeune became a major player in the revival of Cajun music. Dance halls playing traditional Cajun tunes were flooded with patrons, accordions were back on the scene, and recoding of this traditional music was making a major comeback – all prior to the bicentennial celebration. It is interesting to

²⁷ Dormon, James, "Louisiana's Cajuns: French Acadians of the South," *America and the Americas*, History of Today Press.

²⁸ Ibid.

note that the bicentennial celebration was in 1955 – still about seven years away, and this was before the inception of CODOFIL, which shows us that pride and maybe even a bit of self-respect for the Cajun culture was making reappearance in the bayous of south Louisiana.

Introducing Cajun music to the world

In 1964, Cajun musicians Gladius Thibodeaux, Louis “Vinesse” Lejeune, and Dewey Balfa were asked to play at the Newport Folk Festival in Newport, Rhode Island. These three musicians were chosen due to the traditional authentic sound of their blend of music. For some residents of Louisiana, the music made by these men was an embarrassment due to the unrefined sounds. They wanted the musicians to play more traditional, mainstream music – they “...considered the music chosen for the Newport Festival crude – ‘nothing but chanky-chank.’”²⁹ Despite what naysayer’s thought about the music chosen for the festival, the musicians and their music were met with enthusiasm and standing ovations. This was enough encouragement for Dewey Balfa who brought the news home to Louisiana and started a movement to bring Cajun music to the entire world. This was the turning point for traditional Cajun music.

Dewey Balfa, with his brothers, and later other members of his family, introduced the world to the vibrant and unique sound of Cajun music. In a sense, Balfa was a musical ambassador that managed to awaken a hibernating sense of pride in Cajun music. Not only did he share this music with the world, but he was instrumental in bringing back enthusiasm and pride among fellow Cajuns. When Balfa and his brothers returned to the Newport Folk Festival again in 1967, their Cajun music was welcomed with open arms – from a sophisticated, non-Cajun audience.³⁰ He believed “that a culture is preserved one generation at a time...he was open minded and supportive of the innovations taking place during the 1970s and ‘80s as Cajun music went from little-known regional style to an

²⁹ Ancelet, Barry J., “Cajun Music,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Bill Malone (University of North Carolina Press 2014), 39-42.

³⁰ Dewey Balfa: Master of Cajun Music

internationally recognized and imitate musical phenomenon.”³¹ Balfa was a believer in passing down tradition and the Cajun tradition is what he wanted to pass on to future generations, “A culture is like a whole tree... You have to water the roots to keep the tree alive, but at the same time, you can’t go cutting off the branches every time it tries to grow.”³² This is a reason to not only pass on the music, but to add to it as well. As time moved forward, the uniqueness of Cajun music is being discovered by others – not only the residents of the Bayou State. The newest generation of Cajun musicians have taken Balfa’s ideas and moved forward to give us a sound that intertwines the old and traditional with the new and contemporary.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

A new generation of Cajun music

The newest generation of Cajun musicians belongs to young men and women who have taken the traditional style of Cajun music and added a little bit of their own style as well. An entirely new generation has embraced this music wholeheartedly, taking the traditions of what was, and added their own of what is to come. Some of these newer bands have added a little something that the traditional Cajun bands did not do – women are now part of the new generation of Cajun music. Previously, men have played in the public without the stigma that was attached to women should they decide to perform. As a rule, Cajun women were not encouraged to perform in public. The dance halls were not an acceptable place for women;

“...the dance hall stage of the past was not considered a place for ‘decent’ women to be. Women...have usually been emphatically discouraged, in both subtle and overt ways, from bringing their musical talents into a public arena. This may be one reason that the home songs that flourished particularly among women as an outlet for artistic expression. Cajun women have, more often than not, chosen to express their musicality in the most socially acceptable manner available to them, among family and friends.”³³

It may not sound too radical, but in an industry that has traditionally been dominated by men, an all female band like Bonsoir, Catin has become part of the new generation of Cajun musicians. This Grammy nominated band has been instrumental in bringing women into the Cajun music genre. Bonsoir, Catin – which loosely translated means ‘goodnight, sweetheart’ – has maintained the honky-tonk sound that has always been associated with Cajun music.

Bonsoir, Catin is composed of four women. The band includes front-woman Kristi Guillory, Christine Balfa, Yvette Landry, and Anya Burgess. They have been

³³ Richardson, Lisa E., “The Public and Private Domains of Cajun Women Musicians in Southwest Louisiana,” *Folklife in Louisiana*, 1991.
http://www.louisianafolklife.org/It/articles_essays_essays/creole_art_pub_priv_cajun.htm

together since 2004 when they all attended the *Dewey Balfa Cajun and Creole Heritage Week*, founded by Christine Balfa – daughter of Cajun revivalist Dewey Balfa – which includes “...music classes, performances and nightly dances held...in Chico State Park.”³⁴ Guillory explains their formation recalling,

“After spending a week together and hanging out, Yvette and I were jamming around a campfire with Christine Balfa, who I’ve known since I was 10 years old and first starting out on the accordion. We all instantly recognized how easy it was to play with each other. So I asked them if they wanted to start a band, and luckily, they both said, ‘Yes.’”³⁵

Bonsoir, Catin has been rocking Louisiana dancehalls and festivals with the unique Cajun sound that is a blend of all four women’s talents. Their newest album, *Light the Stars*,” is their latest collaboration that blends their unique talents into the new sound for this generation of Cajun musicians. Bonsoir, Catin has made their mark in an almost exclusively male domain – “But within the past twenty years, women’s music that was previously unknown...undervalued and taken for granted...has increasingly piqued interest.”³⁶ While the popularity of Bonsoir, Catin is steadily increasing, the Cajun music industry is still mostly male bands that have been around for many years.

Case in point, Feufollet started their band almost 20 years ago. The original members of the band were young boys in elementary school when they started playing their music. These young men were part of the French Immersion program in the public schools in Lafayette started by CODOFIL. This was a first hand look at the influence of bringing back the French heritage to the schools – a new generation that was being taught

³⁴ Hahn, Roger, “Bonsoir, Catin Plays Cajun Music Their Way,” *Beat Magazine*, July 1, 2014. <http://www.offbeat.com/articles/bonsoir-catin-plays-msuic-their-way/>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Richardson, Lisa E., “The Public and Private Domains of Cajun Women Musicians in Southwest Louisiana,” *Folklife n Louisiana*, 1991. http://www.louisianafolklife.org/It/articles_essays/creole_art_pub_priv_cajun.htm

to be proud of their heritage. Original Feufollet band member Chris Stafford says that when they were singing their songs years ago when they first started out they were aware of what they were singing in Cajun French and they knew what they were singing about. He explains, “We weren’t imitating sounds while we were singing. We knew what we were singing about...it’s really cool that we had the opportunity to do that.”³⁷

That being said, Feufollet’s newest album is half French and half English. Stafford says that when they first started singing they were of a ‘preservationist mentality’ as far as singing the Cajun songs went, but now they are doing “...whatever is musically inspiring to us...”³⁸ He also brings up an interesting conundrum by pointing out that “Though this is the heart of French Louisiana, French is very much a minority language, taking a far second place to English.”³⁹ Some may see their new album as moving away from their roots, but as Stafford points out, “...I think it is important that people know what you are singing about.”⁴⁰ Chris Segura, fiddle player for Feufollet says, “I don’t think, individually, we are ever going to stop playing traditional music. We just do what we feel like playing.”⁴¹

While Feufollet has strayed somewhat from their roots, there are other musicians in the area that are making Cajun music their own – first and foremost. One of these bands is the Huval-Fuselier Cajun Band. The band is made up of high school students Luke Huval, Zachary Fuselier, Kegan Navarre, and college student Jacob LeBlanc. These young men are aspiring musicians wanting to share their Cajun heritage with the rest of the world. All of them are a product of the French Immersion product

³⁷ Pittman, Nick, “Anchors Aweigh,” *Independent Monthly*, Vol. 3, No. 7, March 2015, 15-17.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

implemented by CODOFIL in the public school system in Lafayette. They will all attest to the fact that the program has taught them to appreciate their Cajun heritage of the families as well as themselves. Of the four band members, Zachary Fuselier will be next attending college. He plans on majoring in Biology and French at the local university. He also plans to continue playing with the band and sharing his Cajun heritage.

In the Huval-Fuselier Cajun Band, Zach plays the fiddle, but he also plays the rhythm guitar, triangle, and is in the process of learning the accordion. He says that Cajun music has been a part of his life as long as he can remember. Zach is nonchalant about the fact that,

“Ever since I was little, I have always enjoyed listening and dancing to the beat of Cajun French music. My dad taught me the little that he knows on the accordion when I was seven years old. I was also drawn to Cajun music because of the language that it is sung, which is Cajun French. This language was never taught to us in school, only standard or Parisian French was taught. This difference, along with the fact that this dialect is quickly dying off gave me incentive to preserve this music. I quickly learned this dialect of French after spending the weekends with my great-grandparents and my grandmother – and also by conversing with the elder musicians whom I learned from both musically and linguistically. Without these elders and my great-grandparents teaching me and helping me comprehend the French of Louisiana, I would still be trying to decipher the words sung in Cajun music.”⁴²

Interestingly, Luke Huval has a similar answer when asked what drew him to Cajun music. Huval, a high school freshman says, “My dad has been playing Cajun music for over 25 years, giving me a lot of exposure to the music. In a way, I grew up with it, and one day I was inspired to pick up the accordion and try it for myself, and here I am now.” Huval is also quick to point out the importance of preserving Cajun music – “It’s part of my heritage and cultural identity. Without not only the music, but the entire culture, I wouldn’t be the person I am today. I hope to preserve it, to share with

⁴² Zachary Fuselier, interview by K. Herrick, Lafayette High School, March 2015.

generations to come, and see how they mark it.” He goes on to say, “As each generation plays its course in Cajun music, the songs and the variations of these songs change, branching and mixing with various genres such as blues and country.”⁴³

High school junior, Kegan Navarre, plans on going to college for nursing, but holds the dream of being able to play music on a professional level some day. He has played the accordion for eight years and is in the process of learning the fiddle and guitar. Kegan is what could be considered Cajun music royalty – his great-grandfather was Iry Lejeune who recorded *La Valse du Pont d’Amour* in the late 1940s. It is interesting to see how the music from his great-grandfather was passed down through his family, but Kegan was also a product of the French Immersion program started by CODOFIL. Consequently, Kegan feels the Huval-Fusilier Cajun Band is able to help preserve Cajun music by “Knowing how to pronounce the French correctly.” He feels that “understanding the story behind each song is important. With this, our culture will live on and people will continue to love the music.”⁴⁴

Jacob LeBlanc plays the accordion and triangle for the Huval-Fuselier Cajun Band. He is the newest member of their band, having been with them about four-and-a-half years. His cousin is Zach Fuselier who has shared his knowledge and passion of Cajun music – passing it on, which is the premise of Cajun music – sharing with others and future generations. LeBlanc says, “I notice people get tired of the songs that are over played. I’d like to learn the good songs no one ever hears.”⁴⁵ The songs LeBlanc is referring to are the songs that are passed down from generation to generation – not

⁴³ Luke Huval, interview by K. Herrick, Lafayette High School, March 2015.

⁴⁴ Kegan Navarre, interview by K. Herrick, Lafayette High School, March 2015.

⁴⁵ Jacob LeBlanc, interview by K. Herrick, Lafayette High School, March 2015.

necessarily written down anywhere. Songs like these are heard from time to time at jam sessions where several generations meet once a week to share their music.

Bryan Theriot is the owner of Gallery Acadie – an art gallery in Scott, Louisiana, but also a weekly gathering point for Cajun musicians of all generations. Theriot’s gallery is also a stopping point for international tourists. On any given Friday night Theriot’s gallery has what he refers to as “Heritage Jam” starting at 6:00. Theriot says, “It is a way for the older musicians to teach the younger generations. This is certainly a Cajun music event, but we are introducing music from Cajun history – such as Quebec music and Breton Celtic music from Bretagne, France.” While wanting to introduce new generations of children to Cajun music, he strives to keep the old traditions alive – like Pie Day. Theriot explains this tradition that is held on Good Friday every year in Scott, “Pie Day is an old Cajun tradition within a few families. They fast on Holy Thursday and bake pies. On Good Friday they have an Open House and give pies away -- they cannot be sold! Paul Begnaud is the only living person in our area to still honor the tradition and his is 94 years old. We generally play traditional Cajun music for this day.” It is Theriot’s hope to continue this tradition and pass it down to future generations. He says, “Our goal is not to preserve our culture, but to grow it into something better. We want to export our culture and music, as well as make connections in the French speaking world.”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Bryan Theriot, interview by K. Herrick, Gallery Acadie, April 22, 2015,

Zydeco: A brief digression into a related genre

“Zydeco comes from the same roots as Cajun music, but as recordings introduced outside influences to the south Louisiana culture, black musicians began to become even more influenced by the blues and developed a distinctive sound...”⁴⁷ First, and perhaps most importantly, it needs to be stress that Cajun music and Zydeco music are two completely different entities. The two genres have blurred lines and are often used as similar terms to discuss a broad range of musical style. “Taken together, Zydeco and Cajun music represent a social arena of communication and interaction.”⁴⁸ However, it is important to understand that these two genres of music are completely different from each other, but their sound is similar in some ways. Each type of music has a distinct rhythm that makes it fall under either Cajun or Zydeco. That being said, “Both Zydeco and Cajun music have absorbed many different influences, especially elements drawn from French and African roots.”⁴⁹ So what makes Zydeco music a different genre from Cajun music? As with any genre of music it is important to understand the people and their history that have helped make the music what it has become. Zydeco is the music of the Southwest Louisiana Black Creoles. Creoles are a group of people that lived in Louisiana and were of mixed heritage which included African, Afro-Caribbean, Native American, and European descent. This black Creole society was rural, French speaking, and quickly became intertwined with the Cajun Culture.⁵⁰ The black Creole culture was very different from black cultures elsewhere in the South. There were several distinct groups that made up the culture and made it into what it is today.

⁴⁷ Bradshaw, Jim, “Cajun Music Has Gone Through Many Changes,” *The Daily Advertiser*, Dec., 29, 1998.

⁴⁸ Mattern, Mark, “Let the Good Times Unroll: Music and Race Relations in Southwest Louisiana,” *Music Research Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 2, (Autumn, 1997), 159-168.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

One group in particular, *Les Gens Libres du Couleur*, or Free Men of Color, was a group of property owning blacks. Mixed in with this group were also black slaves who brought their culture – and their music – to the area. The slave rebellion in Haiti also brought in freed slaves who had fled to Louisiana. This group of Afro-Caribbean's brought their culture, religious beliefs, and music to the area. These cultures intermingled over a period of 150 years in the bayous of Louisiana, and their music, along with the music of the French that had migrated from Nova Scotia, formed a mix of music known as French Music.⁵¹ While the music was played for mostly segregated venues, the bands themselves were frequently multi-racial. The blend of music from the Creoles and the French Acadians was intertwined. The accordion was eventually added to the musical repertoire and the loud sound was perfect for the noisy dance floors. It could be heard above the noise and backed by the fiddle – which was a secondary instrument. As a result, the dances and the sound began to change.

After World War II, outside influences came to French Louisiana, as many of the French and Creole men that had left for the war came back to the state. Radios and road improvement helped make Louisiana, and its residents, more accessible to the outside world. Creole music took a turn toward the popular music of the day – New Orleans jazz was in full swing. Creole music leaned toward the New Orleans influence as well as swing and rhythm and blues. Cajun music was leaning toward the country music genre and the two cultures of music began to split. Creole music took on the sound of the piano accordion, while Cajun music stayed with the original accordion. Cajun music also kept the fiddle in its repertoire, while Creole music used the fiddle less and less. In the late 1950s, Clifton Chenier, a Creole who played blues, began calling his music Zydeco. One

⁵¹ Ibid.

of the most common explanations for the name of Zydeco is thought to have originated from a Creole expression – *Les haricots sont pas sale* – which means, *the snap beans aren't salted*. The phrase is similar to – *times are really hard if you don't even have salt for your beans – not to mention no meat in your pot*. It represents falling on hard times.⁵²

Chenier's music was bluesy and syncopated. He was the forerunner that made the difference between the sound of Cajun music and Creole/Zydeco music.

As Chenier's career and music progressed, he became known, and is remembered as, the King of Zydeco. His hometown of Opelousas, Louisiana is considered the birthplace of Zydeco by many.⁵³ Chenier explained by saying,

“We travel a lot, and everywhere we go people say, ‘Y’all gonna play some good Cajun tonight!’ We don’t play Cajun. We play Zydeco. There is a difference. Zydeco rocks more. People get mixed up because of the food craze. They think that every music that comes from Louisiana is Cajun. Zydeco is a feel. It’s not so much the playing. Zydeco is rock and French mixed together, you know, like French music and rock with a beat to it. It’s the same thing as rock and roll but it’s different because I’m singing in French.”⁵⁴

Zydeco is a relatively new genre in the music world. Its name is even newer – having been named just a few decades ago. It is a combination of Creole, Cajun, and New Orleans blues. Zydeco has evolved over the decades and takes on all kinds of music sources on a continual basis – it is always evolving.⁵⁵ It is referred to as party music – some call it dancing music. In a Zydeco band there may be five or so musicians and the instruments include an accordion, wash-board, bass guitar, a guitar, and drums. There is a constant returning rhythm in Zydeco and it is dominated by one single chord and blends

⁵² McLeod, Harriet, “Cajun and Zydeco – They’re Different, Get Straight Now,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (VA), June 8, 1989.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Hayman, Gary, “What is Zydeco Music?”

<http://home.comcast.net/~cajunzydeco/zydemagic/whatiszydecomusic.htm>

the sound of rhythm and blues with the French Creole music that has been passed down generation to generation.⁵⁶

Another by-product of Cajun music and Zydeco music is a relatively new genre being referred to as ZydeCajun – a blend of both Cajun and Zydeco. Performer Wayne Toups is known for the ZydeCajun sound, and in 1986 released an album by the same name – ZydeCajun. Toups incorporates both French and English in his lyrics. The younger performers, like those of the Huval-Fuselier Cajun Band, embrace the idea of ZydeCajun. Huval explains saying, “Cajun music tends to use a diatonic accordion and fiddle, while Zydeco musicians have transitioned to a wet sounding, larger accordion and an electric guitar. ZydeCajun is a mixture of the two, holding on to the same traditional Cajun music with a taste of Zydeco using the electric guitar and a much more bluesy touch.”⁵⁷ Fuselier goes into more detail saying:

“To me, Cajun music and Zydeco music are not that different at all. Both music’s originated from a Creole-type music similar to what Ame’de’ Ardoin and Dennis McGee played about 100 years ago... The difference in instrumentation is that Cajun music uses fiddles and steel guitars while Zydeco uses scrub boards. Both play waltzes, one steps, two steps, and blues. Zydeco, however, tends to be a little bit more up-tempo and upbeat than Cajun music, which has a lot of influence from Americana – such as traditional country western music and ‘50s rock and roll music. I do believe there is such a thing as ZydeCajun, which is a mix of the influences from modern Cajun and modern Zydeco music. Wayne Toups is credited for doing this to get the youth of the 1980s re-interested in the music of their cultures. Without this musical mix-up, a lot of people would not be playing French music at all.”⁵⁸

This is the outlook of a new generation of Cajun musicians. Fuselier and his band members are open to new ideas blending with the traditional that are passed down from generation to generation. Being open to new ideas keeps the tradition intact.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Luke Huval, interview by K. Herrick, Lafayette High School, March 2015.

⁵⁸ Zachary Fuselier, interview by K. Herrick, Lafayette High School, March 2015.

Conclusion

The Cajuns of south Louisiana are a unique people and their music which plays an important part in their lives is a reflection of that uniqueness. This music, that has been passed down from generation to generation, is “...one of America’s down-home musics that has been molded inexorably by the harshness of Acadian history.”⁵⁹ Since the time of the Great Expulsion when the Acadians were forced from their homeland, the ballads and songs that were sung among them were sung for family and friends. The songs were then passed along to the younger generations. This is the way it was done 300 years ago, and it is still the way it is done today.⁶⁰ These songs told stories and gave a personal ownership to the persons that passed them down. Prior to World War II being called a *Cajun* was a source of embarrassment for some, but realization of this negative portrayal stopped the already escalating eradication of the Cajun culture and heritage. The pioneers bringing this music to those outside the bayous, like Iry Lejeune and Dewey Balfa, have instilled a pride in the newest generation of Cajun musicians. Zach Fuselier, one of the newest generations of this music says, “One of the best experiences I have had since playing this music has probably been being able to play with, and learn from, the legends of Cajun music. Each time I play music with them I imagine that these are the greats, and that they have played with the cream of the crop of Cajun music. Being able to play at festivals such as *Festival International*, *Festivals Acadiens et Creoles* (both held annually in Lafayette), and the *Jazz and Heritage Festival* in New Orleans is a great experience to reunite and visit with all of the other Cajun musicians at these festivals.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Broven, John, *South to Louisiana: The Music of the Cajun Bayous*, Pelican Publishing Company, 1983.

⁶⁰ Richardson, Lisa E., “The Public and Private Domains of Cajun Women Musicians in Southwest Louisiana,” *Folklife in Louisiana*, 1991.

⁶¹ Zachary Fuselier, interview by K. Herrick, Lafayette High School, March 2015.

Perhaps this is the reason Lafayette, and surrounding areas, are indeed the crawfish boiling, gumbo making, jambalaya cooking, fish-frying, Mardi Gras bead throwing, king-cake eating, Cajun music playing – Heart of Acadiana.

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