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# Bayou Boogie: the Americanization of Cajun music, 1928-1950

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BAYOU BOOGIE:  
THE AMERICANIZATION OF CAJUN MUSIC,  
1928-1950

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

In

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

By  
Ryan A. Brasseaux  
B.A., University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2000  
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## ABSTRACT

*Bayou Boogie* by Ryan A. Brasseaux outlines the evolution of Cajun music from 1928 to 1950. This thesis highlights obscure recordings by lesser-known Cajun artists to demonstrate how the Cajun-American discourse took place across Fredrik Barth's ethnic boundaries model. This study acknowledges the complexities of the Cajun experience by examining the regional and national socio-cultural contexts in which commercial Cajun recordings flourished. The birth of commercial Cajun music, John and Alan Lomax's 1934 Louisiana field recordings, and Cajun swing (Cajun inflected-western swing) are all discussed in detail to paint a picture of the complexities that shaped south Louisiana's fertile musical landscape between 1928 and 1950. Brasseaux uses music to illustrate the historical roots of the present-day Cajun-American discourse, ultimately concluding that Cajuns negotiated their ethnic and American identities, without compromising their ethnicity, to protect their cultural resources.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The dense south Louisiana humidity trapped the yellow hue of a single florescent light that illuminated a homemade wooden sign that read “Bourque’s Club.” Every Sunday night, my grandparents traveled twenty minutes from their rural home near Church Point, Louisiana, to Bourque’s in Lewisburg, a Cajun hamlet that boasted one grocery store and two dancehalls. I was nineteen years old when I decided to explore my grandparent’s social circles for the first time. The rustic façade of the dancehall pulsed and resonated with the electric sounds of Cajun music as I approached the club’s entrance. Wafts of smoke and bilingual conversation coated the dim interior of the honky tonk. Naked low-wattage light bulbs screwed into the nine-foot ceiling cast a dim glow across the swirling shadowy figures in the center of the dance floor. We situated ourselves at my grandparents’ usual spot, one of about thirty banquet tables that outlined the club’s polished wooden dance floor. Deep red tablecloths, Shaefer Light cans, and empty Miller High Life bottles provided the only decoration against the monotonous stark brown walls. That night I danced with old women.

In hindsight, that experience opened my mind to a world of intricate social realities that defined, in part, Depression-era Cajun experience. I viewed for the first time the interactive complexities among septuagenarians and octogenarians that became manifest in a context intimately linked to Cajun music and dance. My grandparents laughed with their friends, reinforced social bonds, visited with their neighbors, and reaffirmed their own relationship. In essence, they wanted to share with a sense of their reality, a piece of Louisiana’s cultural life unknown to many twenty-first century Cajuns.

This thesis examines early twentieth century Cajun music, and the ethnic culture that shaped the indigenous south Louisiana genre. Cajuns are defined in this study as descendents of

Acadian exiles, deported from Nova Scotia in the British ethnic cleansing operation of 1755, who established a new settlement in south Louisiana during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The historically pejorative term also refers to those Louisianians, largely living an agrarian lifestyle, “who has adopted Cajun language, culture or identity since 1765” (Edwards and Kariouk 2004:40-41). Cajun identity is part of the group’s ethnicity complex, or those aspects of social relationships and the continuous, dynamic processes that transpire between Cajuns and non-Cajuns in which cultural differences are communicated (Barth 1969:15; Melville 1983:272; Eriksen 1991:127). After 1765, Acadian refugees began to intermingle in the Louisiana territory with members of neighboring ethnic groups, who infused new ideas, customs, and surnames as they freely intermarried with people of Acadian ancestry. By the early twentieth century, south Louisianians considered names like Abshire, Ancelet, Clark, Courville, McGee, Miller, Romero, Schexnaider, Veroni, and Walker as legitimately Cajun as such authentically Acadian surnames as Babineaux, Duhon, and Thibodeaux. Working-class Cajun women who married “outsiders” ensured that their children embraced the community’s values, the Catholic faith, and the French language—until the emergence of mandatory education regulations in the early twentieth century. These cultural dynamics continued to evolve at an exponential rate with the introduction of mass media and a nationwide communication infrastructure.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the Cajun music genre varied significantly in terms of instrumentation, rhythm, tempo, dynamic text, dialect, harmony and vocal technique. A musician’s repertoire could easily range from *a cappella* ballad to French interpretations of Tin Pan Alley compositions, or accordion-based dance tunes to Cajun Swing, hillbilly and blues numbers. Because the breadth of the repertoire played by south Louisianians is so diverse, Cajun

music is defined in this study more by ethos and social context than by a delimited set of stylistic features. I define ethos as the group's openness to change and their ability to interpret, selectively apply and negotiate specific cultural information to suits the needs of individuals and the group at large. The disposition, character, and fundamental values of Cajun music are grounded in improvisation, an adaptive cultural mechanism at the very heart of the Acadian experience. In pre-dispersal *Acadie*, the ethnic group negotiated its way through constant governmental shifts between France and Great Britain, the natural hurdles posed by the unruly Maritime topography, and the ethnic cleansing operation of 1755. Like displaced African slaves who encountered a world in Louisiana completely removed from the one they left behind, Acadian refugees traversed a new cultural landscape when they arrived in Bayou Country—adapting musical ideas and stylistic traits into their repertoire. This improvisational experiment led to the developed of a new regional musical form, as the Acadians nestled as another thread in south Louisiana's cultural fabric (Brasseaux 1992).

Ethos also refers to the Cajun music's emotional qualities, born from grinding poverty and an agrarian, working-class lifestyle. Early twentieth century Cajun music stems from a social context shaped by the transition between pre-mechanized farming and the birth of Louisiana's industrial economy. Many musicians and recordings artists experienced first hand a time when the Gulf Coast's incapacitating heat only amplified the backbreaking stresses associated with the exhaustive toil necessary to sustain a successful farm. Indeed, manual labor was the oppressive natural force that liberated in song the fervor and spirit of a people.

The social dimensions of Cajun music have long been an important source of cultural data that can easily be applied to anthropological concerns including ethnicity, tradition, and even Americanization. By examining south Louisiana's musical landscape between 1928 and



## Map of Cajun Country

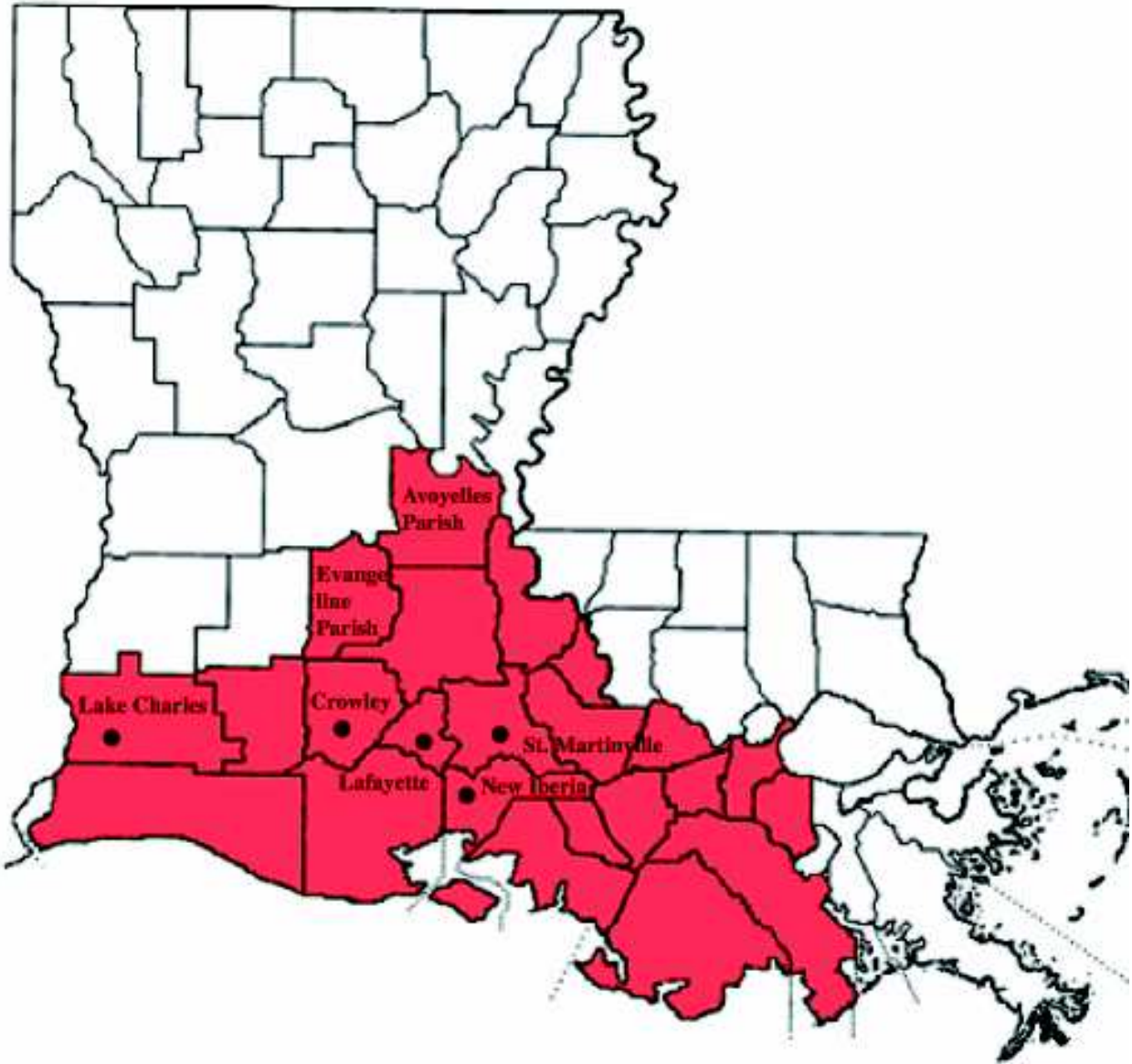


FIGURE 1. A map of Cajun Country, denoted in red, and those commercial centers like Lafayette, Crowley, Lake Charles and New Iberia that played important roles in the development of Cajun music. Courtesy of Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

1950, I will demonstrate that early commercial Cajun music was a heterogeneous cultural expression that evolved through the adaptive processes of modernization and indigenization, as Cajun performers absorbed contemporary American popular culture then transformed that cultural information into a modern Cajun expression (Nettl 1978:134).

Cajun music offered the community both a distraction from the work week and an opportunity for social interaction. Dance has long been a powerful social force in both Acadian and Cajun societies. It provided a congenial atmosphere for courtship and entertainment in a time before electricity, radio, and television. In 1825, W. W. Pugh of Assumption Parish noted that, in Cajun settlements, “Balls were of weekly occurrence, given at small cost, and the young and middle-aged enjoyed themselves to their hearts’ content.” Pugh adds, “The dancing master [instructor] was an unknown and unnecessary institution among these people, for they danced from the cradle to the grave, and danced gracefully [at] that” (Pugh 1888:143). Dances allowed young men and women to interact and court in a “proper” fashion, under the watchful eye of chaperones.

Dances were a primary source of entertainment that took place in small *bals de maisons*, or house dances held on Saturday nights, and later at community dance halls, which provided space for upwards of 300 to 400 dancers. At house dances, friends, relatives, and neighbors from within a single community gathered at a designated home. Hosts pushed furniture aside in their small farmhouses to make room for dancers and musicians and generally served gumbo and alcoholic beverages, though spirits were limited to men and only consumed outside the home. This social context highlighted core values at the heart of Cajun culture: reciprocity, an emphasis on tightly woven extended family, and a mutual interdependence centered on community. For instance, *bals de maison* focused on an exchange of services and reciprocity, as the dances

rotated from house to house within the community. House parties also allowed folks to nurture established relationships within the community, and forge new alliances with an emphasis on family through courtship practices that transpired within the home. Musicians generally performed for money, sometimes collecting their earning by passing a hat around the audience. By the end of the nineteenth century, house dances featured music performed either *a cappella*, or on a variety of instruments including, harmonica, fiddle, accordion, and *'tit fer* (triangle). These patterned behavior continued—albeit on a larger scale—with the emergence of dance halls, a new space that expanded and redefined the Cajun perception community and neighborhood. As the surface of Cajun culture changed dramatically through time, these core values centered on social and family life and adaptation remained at the foundation of Cajun ethnicity.

Cajun musicians freely interpreted and incorporated outside elements of African American musical traditions like blues and jazz and Anglo-American techniques and compositions from the hillbilly and western swing genres. South Louisiana musicians filtered these traits through a Cajun lens, adapting foreign instrumentation, arranging styles, vocal techniques, and musical philosophies to the evolving aesthetics of the community at large. Local musicians also adapted compositions from their own traditions, transforming historic tunes into contemporary cultural expressions. Artists constantly pushed the boundaries of the ethnic group by channeling and imbibing external information through a discourse that extended beyond the permeable ethnic borders. Cajun musicians adopted new musical ideas and practices openly, whenever these cultural traits proved an effective means of expressing the Cajun experience. This thesis acknowledges the complexities of south Louisiana's musical and cultural landscapes during the first half of the twentieth century by examining some of the cross-cultural articulation

points that shaped the sounds of Cajun music. I will focus specifically on atypical recordings that help to illustrate the breadth and diversity of the Cajun musical repertoire.

I will also consider Cajun musical expressions of folk music and popular culture.

Borrowing from folklorists Peter Narváez and Martin Laba, I conceptualize Cajun music as assuming various positions along the folklore-popular culture continuum. Narváez and Laba theorize that

artistic communication within small groups (folklore) and mass societies (popular culture) may be understood as polar types spanned by a complex continuum of different sized groups in which communications are transmitted via various configurations of sensory and technological media (Narváez and Laba 1986:1).

Between 1928 and 1950, Cajun music fluctuated between folk and popular culture in Narváez and Laba's continuum. Media transmission, social context, and group size determine the definition of folk music and popular music in this study, not socio-economic strata or musical content. Folk music is defined here as small group encounters based on artistic performances communicated in close proxemics, with a high degree of performer-audience interaction. Folk performances generally conformed to the Cajun perception of social space, in which dancers practiced courtship rituals at house parties and dancehalls, or when musical recitals (ballads, etc.) provided entertainment at home or during work. Popular culture, on the other hand, refers to cultural information disseminated across ethnic boundaries by technological media in mass societal contexts, thus creating a large distance between the artist and audience that comparatively highlights the differences between ethnic recordings. While I have delineated distinctions between the false dichotomy that determine both extremes of the continuum, there are basic similarities that form structural parallels between folklore and popular culture. Both communicative outlets display dynamism and conservatism, while offering "a means of rendering experience intelligible and graspable through recognizable forms that are both pleasing

aesthetically and relevant in a social interactional sense” (Narváez and Laba 1986: 2). In essence, many of Cajun music’s first recording artists occupied several positions along the folklore-popular culture continuum, as their records were thin transcriptions of folk performances.

Folklore and popular culture affected both the genre and folk performances through a dialectical relationship. However, the social context in which that material was transmitted determined the music’s categorical distinction. For instance, performances at house dances or dancehalls would constitute two similar aspects of the folklore spectrum, as the musicians interacted in relatively close quarters with dancers. The commercialization of Cajun music via record, gramophone, and radio represents Cajun music’s ascendance into popular culture through mass communication. Thus, Cajun musicians occupied the grey area in the folklore-popular culture continuum by engaging aspects of folk and pop culture when recording and performing in concert for audiences. As Cajun folk music became part of the popular cultural arena, popular compositions often informed local arrangements and lyrical content (Narváez and Laba 1986:1-8). In either case, both folk and popular culture performances can be perceived as the praxis of social life, and a means by which Cajuns “reflect on their current conditions, define and/or re-invent themselves and their social world” (Drewal 1991: 2). Recordings and live concert performances were conscious interpretations of the Cajun social reality communicated by Cajun musicians. Music reflects the transformational processes of that shaped south Louisiana’s constantly fluctuating and formulating cultures and cultural contexts during the first half of the twentieth century (Drewal 1991:1-5).

This new definition of Cajun music allows me to approach the genre from alternative perspectives than those put forth in previous studies. The first academic explorations of Cajun

music were largely shaped by the romantic textual analysis that dominated folklore studies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ballad hunters like John and Alan Lomax (Lomax 1941; Lomax 1999a), Irene Whitfield (Whitfield 1935), Elizabeth Brandon (Ancelet and Morgan 1984), Harry Oster (Oster 1958; Oster 1994), Ralph Rinzler (Rinzler 1965), and Catherine Blanchet (Blanchet 1970) sought to document perceived European musical survivals, rather than current trends in Cajun music. These researchers privileged their perception of authentic and pure folk music. Authenticity often equated with an antiquarian bias that attempted to trace the genealogy of ballads and other forms of North American folk music to historical, preferably European, antecedents.

In their 1941 publication *Our Singing Country*, John and Alan Lomax describe only a *cappella* performances by a handful of Louisiana musicians. The folklorists portray the ballads as Old World compositions still performed in the New World.

the ballad singers are still singing their ancient Norman ballads at country weddings, the *fais-dodo* [*sic*] bands creating their wild and fertile music at the rural dances. The songs in this section, the second collection of the kind, so far as we know, that has been published anywhere, will indicate, better than we can, what a rich storehouse of folk music is the Cajun country of southwestern Louisiana (Lomax and Lomax 1941:179).

In contrast to their published interpretations, the 1934 Lomax field recordings provide a far more diverse view of south Louisiana's musical landscape. Compositions ranging from French ballads and fiddle and clarinet arrangements, to Afro-Creole ring shouts and Anglo fiddle tunes present a sonic snapshot of the musical undercurrents that shaped Depression-era Cajun music. The Lomaxes only published material that illustrated their rigid definition of the "folk"—impoverished people who lived beyond the corrosive influence of American popular culture (Porterfield 1996:77). Music historian Benjamin Filene believes that academics like the Lomaxes, the commercial record and radio industries, and publicists acted as "cultural

middlemen,” who presented to the public an interpretation of authentic American folk culture. In *Romancing the Folk* (2000), Filene examines American folk music and the middlemen who worked to create a romantic image of performers and musical styles to satisfy an antiquarian agenda. He writes:

My efforts to understand how Americans’ musical memories have been formed have led me to put at the center of my story characters whose powerful role in American culture has long been overlooked by historians—cultural “middlemen” who move between folk and popular culture. These folklorists, record company executives, producers, radio programmers, and publicists “discovered” folk musicians, recorded them, arranged concert dates for them, and, usually, promoted them as the exemplars of America’s musical roots. In doing so, they did more than deliver “pure” music: they made judgments about what constituted America’s pure musical traditions, helped shape what “mainstream” audiences recognized as authentic, and, inevitably, transformed the music that the folk performers offered. As my title indicates, they “romanced” the folk, in the sense both of wooing them as intimates and of sentimentalizing them as Other (Filene 2000:5).

Salvage ethnography based on the textual analysis of French ballads shaped the work of Harry Oster, Ralph Rinzler, Elizabeth Brandon and Catherine Blanchet through the 1970s, when cultural and linguistic activists undertook that challenge of redefining the focus of Cajun music studies. By the 1980s, a new generation of researchers began to explore the wide variety of Cajun musical styles in a series of contextual studies that sketched out in broad strokes the history and evolution of Cajun music from a late twentieth century perspective.

The Cajun Renaissance (circa 1964-Present) began as a socio-political and linguistic movement based on the notion that Cajuns could reclaim an idealized version of their “language and culture” to replace perceived hegemonic English-based cultural institutions. Language-biased Scholars associated with the Renaissance defined French as the symbolic foundation of Cajun ethnicity and culture, and the criterion for authenticity, thereby reducing the ethnic group’s socio-historical complexities to one-dimensional characterizations by portraying the Cajuns as a homogenous francophone society (Gumperz 2001:49).

Renaissance authors like Revon Reed (1976), Barry Ancelet (Ancelet and Morgan 1984; Ancelet 1989; Ancelet 1991:149-170) and Ann Savoy (1984) created general introductory overviews of Cajun music's evolution through a francophone lens. These researchers occasionally manipulated the chronology of commercial and field recordings to fit their theories—citing both commercial and field recordings as evidence of a pre-commercial repertoire—which became the foundation of an "evolution of Cajun music" theory (Ancelet 1989; Savoy 1984). For instance, folklorist Barry Ancelet has used the south Louisiana field recordings of *a cappella* ballads compiled by the Lomaxes in 1934 as examples of the antecedents to commercial Cajun music, despite the fact that the recordings were collected six years after the initial commercial Cajun recordings. Rather, popular accordion-based dance music and unaccompanied ballads existed simultaneously within the framework of Cajun music. Furthermore, the tremendous influence of Anglo-America on Cajun music in the 1930s is only acknowledged in passing, limiting the scope of south Louisiana's musical landscape by acknowledging only a small number of artists and song styles. My thesis hopes to broaden the definition of Cajun music by offering a new perspective of south Louisiana's musical landscape, a view that recognizes the complexities of the bilingual ethnic group ignored by previous studies. I hope to consider the group's musical and cultural boundaries—the unusual styles often overshadowed by mainstream trends that exist as cultural articulation points connecting Cajun Country to outside stimuli. Specific musical examples will be used to illustrate the expanse and breadth of the Cajun experience during the first half of the twentieth century. These recordings will also serve as a means of discussing the processes of adaptation that have sustained the Cajun community for centuries.



Renaissance scholars viewed the dramatic decline of monolingual Francophones and first-language French speakers after World War II as evidence of unilinear assimilation. These researchers also viewed stylistic shifts in Cajun music as simply American culture eroding Louisiana's Francophone cultural traits and values. For instance, Ancelet described Cajun swinger Harry Choates' fiddling as a Southern-American musical expression, not a Cajun adaptation of American music. "His music no longer imitated western swing," explained Ancelet, "it *was* western swing, and good western swing at that" (Ancelet, Edwards, and Pitre 1991:158). On the contrary, my argument is that the nuances of Choates' style and technique and the social contexts in which the musician performed suggest that the fiddler was a sublime example of Cajun swing, not its Texas cousin western swing (Brown 2002).

This thesis offers a complementary perspective to previous studies. My experience growing up along the southeastern edge of south Louisiana's prairies also colors my perspective of Cajun music's early twentieth century evolution. Although my francophone grandparents lived most of their lives in a rural working-class environment, I enjoyed the amenities of the Lafayette's urban academic community growing up in a middle-class Anglophone household. The generational gap separating the artists who recorded early Cajun music and my retrospective interpretation of those cultural expressions that transpired two and three generations ago posed several challenges. Like a modern ethnographer, I had to acclimate my mind and understanding to a cultural climate removed from my own experience. My knowledge of early Cajun music comes through commercial recordings, memoirs, essays, books, and oral histories in which seventy and eighty-year-old Cajuns recount experiences after more than fifty years. I have relied heavily on the Ancelet, Bernard, and Rinzler oral history collections—which contain interviews with legendary Cajun musicians like Joe Falcon and Leo Soileau—housed at the Cajun and

Creole Archives, Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism, University of Louisiana at Lafayette. In addition, I have actively engaged in ethnographic research by recording interviews with music aficionados throughout southwest Louisiana. I have vigorously examined primary and secondary sources to empathize with the prevailing mindset of Cajuns who experienced Depression-era Louisiana and World War II.

Reissued record catalogues have also clarified my perceptions of Louisiana's musical landscape. I have enjoyed unprecedented access to recorded materials that were not available to previous scholars. During the 1990s, record companies like Roots n' Blues (Sony), and the Country Music Foundation in Nashville, Tennessee, began to steadily reissue on compact disk out-of-print 78 RPM recordings from their holdings (Seeman 1990; Cohn 1990). Compact disks generally focused on the recordings career of specific musicians like Dennis McGee and Joe and Cleoma Falcon, while other issues focused on the recording legacy of specific labels (Savoy 1994; Humphrey 1994). Some reissued materials came from internationally renowned private collectors like Joe Bussard and Ron Brown. Before the recent resurgence of reissued Cajun material from 78 RPM records, scholars were forced to scrounge through record shops and used record collections in search of obscure Cajun material from the first half of the twentieth century. My observations and conclusions are based largely on these digitized compact disk reissues. These recordings complemented the comprehensive discography published by Richard Spottswood (1990).

A comprehensive analysis of Cajun music recorded between 1928 and 1950 has allowed me to delineate patterns and evolutionary trends within the musical landscape. My observations have led to a structural conceptualization of the genre from which I organized recordings into time periods, framed by the patterns of instrumentation and repertoire in commercial music.

This study will examine stylistic shifts within the genre in relation to Cajun ethnicity and the development of a secondary identity among the ethnic group.

To facilitate a discussion of musical trends, I will outline and define specific time periods to help interpret the chronology and evolution of Cajun music. Its principle categories will be based on major stylistic trends—the Early Commercial Era (1928-1934) and the Cajun Swing Era (1935-1947). The boundaries of these two eras are fluid with vastly increased experimentation and new musical trends developing in the second era. I will maintain the commercial recording industry's song title orthography for those recordings made in each respective era to preserve the historical integrity of these recordings and the cultural context in which they flourished. Songs like "Jole Blon," an English misspelling of the French *jolie blonde* (pretty blond), were often misspelled and preserved on record labels by Anglophones trying to decipher song titles from Francophone Cajun musicians. A closer examination of these periods will hopefully clarify Cajun music's historical development and the role of identity within Cajun ethnicity.

In contrast to Francocentric examinations of Cajun history, I will explore identity's relationship to Cajun musical expressions and culture during the twentieth century. By the 1990s, Cajuns expressed a fully developed secondary American identity (Bernard 2003; Henry and Bankston 1999:244). Evidence suggests that Cajuns formulated a secondary American identity between 1928 and 1950, a process that historian Carl Brasseaux argues began in the late nineteenth century (personal communication, telephone, September 16, 2004). Contrary to the diametrically opposed anthropological theoretical camps that argue for either expressive or instrumental views of ethnicity, Cajun ethnicity during the first half of the twentieth century was neither completely expressive (taking place in an ethnic context, without outside interference)

nor completely instrumental and situational (occurring when an ethnic confronts members of a different group in public spaces) (Rosaldo 1988; De Vos and Romanucci-Ross 1982:378-389; Bun and Kiong 1993:163). Rather, Cajun ethnicity should be regarded as both expressive and instrumental. Jacques Henry and Carl Bankston add another layer of complexity to this interpretation by arguing that Cajun ethnicity and identity at the end of the twentieth century was neither completely symbolic nor structural (Henry and Bankston 1999). Cajun ethnicity is something of an anomaly, as neither a symbolic approach nor a structural argument can adequately explain the phenomenon.

## METHODOLOGY

My methodological approach is based on participant observation, ethnographic research, and ethnohistoric analysis. Ethnographic fieldwork techniques and historical documentation have been employed to reconstruct Cajun music's past.

For more than six years, I have attempted to immerse myself in the feeling, movement, and color of Cajun music via radio, frequenting dances, and by joining a Cajun band. To familiarize myself with Cajun music's early repertoire, I enlisted in the Lafayette, Louisiana-based acoustic Cajun ensemble *Les Frères Michot*, a group specializing in compositions from the early part of the twentieth century. I found that while participating as a percussionist, I could learn about accordion technique, dance tempos, guitar and fiddle chord changes, and singing styles. Between 2000 and January 2004, I performed with the Michot Brothers every Monday evening at Prejean's Restaurant, Carencro, Louisiana.

I also performed on occasion with the Lost Bayou Ramblers (LBR), a group of up-and-coming Cajun musicians who perform arrangements from three distinct Cajun musical eras:

Early Commercial (1928-1934), Cajun Swing (1935-1947), and Dance Hall (1948-Present). I learned a great deal about the nature of Cajun Swing compositions from LBR lead singer and fiddler Louis Michot and accordionist/guitarist/steel guitarist André Michot.

I conducted ethnographic research on Cajun Swing musicians, including several interviews with ninety-one-year-old Luderin Darbone, founder of the Hackberry Ramblers. His insights into the development of Cajun Swing, the influence of Texas and the petrochemical industry, and the major figures of the genre have been documented digitally with a Panasonic HHB professional minidisk recorder and Audio Technica AT825 stereo microphone. Local musicians, like fiddlers Hadley Castille and Mitch Reed, accordionist Bob Reed, and septuagenarian/octogenarian members of the Cajun community who frequented dancehalls during the 1930s and 1940s have also greatly contributed to my understanding of early Cajun music. The thirty field recordings that I have conducted for this project are now housed in the *Brasseaux Collection* at the Cajun and Creole Archives, Edith Garland Dupré Library, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

In addition to interviews, I have collected an assortment of period ethnographic research conducted by other social scientists. Scholarly articles, interviews, and theses lend insight into the cultural climate that produced the richness heard in early Cajun music. The Library of Congress' Archive of Folk Song field recordings collected by John and Alan Lomax during their visits to south Louisiana in 1934 and 1937 are perhaps the most remarkable work from Depression-era Louisiana. Copies of the collection, now housed at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Cajun and Creole archives, total twenty-one compact disks that contain materials ranging from *a cappella* French ballads, Afro-Creole ring shouts, and fiddle breakdowns, to performances by the Evangeline jazz band and English language cowboy songs.

The Lomax collection stands as the most complete documentation of south Louisiana's Depression-era musical landscape. I obtained digital copies of the recordings from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. The Lomaxes' complete southwestern Louisiana collection has been considered in this study. These recordings supplement the commercial recordings that I have considered in this study.

I have constructed a database containing information on commercial Cajun recordings from 1925 to approximately 1950. I consulted a variety of sources including the liner notes from an assortment of reissued compact disk compilations and Cary Ginell's *Decca Hillbilly Discography, 1927-1945* (Ginell 1989). The database is largely based on Richard K. Spottswood's discography entitled *Ethnic Music on Records: A Discography of Ethnic Recordings Produced in the United States, 1893 to 1942*, a sourcebook with a complete commercial Cajun discography through 1941. Following World War II, the details concerning Cajun recordings become fragmented with the emergence of small independent record labels like Gold Star, Goldband, and Fais do-do throughout east Texas and south Louisiana. Independent labels often did not keep complete records, or slipped into obscurity when companies folded. In some instances, surnames and recording location were used to determine the performer's ethnicity, particularly in cases involving instrumentation not associated with traditional Cajun music (Ginell 1989; Spottswood 1990).

The 971 entries that form the body of my commercial musical data have been catalogued in the computer database program *FileMaker Pro* for easy access and analysis. I have established ten categories to organize the information:

- artist information (including all musicians and instrumentation on the recording)
- song title
- original label information (record label and matrix number)
- original recording date

recording location  
language (French or English)  
instrumentation (accordion-based, string band, spoken word, harmonica, twin  
fiddle, or other)  
reissue label (if the recordings has been reissued on compact disk)  
reissue album title  
reissue date

To orient myself with song styles and musical trends of the period, I have purchased all of the available pre-World War II Cajun material reissued in the United States, England, Germany, and France. Reissues include titles on the Bear Family, Arhoolie, Country Music Foundation, Krazy Kat, JSP, Roots'n'Blues (Mercury/Columbia), Yazoo, and Rounder record labels.

This thesis analyzes Cajun music recorded during the first half of the twentieth century in three chapters. The first substantive chapter entitled “Early Commercial Era” examines several of the 256 total recordings issued between 1928 and 1934 on national recording labels. The material documented on 78 RPM discs ranged from accordion-based arrangements and harmonica performances, to twin fiddle and solo guitar selections. In 1925, the trade magazine *Talking Machine World* proclaimed that an amateur musician from New Orleans named Dr. James F. Roach recorded the first “Cajan” record—“Gue Gue Solingail” (Song of the Crocodile). Cajun music scholars generally dismiss the recording, which was in fact based on an Afro-Creole lullaby popular in and around New Orleans. Instead, historians and musicologists consider the Joe and Cleoma Falcon composition “Allons a Lafayette,” waxed on April 27, 1928, to be the first bona fide Cajun recording (Monroe 1921:22-25; Spottswood 1990).

The earliest Cajun records reflect both popular musical trends and instrumentation in Bayou Country, and extant atypical musical styles within the region’s musical landscape. Musicians recorded a variety of influential, accordion-based acoustic selections representative of prevalent commercial trends in Cajun Country during the late 1920s and early 1930s. The first

recordings covered a variety of musical styles including blues laden one-steps, two-steps, waltzes, and Anglo-American compositions translated into French, along with now obsolete arranging styles like polkas and mazurkas. In contrast to the 174 accordion-based compositions from the period, harmonica master Arteleus Mistic and fiddler Dennis McGee made a series of records representing instrumentation popular in south Louisiana during the nineteenth century. Other uncommon styles include guitar arrangements of European-based melodies by Avoyelles Parish native Blind Uncle Gaspard. Popular tunes on the other hand, featured acoustic arrangements of two or three piece ensembles that included fiddle and/or guitar and accordion.

Chapter Three “The Lomax Recordings” will explore non-commercial music documented by folklorists in search of America’s musical legacy. In the depths of the Great Depression, song collectors John and Alan Lomax visited south Louisiana in 1934 and 1937 as part of a nationwide folksong survey for the Library of Congress’ Archive of Folk Song (AFS). The Lomax field recordings stands as the clearest documentation of the musical interaction that took place across racial and ethnic boundaries within south Louisiana’s web of ethnicity. These recordings portray Cajun society as a complex, socially and economically stratified bilingual community, immersed in an incredibly diverse musical milieu. They also demonstrate that working-class Cajuns maintained a balancing act with one foot in traditional culture and another in Americana.

The AFS field recordings are essential to the study of Cajun music. Not only do they represent one of the first academically-based explorations of regional music in southwest Louisiana, they reveal the expanse of the Cajun repertoire neglected the commercial record. Cajun music included, for example, European ballad traditions, laments and drinking songs, often performed only at weddings or private family functions. Other material in the collection



lends insight into the linguistic climate among Cajuns. The use of accordions, fiddles, guitars, clarinets, trombones, and cornets in blues numbers, waltzes, and jazz compositions illustrate the diversity of the instrumentation available in Depression-era Louisiana. The Lomax field recordings demonstrate the profound effect of Americanization and the English language on Cajun musical trends during the period between the Early Commercial Era and the Anglo-American influenced Cajun Swing Era (1935-1947).

Chapter Four examines the Cajun Swing Era. By the mid-1930s, Cajun became increasingly connected to popular American cultural trends through burgeoning mass media technologies. Many south Louisianians connected to the state's evolving industrial economy garnered for the first time enough disposable income to purchase phonographs, records, and radios. Workers connected to the petroleum industry often moved to east Texas where the sounds of western swing—a hybrid of Texas string band music, jazz, hillbilly, and blues—were the popular compositions of the day. Pioneer Cajun swing bands like Leo Soileau's Three Aces, the Hackberry Ramblers, and the Rayne-Bo Ramblers interpreted and adapted these new sounds by fusing traditional Cajun string band music and western swing. I will discuss briefly the socio-economic factors that influence Cajun swing, and musicians like Harry Choates who popularized the most famous Cajun composition, "Jole Blon."

Commercial Cajun music can be applied to several anthropological problems, including questions concerning assimilation, ethnicity and identity, and the Americanization process. The concluding chapter of this study explores the theoretical considerations that help to extract meaning from Cajun music history. I will argue that assimilation, as prescribed by anthropological and sociological theory, does not apply to the Cajun evolution. Rather, I will

demonstrate that through acculturation and adaptation both Cajun and American cultures are mutually enriched through a two-way discourse.

## CHAPTER 2: EARLY COMMERCIAL ERA, 1928-1934

Between 1928 and 1934, Cajuns teamed up with national record labels to produce the first generation of commercial Cajun music. Acoustic compositions ranging from old world ballads and indigenous Louisiana arrangements, to French language renditions of American popular music created the foundation of the repertoire preserved on 78 RPM records. These recordings signify the commercialization of vernacular Louisiana music and the working-class Cajun community's interaction with American values and concepts like capitalism, materialism, and industrialization. Cajuns from all socio-economic backgrounds were acquainted with Americana. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, popular culture's far-reaching tentacles invaded Bayou Country in the form of traveling vaudeville and minstrel acts. American music further established its presence in south Louisiana following the emergence of mass media like the gramophone and radio. By the time Joe and Cleoma Falcon recorded the first Cajun record, the ethnic group was already well-versed in popular music.<sup>1</sup>

The commercial recordings waxed between 1928 and 1934 illustrate that Cajun music existed as a diverse and constantly evolving art form that incorporated musical ingredients from local and national sources. The earliest Cajun recordings also placed south Louisiana music squarely within the boundaries of the nation's commercial musical landscape. None of the commercial releases published between 1928 and 1947 were recorded in southwest Louisiana's Cajun country. Cajun musicians traveled to regional recording centers in the heart of Americana, both in the South—Atlanta, Memphis, New

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<sup>1</sup> Falcon 1965; *Lafayette Advertiser*, January 5, 1901, December 21, 1901, January 24, 1906, December 2, 1910; *Opelousas Courier*, September 29, 1906

Orleans, and San Antonio—and as far away as northern urban commercial hubs like Chicago and New York. The documentary record also lends insight into the commercial success of particular artists (Spottswood 1990).

This chapter explores the development of Cajun music's commercial infrastructure and the lives and contributions of those musicians whose recordings skirted along the edge of mainstream Louisiana musical styles between 1928 and 1934.

Recordings by eight commercial artists—Dr. James F. Roach, Joe Falcon and Cleoma Breaux Falcon, Blind Uncle Gaspard, Dennis McGee, Lawrence Walker and Nathan Abshire—are considered in this study as examples of remarkable musical trends in Cajun music during the early commercial era. A discussion of the initial Cajun recording will be used to establish the context in which the commercial Cajun music developed. In addition, the works of guitarist Blind Uncle Gaspard, fiddler Dennis McGee, accordionists Lawrence Walker and Nathan Abshire will be used as illustrations of the adaptive Cajun-American discourse that transpired on the edges of the Cajun ethnic boundary and the interpretation of traditional music. These recordings are examined here through Fredrik Barth's ethnic boundaries model by highlighting those cultural articulation points that permeated the ethnic divide between Cajuns and American popular culture.

Musicians were culture brokers who actively created, filtered, modified, translated, and communicated their symbolic cultural environment to local and unfamiliar audiences through live performances and commercial recordings. Many accordionists, fiddlers, guitarists, and vocalists imbibed American popular music disseminated through mass media and translated that cultural information to conform to the Cajun cultural

context. Thus, musicians can be viewed as an active agent in the Louisiana's cultural equation, as Cajun musicians engaged in a dialogue with both their own traditions and American popular culture during the first half of the twentieth century (Barth 1969:1-19).

Like hillbilly music, commercial Cajun music is a synthetic cultural product rooted in "genuine folk elements which have intruded into the mechanism of popular culture." Cajuns engaged in a musical and cultural discourse both within and beyond the ethnic boundary outlining the Cajun experience. This interaction produced the fodder for local musicians, who adapted and interpreted indigenous and extraneous compositions. Mass media accelerated the transmission and dissemination of popular culture, further opening the discursive channels between south Louisianians and the latest American musical trends. Cajun music subsequently became Americanized, as local musicians absorbed and translated elements of North American white Anglo Saxon Protestant culture into the Cajun context (Green 1965:205).

Cajun music's early commercial era produced 280 recordings on a variety of national recording labels. The earliest Cajun records reflect both popular musical trends and instrumentation in Bayou Country, and extant intermittent musical styles within the region's musical landscape. The diverse material documented on 78 RPM discs ranged from accordion-based arrangements and harmonica performances, to twin fiddle and solo guitar selections. Small accordion-driven dance bands represent an overwhelming sixty eight percent (174 recordings) of the instrumental arrangements documented between 1928 and 1934. Cajun musicians recorded in groups no larger than trios, reflecting the local convention employed at house dances. Likewise, the commercial repertory is indicative of prevalent trends in Cajun music during the first years of the Great

Depression. Accordionists recorded a diverse array of arranging styles like blues laden one-steps, two-steps, waltzes, and Anglo-American compositions, along with now obsolete polka and mazurka arrangements.

In contrast to the 174 accordion-based compositions from the period, harmonica master Arteleus Mistic and fiddler Dennis McGee made a series of records representing instrumentation popular in south Louisiana during the nineteenth century. Other unusual styles include guitar arrangements of European-based melodies by Avoyelles Parish native Blind Uncle Gaspard. Cajun music's transformation from a vernacular expression to a commercial idiom forever altered the scope and local perspective of Cajun music. South Louisiana's record-buying audience suddenly found local recordings on the shelves next to 78 RPM discs by celebrated American artists. Thus, "Lafayette (Allons a Lafayette)" reflects the increasingly important role of commercialization in rural working-class Cajun society and the Americanization of the culture group's vernacular music. However, Joe and Cleoma's pioneering efforts did not constitute the first time Cajuns were exposed to recorded music. Bayou Country embraced commercial recording technology long before the first Cajun record hit the market.

As early as 1878, only one year after Thomas Edison invented the phonograph, local newspapers helped raised awareness of the scientific marvel. The Opelousas *Courier* published a short editorial sketch announcing the public exhibition of the gramophone, "an instrument which reproduces the voice, accent and words and records the same with the fidelity of perfection itself" (Opelousas *Courier*, May 4, 1878). By the early twentieth century, furniture and jewelry storeowners provided their customers in Cajun country with the latest technological advances in recorded music including

Columbia's indestructible cylinder records. Opelousas jewelers R. Mornhiveg & Sons also offered a "splendid repertoire" of wax cylinders at their store on Main St., in addition to a variety of music machines that ranged in price from \$17.50 to \$100.00. Though the poorest rural Cajun families did not have enough disposable income to indulge in a cylinder player, Mornhiveg & Sons lured potential customers and curious onlookers on the twenty-eighth day of each month by demonstrating free of charge the entire catalogue of Columbia Records' latest releases. The store liberally disseminated popular American compositions, a situation that offered musicians the opportunity to explore an exotic repertoire. Such public commercial musical presentations plugged even the poorest Cajuns directly into contemporary popular musical trends (*Opelousas St. Landry Clarion*, March 11, 1911).

By 1912, Cajuns proved so familiar with phonograph equipment, they made innovations to the machine's design. In Jeanerette, Louisiana, a small agrarian settlement along the western banks of Bayou Têche, inventor Emile C. Geneaux enjoyed critical acclaim with his "improved sounding box," designed to enhance gramophone resonance. He marketed his idea to manufacturers and music stores as far away as New Orleans, where he received several promising offers. Indeed, curio storekeepers offering phonographs and records advertised their merchandise in some of the same newspapers to announce the advent of the talking machine. Advertisements lured music lovers to storerooms from Bayou Lafourche to Abbeville (*St. Martinville Weekly Messenger*, April 27, 1912).

"Everything pertaining to the artistic and musical side of life will be found at the store located at 204 St. Phililp [*sic*] street," announced A. E. Malhiot's advertisement in

Thibodaux, Louisiana's *Lafourche Comet*. In addition to sheet music and player piano rolls, Malhiot's store carried both Columbia Grafonolas and Victrolas, and a choice selection of recordings by nationally renowned orchestras and soloists. Further north, along Cajun Country's prairie region, Bourque's Furniture Co. of Abbeville carried a complete line of Edison Phonographs and records. The store attracted potential Edison customers with a free trial period, to entertain their families and friends for a few days in their homes with no obligation to buy. Before the release of local music, affluent Cajuns who did purchase record players listened to a variety of musical styles, from classical music to popular American dance music from Tin Pan Alley at parties, at social engagements or alone for personal amusement. Record companies understood that popular releases catered to a particular demographic—well-to-do Americans—thereby neglecting a potential, unexploited ethnic market in and out of New York City.<sup>2</sup>

The history of commercial Cajun music parallels the evolution of other forms of recorded ethnic music in America. Major record companies, who profited from selling phonographs, attracted prospective customers in regional and linguistic markets by releasing foreign language recordings by ethnic musicians. Columbia, Victor, and later Brunswick and Decca, reasoned that cultural groups—including poor white southerners, African-Americans, and foreign language ethnic groups—would purchase phonographs, if they could listen to familiar sounds from their respective musical heritages. Music executives subsequently established regional recording facilities outside of New York in cities like Memphis, New Orleans, and San Antonio to compile their catalogues (Cohen and Wells 1982:200; Gronow 1982:1-9).

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<sup>2</sup> *Abbeville Meridional*, December 16, 1922; *Abbeville Progress*, May 19, 1923; *Crowley Signal*, August 16, 1924; Thibodaux *Lafourche Comet*, July 10, 1919



Between 1900 and 1920, the number of foreign language releases increased exponentially, as the recording industry enjoyed almost uninterrupted growth. Independent start-up labels, interested in jumping on the profitable commercial music bandwagon, saturated the market with mainstream releases, forcing recording giants like Victor and Columbia, and smaller, but well-financed labels, like Okeh, Vocalion, Brunswick, and Gennett to exploit the minority and ethnic fields. “Hillbilly,” and African American music—promoted under the label “race records”—became a viable component of the recording industry, a phenomenon that spread and consequently embedded southern music into the fabric of America’s popular musical discourse. The earliest Cajun recordings were, in essence, an extension of the budding race record market of the 1920s. Musicologists Rick Kennedy and Randy McNutt (1999) maintain that race recordings filled a commercial void, an economic innovation that developed in New York City as a means of promoting African American artists to an African American consumer base. Record labels promoted the earliest Cajun records using the same marketing schemes that successfully sold the work of African American race record artists—like Charlie Patton, Clarence “Blind Lemon” Jefferson, and Lonnie Johnson—by specifically targeting ethnic groups on the periphery of mainstream American culture. The strategy paid off. In 1926, minority groups bought talking machines to play their favorite records along with the rest of the nation, catapulting phonograph profits near the \$70 million dollar mark. One million record players were sold in 1927 alone. In south Louisiana, talking machine retailers not only sold phonographs and records but also often acted as the liaison between musical artists and record companies (Gronow 1982:1-6; Kennedy & McNutt 1999:xiv, 16, 21-23; Malone and Stricklin 2003).

Phonograph retailers in Bayou Country intimately knew the fashionable tastes of their customers, as well as the region's popular musicians. Recognizing the potential returns that local recordings could generate, retailers often arranged recordings sessions for, and invested in, the first commercial Cajun artists. In turn, record companies agreed to record almost anyone the phonograph retailer suggested. The first documented attempts to capitalize on Cajun music describe Crescent City socialites doubling as part-time musicians (Gronow 1982:7).

By 1925, vocalist Dr. James F. Roach had amassed a widespread reputation as an amateur musician during his frequent radio appearances in New Orleans. In January of that year, Dr. Roach, accompanied by his wife, pianist Agnes Farrell Roach, recorded the first "Cajan" folksong—"Gue Gue Solingail" (Song of the Crocodile) and Debussy's "Reflets Dans L'Eau" (Reflections in the Water)—at the Hart Piano House for the General Phonograph Company's Okeh record label. On July 15, 1925, the trade magazine *Talking Machine World* proclaimed that the record's success would encourage future exploration of Acadian French music in south Louisiana (Gronow 1982:9; Cohn 1990:6-7).

"Gue Gue Solingail" was apparently a folk song popular among Afro-Creoles in and around the Crescent City. An early Louisiana music author Mina Monroe recalled hearing the song as a child from the Afro-Creole domestics who worked on her family's plantation in St. Charles Parish. She explained in her 1921 publication *Bayou Ballads* that the singers usually performed the lullaby for children. Little ones were "urged to 'balié chimin-là,' literally to 'sweep the path clear,' the path being the tiny mind preparing

for dreams.” “Gue Gue Solingail” paints a fantastic world where tortoises speak and crocodiles (alligators) lure children to the edge of the swamp:

Gué-gué Solingaie,  
balliez chimin-là,  
M'a dis li, oui, m'a dis li,  
Calbasse, li connain parler!  
Calbasse, il connain parler!

Dreamland opens here,  
Sweep the dream path clear!  
Listen, chile, now listen well,  
What the tortoise may have to tell,  
What the tortoise may have to tell!

Gué-gué Solingaie,  
balliez chimin-là,  
M'a dis li, oui, m'a dis li,  
Cocodril, li connain chanter!  
Cocodril, il connain chanter!

Dreamland opens here,  
Sweep the dream path clear!  
Listen, chile, dear little chile,  
To the song of the crocodile,  
To the song of the crocodile!

Gué-gué Solingaie,  
balliez chimin-là,  
M'a dis li, oui, m'a dis li,  
Pichou, li connain trangler!  
Pichou, li connain trangler!  
(Monroe 1921:22-25)

Dreamland opens here,  
Sweep the dream path clear!  
Listen, chile, now close your eyes,  
In the canebreak the wildcat cries,  
In the canebreak the wildcat cries!

Anthropomorphic animals display the same mysterious and enchanting qualities found in Afro-Creole fairy tales (Saxon 1954). Domestics sang the tune in Creole French, as Monroe’s transcription illustrates, to emphasize that children under their watch should not stray beyond their caregiver’s protection. Performers recited the tune as an incantation, whispering in hushed tones the ending phrase of each couplet, “li connain...” “Gue Gue Solingaie” described by Monroe is apparently the same composition recorded by Dr. Roach (Monroe 1921:vi, 22-25).

Despite *Talking Machine World’s* enthusiastic review of the Roach release, there is no evidence to suggest that the musicians were indeed Cajun, or that OKeh actually released the Roach recordings. Neither the musician’s surname, nor the recording’s instrumentation coincides with measures of authenticity generally associated with early commercial Cajun releases. Dr. Roach may have had familial Cajun ties, though most

Cajun music scholars generally discredit him and his initial recording. Furthermore, Richard K. Spottswood's discography of North American francophone music indicates that the musician released the two sides on his own Roach label in January of 1925, not on Okeh. Musicologists generally consider the 1928 Columbia release "(Allons à Lafayette)" to be the first legitimate Cajun record (Ancelet 1989:19-20; Ancelet, Edwards, and Pitre 1991:150; Cohn 1990:7; Gronow 1982:8; Savoy 1984; Seemann 1990; Spottswood 1990).

Joe and Cleoma Falcon altered the evolutionary course of Cajun music forever by waxing the first successful Cajun record, an event that encouraged other south Louisiana musicians and major record companies to produce an assortment of regional 78 RPM discs. The ramifications of this initial recording proved, as music historian Pekka Gronow argues, that Cajun music could be profitable in smaller niche markets. This cultural experiment reverberated for years in south Louisiana, by substantiating the move towards standardized song lyrics and granting Cajun recording artists unprecedented fame (Gronow 1982:8).

Music has long been an outlet for individual expression in a culture that, until the twentieth century, has largely been illiterate. Cajun songwriters composed tunes describing their reality and transferred those songs orally across generational lines. As musicians learned songs through imitation, they often adapted lyrics to suit their own situation. Some singers replaced forgotten words within song texts with their own lyrics. Particularly adept vocalists could spontaneously generate melodies and texts at will. The emergence of recorded music set Cajun compositions in a stable, concrete format, thus transforming Cajun folk music into a form of popular culture. The lyrics to the first

Cajun recording published by Falcon in 1928 are still performed precisely by dancebands at the dawn of the twenty-first century:

Allons à Lafayette, mais pour changer ton nom.	Let's go to Lafayette It is to change your name
On va t'appeller Madame, Madame Canaille Comeaux/ comme moi.	We will call you Mrs. Mischievous Comeaux
Petite, t'est trop mignonne pour faire ta criminelle.	Honey you're too pretty To act like a tramp
Comment tu crois, mais moi, je peux faire, mais moi tout seul.'	How do you think I am going to manage without you.
Mais toi, mais joli Coeur, regarde donc mais quoi t'as fait.	Look at what you done, pretty heart We are so far apart
si loin que moi, je suis de toi, mais ça,	And that is pitiful
Petite, t'est trop mignonne pour faire ta criminelle.	Honey you're too pretty To act like a tramp
Comment tu crois, mais moi, je peux faire, mais moi tout seul.'	How do you think I am going to manage without you.
Mais toi, mais joli Coeur, regarde donc mais quoi t'as fait.	Look at what you done, pretty heart We are so far apart
Si loin que moi, je suis de toi, mais ça, ça me fait pitié (Ancelet 1989: 21).	And that is pitiful.

“Allons à Lafayette” reflects the increasingly important role of commercialization in rural working-class Cajun society and the Americanization of the culture group’s vernacular music. The Falcons adapted the composition from an older tune in the Cajun repertoire, “Jeune gens de la campagne,” and subsequently generated a recording revolution in south Louisiana (Ancelet 1989:21; Ancelet 1994:285; Reed 2004).

Thirty-two percent of the recordings produced between 1928 and 1934 did not feature the accordion as the primary melodic voice. For instance, Opelousas native Patrick Pellerin recorded several French interpretations of American pop tunes on his banjo during a 1929 session in Atlanta, Georgia. Later that year, Artleus Mistic recorded two sides for the Victor label. Mistic’s robust harmonica playing punctuated

his nasal French vocal interludes. These recordings are considered intermittent in this study because the instrumentation and thematic integrity of these recordings do not conform to the standard arranging and composing styles prevalent during the early commercial era. Some of the best examples of atypical commercial trends can be heard in recordings by some of the most prolific unconventional artists like Blind Uncle Gaspard, and Dennis McGee. A handful of experimental recordings by revolutionary accordionists Lawrence Walker and Nathan Abshire are also considered in this study because their role in Cajun music's transition towards Cajun swing in the commercial documentary record.

Avoyelles Parish is part of the permeable cultural border on the northern outer rim of Cajun country, where cross-cultural pollination took place between French Louisiana and the state's Anglo Bible Belt. Like most Louisiana parishes, Avoyelles is an ethnically diverse region, where African Americans, Afro-Creoles, American Indians, Acadians, French, and Anglo Americans have coexisted and intermarried for centuries. However, unlike the southern portions of Cajun Country, non-Acadian Francophone peoples shaped the parish's French presence and musical repertoire. In 1929, Avoyelles Parish native Blind Uncle Gaspard recorded some of the most distinctive material during the early commercial era. Gaspard's sides are the clearest examples of non-Acadian francophone musical expressions unique to Avoyelles and Evangeline Parishes. Both parishes share a common history and musical repertoire that is rooted in the ethnic distribution of the locale.

Much of Avoyelles Parish's musical legacy is rooted in colonial French North America. The establishment of the French presence in the region began during the

1760s, as a series of European political maneuvers dramatically transformed the Francophone demographics in the Louisiana territory, a mammoth slice of the continent that stretched from Appalachia to the Rocky Mountains. In 1763, the Treaty of Paris conceded the French-owned Louisiana territory east of the Mississippi River to the British. The provincial government encouraged colonial refugees and their Indian allies fleeing British rule in the transfer of land to settle in present-day Avoyelles, Evangeline, Rapides, St. Landry, and St. Martin parishes. In the 1770s, the population shifted again as the overflow of French settlers from Pointe Coupee trickled into the area originally occupied by the Avoyelles Indians. The mass exodus of enlisted men, retired soldiers, expatriates, and French sympathizers migrated to les Avoyelles and transplanted into the region a rich musical repertoire that expressed the Franco-European experience in the New World. These French songs, which were completely removed from the Acadian tradition, flourished in French colonial settlements. By the time of the first commercial Cajun recordings, musicians from those northern fringe parishes that boasted high concentrations of French extraction—namely Avoyelles and Evangeline—continued to sing, and eventually record compositions rooted in French colonial north America. Mass media like commercial releases and phonographs then disseminated the folk material to other parts of Cajun Country, where communities with higher concentrations of Acadian descendents filtered the songs into their musical inventories (Brasseaux 1981:100-101, 114, 122).

Three musicians affiliated with the Avoyelles Parish folk tradition recorded during the early commercial era. Guitarist Blind Uncle Gaspard and fiddler Delma Lachney are two relatively unknown Cajun musicians whose short recording careers offer

a vicarious glimpse into the extremities of the Cajun repertoire. These musicians, Gaspard in particular, represent another side of Cajun folk music, which is based in ballad traditions that differ melodically from other recorded between 1928 and 1934 (Brown 1999).

The son of a Civil War veteran, Alcide “Blind Uncle” Gaspard was born into a musical family in 1880 in Dupont, Avoyelles Parish. As a child he learned to play a variety of instruments including accordion, upright bass, fiddle, and guitar. In 1887, a degenerative nerve disease left Gaspard almost completely blind. Like other visually impaired musicians of the period, music became Alcide’s main source of income. He traveled around Avoyelles Parish playing house dances and occasionally at a dancehall in his hometown of Dupont.

A sort of Cajun troubadour, Blind Uncle Gaspard often walked alone along parish roads with his Montgomery Ward guitar, delighting neighbors with his skills as a raconteur. Music historian Roy Brown maintains that the musician had extraordinary olfactory and auditory senses that facilitated his mobility. “He invariably knew whose house he was walking past even when several miles from his own home,” Brown explains, “and could also identify the type and location of various objects ahead of him on the road such as parked automobiles” (Brown 1999:3). Tragedy struck again years after Alcide’s blindness heightened his sensory perception. Following a bout of blood poisoning, doctors amputated a portion of Gaspard’s right index finger. The guitarist learned to compensate for his missing appendage, and played flawlessly on the recordings he made with fiddler Delma Lachney (Brown 1999:3).



Born in 1896 in Egg Bend near Marksville, Lachney became an accomplished instrumentalist, perfecting a left-handed fiddling style. The fiddler learned to play from his father, Lorena, whose repertoire of quadrilles and old dance tunes reflected the family's French Canadian heritage. Growing up, Delma performed with his brother Philogene, who often provided accompaniment with spoons or fiddle sticks. By the mid-1920s, Delma had organized a small twin fiddle string combo featuring fiddler Clifton Mayeux and guitarist Philmore Lachney. The group performed at *bals de maison* and dancehalls around Marksville, when Delma was not farming or traveling selling freshly butchered meat from his barnyard.

Gaspard and Lachney crossed paths in early January of 1929, when Marksville furniture store owner and phonograph retailer Guy Goudeau sponsored a recording session for the musicians. Goudeau agreed to pay Jules Moreau, the proud owner of a new Pontiac, one hundred dollars plus expenses to drive the musicians to the Brunswick-Collender Company's Chicago headquarters. With Godeau's son Larry, and friend Charles Bordelon in tow, Blind Uncle Gaspard entertained his fellow journeymen strumming his guitar and sing during the long trek. The barometer dropped, and the icy weather grew more severe, as the five men reached the Windy City (Brown 1999:3-5).

To earn extra money, Blind Uncle Gaspard and Delma Lachney decided to perform on the streets of Chicago in the freezing weather, a decision that almost proved disastrous. Not only did Gaspard drop his guitar—which somehow remained undamaged—on the frozen pavement, Lachney caught a cold and endured the recording session despite several sneezing bouts. On January 26, 1929, the musicians laid down nine tracks together for the Vocalion label, including the hillbilly influenced “Riviere

Rouge (Red River),” and a few original compositions like “Baoille.” A pair of solo performances by Alcide Gaspard rounded out the session (Brown 1999:3-6; Spottswood 1990).

Alone with his guitar and ethereal voice, Blind Uncle recorded the most remarkable material during the Chicago session, a pair of French ballads with guitar accompaniment: “Mercredi Soir Passé (Last Wednesday Night)” (Vocalion 5281) and “Assi Dans la Fenetre da Ma Chambre” (Vocalion 5280). These performances represent one of the unusual styles recorded during the Cajun music’s early commercial period. The instrumentation, European-based melodies, and unusually lyrical vocal delivery of his recordings contrast starkly the syncopated, punchy dance numbers recorded by accordion-based ensembles like the Breaux Brothers and Joe Falcon.

Gaspard’s melancholy tenor flows warmly in a gentle vibrato through the opening phrases of “Assi Dans la Fenetre da Ma Chambre,” as he strums on his guitar through the minor chord progression of the waltz. Unlike other songs from the period, his vocals are used as a continuous melodic expression throughout the song as the ballad describes a dejected man seated in the window of his room, watching his lover leave forever. Blind Uncle Gaspard’s solo performances are linked by a common historical thread to folk material collected in Evangeline Parish during the 1950s and 1960s by folklorists and musicologists Harry Oster and Ralph Rinzler respectively (Ancelet 1994:296; Rinzler 1989a; Rinzler 1989b; Oster 1994).

The areas that are now Avoyelles and Evangeline Parishes played similar roles during the colonial period as safe havens for a large number of non-Acadian, French speaking peoples. While French refugees from other settlements in the Mississippi

Valley relocated to les Avoyelles in 1763, troops stationed at Fort Toulouse, a French garrison located near present-day Montgomery, Alabama, migrated to Evangeline Parish with several American Indian groups allied to the French government. By the mid-1780s, as time Louisiana's colonial government established the Avoyelles district, retired French soldiers with surnames like Deshotel, Guillory, LaFleur, Brignac, Fontenot, and Soileau were carving out a subsistence by cattle ranching and cotton farming on Evangeline Parish's Mamou prairie. Indeed, non-Acadian peoples, including American Indians, French, and enslaved Africans were the initial settlers in Avoyelles and Evangeline Parishes, a phenomenon that mirrored migratory and settlement patterns in Louisiana's other important colonial hamlets.

Natchitoches, Louisiana—one of the most important eighteenth century French settlements west of the Mississippi River—was a product of the same colonial society that shaped the music in Avoyelles and Evangeline Parishes. Founded in 1714, the town served as the most important trading post along the same Red River that Blind Uncle Gaspard and Delma Lachney celebrated in song. In 1929, Gaspard waxed a ballad entitled “Aux Natchitoches,” presumably a colonial era composition handed down for generations in families of French extraction on the northern fringes of Cajun Country. In his characteristic eerie intonation, the guitarist bewailed:

Aux Natchitoches il y a une brune,	In Natchitoches there is a brown haired
	woman,
et je la vois pas autant que je veux. (X2)	I don't see her as much as I would want.
Par un beau dimanche,	One beautiful Sunday I went to see her,
mais j'ai mis aller la voir,	I found her to be in bed sick.
je l'ai trouvé au lit malade. (X2)	
Endormez-vous, sommeillez-vous	Are you sleeping, do you slumber,
Et tous nos amours 'trends plus parler?	And all our love never to be heard again?
Si vous avez un habit a prendre	If you have an outfit to take

Prenez-la, donc, couleur de cendre

Take the one the color of ash.

C'est l'habillement de la plus triste,  
Pour un amant qui vit qu'en langueur  
Ni je dors et ni je sommeille  
Touste la nuit mon esprit veille.  
(Savoy 1984:24-25).

It is the saddest clothing  
For a lover who is living in languor.  
I sleep not and I slumber not  
All the night my spirit is awake

While most Cajun composers wrote about their immediate environs, “Aux Natchitoches” revolves around the strategic colonial settlement up river from Avoyelles. Between 1956 and 1957, ballad hunter Harry Oster recorded an almost identical adaptation of this early commercial recording. In search of non-commercial folkloric material in Evangeline Parish, between the farming towns Eunice and Mamou, Oster discovered vocalist and guitarist Bee Deshotel who sang the ballad *a cappella*. According to Oster, the thematic integrity of Blind Uncle’s solo recordings places the songs squarely in the French ballad tradition. And, by virtue of his 1929 recordings, Gaspard’s sides also fit squarely into the American context through their association with Cajun music’s early commercial era. The guitarist also recorded ballads like “Mercredi Passé,” whose melody also appears in Evangeline Parish, another multi-ethnic parish along the northern fringe of Cajun country (Oster 1994; Savoy 1984:24-25).

Between 1964 and 1967, Smithsonian Institute Fellow and folklorist Ralph Rinzler made three fieldtrips to Louisiana in search of the state’s underground French musical traditions. Like Oster, the folklorist encountered on one of his expeditions fragments of the same colonial repertoire shared by Deshotel and Gaspard. With his professional tape recorder in tow, Rinzler visited septuagenarian Cajun fiddler and balladeer Edius Naquin at his home in rural Evangeline Parish. The aging school bus driver entertained the folklorist’s requests for old time material by unveiling his

interpretations of “Mercredi Soir Passé,” and the melody to “Assi dans la fenetre de ma chambre,” reframed as a waltz entitled “Ma Mule.” While Naquin could very well have adapted the Gaspard’s arrangements, striking similarities in the ethnic composition of both Avoyelles and Evangeline Parishes suggest that these melodies were fixtures in specific locations within the musical landscape, where persons of French, white Creole, and French-Canadian extraction came into contact with one another. Other non-Acadian groups, Anglos in particular, also dramatically shaped the sounds of Cajun music (Rinzler 1989a).

In the early part of the twentieth century, Irish cultural traits permeated Evangeline Parish. Dancers faced off, nose-to-nose, and step danced to reels and jigs. Irish musical traits diffused across ethnic boundaries when Cajuns intermarried with peoples of Gaelic descent. For instance, the Courville family boasted two of the most famous fiddlers in the region, Eraste and his brother Arville, who also played hornpipes and tin whistle. The popularity of Dennis McGee, who married into the Courville family, further reinforced and perpetuated Irish musical traits in the Cajun repertoire (Daigle 1972:138).

Dennis McGee was born into a musical family on January 26, 1893, in Bayou Marron, Louisiana. McGee’s grandfather John McGee immigrated to Louisiana from Donegal County, Ireland, a district famous for mazurkas and its unique style of fiddling. Dennis endured a difficult childhood. Amelia LaFleur, his half Seminole, half French mother died when McGee was only two years old, leaving his father John McGee Jr. to raise four children. To make ends meet, John Jr. left home for days or weeks at a time to work as a laborer. Dennis’ brother, eight-year old Eraste McGee, looked after his

brothers, who sustained themselves on the generosity of their neighbors, who fed the McGee boys periodically with leftover stale biscuits. When John remarried, his second wife renounced her stepchildren, forcing Dennis to find shelter with his maternal grandmother. “It was during these years at the home of his grandmother,” explains Ann Savoy, “that the young Dennis was initially exposed to his father’s fiddle playing.” Dennis incorporated ornamental fills, mazurka arrangements, and melodies that emigrated with the McGee family from Ireland (Ancelet and Morgan 1984:35; Reed 2004; Savoy 1984: 48; Savoy 1994:3-4).

As a young man, Dennis McGee managed to tap into, and capitalize on, the evolving cultural landscape in south Louisiana, a transformation spurred, in part, by the new media technologies. The fiddler performed regularly on weekends at rural house dances to earn money. During the week, he found employment in towns in Evangeline and St. Landry Parishes—by day, Dennis provided the soundtrack for the silent film theaters in Mamou and Eunice; by night, he supplied the musical entertainment at local whorehouses. Other times, he found employment as a field hand and later a barber (Reed 2004).

McGee’s diverse repertoire represented an uncommon musical style somewhat removed from the popular accordion-based compositions that dominated the early commercial period. His first recordings differ markedly from mainstream arrangements in instrumentation, textual content, and stylistic technique, a reflection of his varied influences. In addition to the Old World reels and jigs he learned from his Irish relatives, Dennis apprenticed under Gustave Ardoin, a fiddler versed in nineteenth century dance music. Ardoin was almost one-hundred-years-old when McGee became his student, a

detail that delighted late twentieth century folklorists and musicologists interested in the ancestral roots of Cajun music. Scholars and cultural activists exalted Dennis McGee as the “Dean of Cajun fiddlers” during the Cajun Renaissance, in part, because he lived to ninety-six years old. Musicologists and documentarians saw the fiddler as a way to touch the past, particularly because of his association with Gustave Ardoin. The architects of the Renaissance relied heavily on McGee as an informant, a process that eventually transformed the fiddler into a Cajun musical icon through publications, documentary films, public appearances, reissues, and updated interpretations of Dennis’ compositions.<sup>3</sup>

During the latter half of the twentieth century, McGee’s music enjoyed a resurgence in popularity as a young fiddler named Michael Doucet, founder of the Cajun super group Beausoleil, almost single handedly revitalized the aging fiddler’s early recordings. Beausoleil’s commercial success both in Louisiana and beyond further established McGee symbolic status as the quintessential Cajun fiddler. Following in the shadow of Doucet’s popular interpretations of McGee’s compositions, a new generation of fiddlers—lead by David Greely, Mitchell Reed, Eric and Clay Chapman, and Joel Savoy—followed Beausoleil’s lead, thereby providing new support for McGee’s for the argument that his fiddling represented the prototypical Cajun fiddling technique.

However, as the early commercial documentary record indicates, there existed no homogenous or archetypal fiddle style between 1928 and 1934. Leo Soileau, Ophy Breaux, Sady Courville, Ernest Frugé, and a hoard of other early fiddlers developed their own distinct styles.

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<sup>3</sup> Blank and Strachwitz 2002; Gladu 1972; Haddad 1995; *New York Times*, October 6, 1989; Savoy 1984:48, 52; Savoy 1994:3.

Dennis McGee hardly represented the model Cajun musician. On the contrary, as William Spires illustrates, the fiddler's highly specialized style was unique to Cajun music in almost every way. The musician represented the dynamism and innovation that spurred the evolution of Cajun music. He employed more than seven different tunings and a variety of remarkable fingering patterns when playing lead fiddle. In addition, he played in at least two keys, G and C, that are not found in accordion-based music, due to the tonal limitations of the diatonic squeezebox. His unusual hand positioning and bowing technique—McGee placed both his thumb and little finger between the bow and hair—allowed the fiddler to increase the bow's tension on the strings, while maintaining enough control for both clear articulation and his trademark glissando (Spires 1994:23-25).

Dennis McGee was one of the most prolific recording artists during the early commercial era. He recorded fifty-three sides with a variety of musicians for the Brunswick, Bluebird, Columbia, and Vocalion labels. Dennis' commercial contributions lend some insight into the scope of his repertoire that ranged from square dances and one steps, to waltzes, blues numbers, and reels (Savoy 1984:53; Spottswood 1990).

Fiddler Sady Courville accompanied Dennis during his first recording session on March 5, 1929 at the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans, an event that launched the twin fiddle sound in the commercial documentary record. One year earlier, McGee and Courville began a promotional campaign by broadcasting over Shreveport radio station KWKH, a station that would later affect the sounds of Cajun music through the station's Louisiana Hayride broadcast. That same year, Sady's employer, a local storeowner, approached him about making records for the Vocalion label in New Orleans. Courville



contacted Dennis and persuaded him to make the trek, although the musicians would not receive any money for their services. With their fiddles in tow, musicians rode the train to the city and cut eight sides. Sady asked that his name not appear on the recordings, fearing his recordings might have a negative reception west of the Atchafalaya Basin by critics who associated Cajun music with the perjorative connotations associated with the ethnic group (Walton 2003). The Brunswick representatives complied, labeling the musician as ‘Second Fiddle’ on all but one of the records. The Courville-McGee string band not only recorded some of the first commercial string music during the early commercial era, but the duet became one of the first Cajun groups to tap into burgeoning mass communication technologies like radio (Savoy 1984:41).

The winds of change began to blow a little harder within the commercial Cajun infrastructure by 1934, foreshadowing the dramatic shifts in instrumentation and repertoire that would come with the Cajun Swing era. Celebrated Cajun musicians like Joe Falcon and the Breaux Family made their way back into the recording studio following a hiatus implemented by major recording companies, who tried desperately to regroup in the wake of “Black Tuesday.” The Breaux family, who had not recorded since their landmark session in 1929, preserved the largest sampling of their assorted repertoire in 1934. Amédé, Ophy, and Clifford recorded one mazurka and several old-time waltzes, blues numbers and one-steps during their stint at Vocalion’s regional recording facility in San Antonio, Texas. “Mazurka de la Louisiane” and “Valse D’Auguste Breaux” represent song styles popular in Cajun Country during the nineteenth century that remained in family repertoires through the middle of the twentieth century.

Blues arrangements, on the other hand, act as a cultural weathervane indicating the direction of commercial Cajun music. African American and Afro-Creole blues seeped into Cajun music's bloodstream through a musical dialogue based on intensive personal interaction that transpired despite overt racial tensions. For instance, Joe and Cleoma Falcon, and Ophy Breaux had several days to bond with Amédé Ardoin in the winter of 1934, when the couple and Ophy escorted the Creole accordionist to New York City on a chartered bus for a recording session on the Decca label. Three days before Christmas, Ardoin recorded his first solo performances, while the Falcons recorded a bona fide Louisiana French blues number entitled "Blues Negre (Nigger Blues)." Blues influenced compositions became a standard fixture in south Louisiana's musical landscape as more Cajuns drew inspiration from popular American commercial music. Indeed, the enormous popularity of country music legend Jimmie Rodgers in Cajun country reinforced the blues' presence in the Cajun repertoire. This musical fusion persisted, as Cajuns created a variety of musical hybrids and the pendulum swung from the Early Commercial Era into the Cajun Swing Era (Falcon 1934).

By 1935, small acoustic accordion based ensembles began to give way to more substantial string-based orchestras. Lawrence Walker and Nathan Abshire, a pair of experimental accordionists who would become two of the leading proponents of the post-World War II dancehall sound, recorded the clearest example of the shift to Cajun Swing on the Bluebird record label. On January 18, 1935, Walker waxed a pair of bluesy English compositions, "What's The Matter Now?" and "Alberta," his interpretation of the blues standard "Corinna," at Bluebird's mobile recording facility in New Orleans. "Corinna" was "[a] tender little blues with a touch of jazz and a flavour of hillbilly,"

expounded folklorist and musicologist Alan Lomax in his treatise *The Folk Songs of North America*. “[T]his folksong of the 1920’s has been so often resung by whites and Negroes in the South that it is now impossible to say on which side of the Jim Crow line it was born.” By the 1930s, the song was widely popular among blues and hillbilly artists who also recorded the arrangement under the titles “Alberta” and “Roberta.” The tune later became a fixture in the western swing repertoire largely through the popularity of Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys’ adaptation. Walker’s recording represents the reach and accumulation of American popular culture that had been percolating in Cajun Country through January of 1935. While the blues genre was well established in south Louisiana’s musical landscape, Cajuns generally rendered their interpretations in French. Walker’s explicit use of English lyrics represents Anglophone American—in particular African American—popular culture’s infusion into Cajun life. It also signals the decided shift from customary stylistic protocol in the commercial setting, although “Alberta’s” thematic orientation could position the song squarely in the early commercial era inventory. In essence, “Alberta” can be equated to the Breaux family composition “Ma blonde est parti,” as both tunes describe an inconsolable man lamenting about the impenetrable boundaries that separate the protagonist from his belle. Nine months after Walker recorded his English blues sides, Bluebird documented the best example of south Louisiana’s evolving musical scene—when Nathan Abshire’s blues-drenched accordion stylings merged on record with the swinging intensity of the Rayne-bo Ramblers, a pioneer Cajun swing ensemble. Record-buying audiences could indubitably hear the momentum shifting from accordion-based arrangements to the fiddle driven string band

combos that dominated the commercial landscape during the World War II era (Lomax 1960:577-578; Sacré 1995:37-39).

During the mid-1930s, the Bluebird record label was at the vanguard of commercial Cajun music. In their search for contemporary crossover artists, Bluebird documented the transition between the early commercial era and the Cajun-inflected western swing that would later dominate the commercial market. On August 10, 1935, veteran bandleader and accordionist Nathan Abshire traveled to New Orleans to record his first commercial sides with the Rayne-bo Ramblers, a string band trio featuring fiddler Norris Savoy and guitarists LeRoy “Happy Fats” LeBlanc and Simon Schexnyder. The group fused traditional and avant-garde musical elements from the Cajun repertoire producing a musical hybrid that reflected the collision of two competing cultural trends. Indeed, the tension between tradition and progress transferred onto the Abshire sides. The accordion assumed its traditional position at the forefront of the recordings, while the revamped western swing-style rhythm section created space for an improvisational jazz-like interplay between the squeezebox and the guitar voices.

Nathan Abshire’s experimental recordings were a sonic premonition of the burgeoning developments in the Cajun musical genre. At times, Abshire’s accordion work and characteristic Cajun vocals played tug-of-war for the dominant position within the song with rhythm section guitarists LeRoy “Happy Fats” LeBlanc and Simon Schexnyder. The double guitar arrangement freed one of the stringed voices from the shackles of its support instrument status allowing the rhythm section to periodically poke its head into the limelight. LeBlanc’s and Schexnyder’s blues slide guitar embellishments and swinging 2/4 backbeat put a revolutionary twist on the traditional

accordion arrangement. Even Abshire's sustained vocal outbursts, commonly used for emotional emphasis in traditional accordion-based Cajun music, stood in sharp contrast to the Rayne-bo Ramblers' abbreviated staccato interjections like "ah hah," "yee ha," and "yeah boy" that the band borrowed from the western swing tradition. These experimental recordings may have been too far removed from convention for Cajun audiences, because Bluebird never again attempted to match accordionists with Cajun Swing rhythm sections following Abshire's debut session.

The ensemble recorded only six sides during the session. Two of the selections presaged the bluesy melodies that would become Abshire's trademark during the post-World War II dancehall era. The "One-Step De Lacassine," for example, is a vibrant romp that flirts with the melody that would become "Pine Grove Blues," the accordionists' seminal postwar smash hit. The ensemble also waxed the "French Blues," another Abshire composition that would achieve classic status during the 1950s. Abshire and the Ramblers also drew inspiration from tunes from the early commercial repertoire. "La Valse de Riceville," an homage to Nathan Abshire's native hamlet, is a rough adaptation of the Breaux family's "Ma Blonde est parti." Abshire borrows several lines directly from Amédé Breaux's waltz, including "tu m'as quitté...pour t'en aller chez ta famille (you left me to go to your parent's house)." Like the Breaux family and Lawrence Walker, Nathan composed his blues numbers from the cross-cultural fodder that nourished Cajun music's evolutionary mechanisms. These imaginative composers followed their ears to the permeable boundaries of their own traditions where fresh ideas and sounds seethed in the Gulf Coast's cross-cultural marinade (Spottswood 1990).

Nathan Abshire and the Rayne-bo Ramblers' collaboration is the proverbial missing link in the documentary record that bridges the gap between the early commercial and Cajun swing eras. Their recordings were on the cutting edge of commercial Cajun music, boldly carving a new path for other musicians to follow. The blistering energy at the core of Abshire's and the Rambler's cross-pollinated sound stemmed from the friction between two contrary stylistic paradigms that espoused two contrasting musical philosophies—French, rural, and traditional, on one hand, and Anglo, urbane, and contemporary on the other. As the French blues collided with western swing, the awkward marriage of the two regional forms generated the same electric atmosphere that engendered the intensity of rock and roll.

The intermittent recordings waxed between 1928 and 1934 during Cajun music's early commercial era reflect the constant dialogue between tradition and popular culture. Musicians freely explored arrangements from their own traditions while absorbing and adapting musical elements from south Louisiana's diverse cultural landscape and American popular culture. The first generation of Cajun recordings represents the emergence of Cajun popular culture, which transcended community and regional boundaries through the commercial distribution of recorded material. Recordings by Blind Uncle Gaspard were a contemporary interpretation of traditional material in 1929, as the guitarist explored the Cajun repertoire from the northern fringe of Cajun country. Gaspard's recording also engaged in a discourse with Americana through the national commercial musical context by recording for Vocalion. He negotiated his position between popular culture and tradition as his recordings became part of the commercial Cajun repertoire, and part of Cajun popular culture.

Fiddler Dennis McGee also straddled several traditions. McGee interpreted and adapted compositions from his Irish heritage and from the traditional Cajun repertoire. After teaming up with Sady Courville, the fiddlers disseminated their brand of string band music on both record and radio. Their personal appearances on Shreveport's KWKH paralleled the development of other radio string bands throughout the South. The development of nationwide communications network accelerated and ameliorated the Cajun-American discourse, which took center stage musically during the Cajun swing era.

### CHAPTER 3: THE LOMAX RECORDINGS

In the depths of the Great Depression, song collectors John and Alan Lomax visited south Louisiana in 1934 and 1937 as part of a nationwide folksong survey to document America's musical legacy for the Library of Congress' Archive of Folk Song (AFS). Like other New Deal projects, the AFS hoped to stimulate the United States' economy and boost morale by validating and celebrating the nation's indigenous music.

The father and son team collected most of their Cajun material between July and August of 1934. Equipped with a three hundred pound "portable" electronic disc recorder in the trunk of their Model A Ford, the research team established their headquarters in New Iberia, Louisiana, a bustling commercial center in the Têche country, and traveled around the surrounding countryside in search of informants. Alan enjoyed the opportunity to practice his French while working in the field, particularly during his first days in Louisiana. After tapping into Cajun Country's rich folklore reserves, the teenager took the recording reins and bore the brunt of the fieldwork load while his father wrote his autobiography. The researchers hoped to document the variety and diversity of the American vernacular songbook, so the nation might learn more about itself (Conrad 1979; Lomax 1999; Lomax and Lomax 1941:xv).

A weighted needle etched the vibrations of music and spoken word into the face of aluminum discs, while a vacuum-tube amplifier, powered by large alkaline batteries, allowing the performances to be played back through a speaker housed in the machine. Alan remembered witnessing, with deep satisfaction, "the pride and pleasure of the folk community in hearing its own music played back for the first time and to realize that this artistry had been permanently preserved" (Lomax 1999).



The Lomax excursion became part of a revolutionary trend in ethnographic and folklore research by embracing emerging advances in sound recording technology. By the 1930s, a number of American social scientists had experimented with recording devices to collect Native American folksongs. Recording machines obviated the need for tedious lyric transcriptions, a technique then popular among folklorists who captured only a one-dimensional skeleton of songs. The Lomax discs from southwest Louisiana present a sonic snapshot of the region's folk music in its natural social contexts, as it was performed in homes, dancehalls, and beer joints. While providing a broader cross-section of south Louisiana's musical landscape than the early commercial record, John Lomax's theoretical orientation profoundly affected his methodological approach to ethnography (Hickerson 1982:68-70; Lomax 1941:xiv).

John Lomax equated their vision of the folk with authenticity. For the ballad hunters, authenticity did not necessarily coincide with race or ethnicity, but socio-economic status and cultural affiliation. Lomax, like his contemporaries in the social sciences, espoused the notion that the folk lived beyond the corrosive influence of mainstream popular culture disseminated by middle and upper class Anglo-Americans. For example, John criticized vocal groups that combined elements of folk and popular music. Lomax believed "citified singers," vocal ensembles like the Golden Gate Quartet and Fisk Jubilee Singers, stripped from their arrangements the vernacular soul of the music's origins. John Lomax championed performers that appealed to the researcher's personal aesthetics and concept of folk—southern men with working class backgrounds, who lived beyond the corrosive influence of American popular culture (Porterfield 1996:77).

John Lomax's brand of salvage ethnography tended to focus on male informants. Indeed, the working man was the sole purveyor of "pure" folk culture. Untainted by education and high

culture, his music represented the “native mind of the frontiersman.” Luckily for Cajun music researchers, John and his son Alan captured a snapshot of Louisiana’s musical landscape generally ignored by the Academy (Porterfield 1996:128).

During a period when most of academia dismissed provincial peoples as inconsequential research material, John looked to the isolated and impoverished as the wellspring for vernacular music. The Lomaxes not only revolutionized American ethnography, but the nation’s perception of the folk and folk music by emphasizing the architects who generated folk traditions. A folksong’s pedigree no longer represented the single criterion for authenticity. Rather, a combination of song and singer that had to conform to the Lomaxes’ standards. The researchers debarked from fashionable popular interpretations of the folk repertoire by formally trained musicians by highlighting “actual folk.” Their pioneering efforts created what music historian Benjamin Filene dubbed as a “‘cult of authenticity,’ a thicket of expectations and valuations that American roots musicians and their audiences have been negotiating ever since.” While Lomax’s efforts can be viewed as a ground-breaking achievement, the scope of his fieldwork was linked to his adaptation to two cultural spheres in American society (Filene 2000:49).

As Nolan Porterfield’s *Last Cavalier* illustrates, John’s life was filled with contradictions, a condition derived from a sort of cultural schizophrenia. Though he was raised on a Texas ranch, the musicologist’s lifestyle became a balancing act between his marginal inclusion in two juxtaposed and contradictory social spheres—the rural South and the Ivy League elite. As a student at Harvard University, Lomax cloaked himself with a romantic urban cowboy persona, portraying himself as “a hard-bitten ex-cowboy, now turned civilized and sophisticated, dressed up in coat and tie and gone East.” In the field, Lomax emphasized his rural roots to facilitate the

collection process with working class informants, who would not have identified with traditional academicians (Porterfield 1996:111).

Taking a page from his own experience, marginality became John Lomax's prerequisite for uncovering examples of indigenous American music and European musical survivals. He looked to the periphery of mainstream trends: cowboys, for instance, who engaged in an insular, vagabond lifestyle; African American inmates, sheltered from jazz, radio, and the white world outside the prison walls, also served as a representative example of a group who maintained "pure" musical traditions. French Louisiana proved another fertile time capsule on the edge of Anglo American society. To the researchers' great delight, Cajun musicians played a form of music that was seemingly sheltered from Anglo-American trends. The ethnic group conformed to the Lomaxian isolation model, as Cajuns lived on the geographic, linguistic, and cultural periphery of the American mainstream. Fortunately for this analysis, the researchers did not always adhere rigidly to ballad collecting. While French ballads and indigenous Louisiana compositions are the obvious focal point of their research, the Lomaxes recorded extraneous material that caught their fancy. These recordings clearly indicate that Cajuns imbibed and interpreted contemporary American cultural trends. Furthermore, they demonstrate that Cajuns chose to maintain specific cultural traits including language and music despite their connection to Americana, as they served an immediate purpose within Depression-era Cajun society. The contradictions between the Lomaxes' agenda and south Louisiana's musical and cultural diversity reflected by the field recordings indicates that the researchers ignored those cultural traits that did not conform to their mission. Such criteria sometimes overlooked the artists' complexities. For instance, Cajun balladeers like Elita Hoffpauir may have enjoyed listening to and performing popular music, but the musicologist only documented her European-based *a*

*cappella* repertoire. At other times the Lomaxes improvised the parameters of their research and collected either what their informants offered or unusual or novel musical strains, such as the Evangeline jazz orchestra. Their ethnomusical survey documented enormous amount of cultural material, that, when compared to the commercial musical documentary record, provides a broad look at south Louisiana's diverse musical landscape.

The Lomax collection stands as the clearest documentation of the cross-cultural musical interaction that took place across racial and ethnic boundaries within south Louisiana's intrinsic web of ethnicity. These recordings portray Cajun society as a complex, socially and economically stratified bilingual community, surrounded by an incredibly diverse musical milieu. The sounds, techniques, melodies, arrangements and musical ideas from the Cajun's Anglo-American, Afro-Creole, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and American Indian neighbors diffused freely through a multifaceted discourse (Ancelet 1989:1).

The field recordings hint at the region's musical diversity—black Creole *jurés*, Afro-Caribbean melodies, Anglo-American tunes, and an assortment of reels, breakdowns, and waltzes. Despite the brilliant material collected by the Lomaxes, time and financial restraints shaped their research. In his reminiscences, Alan Lomax recalled the limited scope of their methodology, which intended to collect and interpret European musical survivals, not the then popular commercial styles that resembled music of the Anglo-American South. In 1999, he revisited the material that he collected sixty-five years earlier in the liner notes of the Rounder Records release *Cajun and Creole Music Vol. I & II: The Classic Louisiana Recordings, 1934/1937*. Lomax writes:

It is only after years of work in analyzing the song styles of the world (*Folk Song Style and Culture*, New York: Transaction Press, 1994), that I began to understand the extraordinary nature of these songs. In them I find imprints of the three main cultural traditions that encountered one another in Louisiana--the French European, the Caribbean African, and the

Mississippi Indian. In fact, I believe that the Cajun and Creole traditions of Southwest Louisiana are unique in the blending of European, African, and Amerindian qualities (Lomax 1999).

Indeed, all three traditions—European, African, and Amerindian—have synthesized in varying degrees in the formation of what is now popularly known as Cajun music. However, Lomax fails to recognize another important component of the cultural amalgam that contributes to the form and structure of the genre—Anglo-American characteristics (Tisserand 1998:46; White 1976-1980:143-145).

This chapter focuses upon the profound effect of Americanization and the English language acculturation on musical trends and the diversity of the Cajun repertoire in 1934. Like the Lomaxes, later researchers neglected the large body of Anglo-influenced material in this collection, choosing instead to concentrate on supposed Old World musical survivals. For instance, folklorist Barry Ancelet, the most recent scholar to interpret the field recordings, has focused primarily on perceived European musical survivals and French language compositions. Neglecting the contexts and external musical influences that shaped both Cajun music and evolving musical tastes in south Louisiana presents an overtly limited view of the diversity and complexity of the Cajun experience during the first half of the twentieth century. This study hopes to complement previous Franco- and Euro- centric research by presenting an alternative perspective on the Cajun experience (Ancelet, Edwards, and Pitre 1991:2-25).

The AFS field recordings are essential to the study of Cajun music. Not only do they represent one of the first academically-based explorations of regional music in southwest Louisiana, they reveal the expanse of the Cajun repertoire neglected the commercial documentary record, such as the prevalence of European ballad traditions, laments and drinking songs, often only performed at weddings or private family functions. Other material in the collection lends insight into the linguistic climate of both French and English among Cajuns, and

documents the impact of external musical influences from both neighboring ethnic groups and American popular culture. The accordions, fiddles, guitars, clarinets, trombones, and cornets that appear in blues numbers, waltzes, and jazz compositions offer a glimpse of some of the instrumentation available in Depression-era Louisiana. The ballad hunters also uncovered fragmented evidence of diverse musical aesthetics among different socio-economic groups.

John and Alan Lomax noted in their 1937 publication *Our Singing Country*, that rural Louisianians and their working-class music embarrassed the urban middle- and upper-classes. Those privileged Cajuns fortunate enough to afford a college education cringed at the thought of being labeled with the pejorative “Cajun.” Despite the animosity between classes, a cultural dialogue persisted between the factions. The social elite often learned songs through personal contact with domestic servants or at public performances by working class musicians. The Lomaxes documented several instances in which middle and upper class Louisianians performed working class folksongs. The social aesthetic and classical musical training of the elite, however, affected their rendering of folk material. Edwin L. Stevens, president of Lafayette’s Southwest Louisiana Institute (SLI), contributed a song he learned from a “colored Baptist preacher” who hailed from Tallahassee, Florida, and worked for the Stevens family in Natchitoches Parish. The Lomaxes also recorded fiddler and vocalist O. J. Phillips, then a student at Louisiana State University, who played three songs he learned as a child in Evangeline Parish, including “Baouille” and “J’ai passé devant ta porte.” Though noteworthy performances, Stevens and Phillips depart from the working-class aesthetic. The recordings follow accurately the assigned chord changes and melody lines of the compositions, but did not have the whining nasalization or emotive gusto associated with blue-collar Cajun music. Aluminum discs collected from the privileged classes only represent a small percentage of the material compiled

in 1934. Rural working class farmers, laborers, sharecroppers, and hired hands generated the bulk of the Lomax collection's material (AFS 112a1).

The musicologists relied heavily on neighborhood gatekeepers, guides who provided the Lomaxes with access to the inner circles of rural Cajun society. Ideally, John and Alan hoped to find a respected member of the local community who was also savvy enough to comprehend the nature of the research, particularly considering that field recordings were a revolutionary methodological advancement even among academics. The Lomaxes allowed their guide to negotiate and interpret the mediations between the singers and researchers. Alcohol often proved to be a seductive social lubricant, and, when used in moderation, proved to be a veritable "Open Sesame" into the vaults of the Cajun musical repertoire (*New Iberia Weekly Iberian*, April 28, 1938).

The Lomaxes' colleague, musicologist Irène Thérèse Whitfield, sometimes accompanied her friends on their song-hunting expeditions. She described in detail the effective role of the gatekeeper in her 1935 Master's Thesis for Louisiana State University. On one of their expeditions, the musicologists procured the services of a Crowley man, a roughneck who allegedly knew all the musicians in the rural *Marais Bouleur* neighborhood. The group became well acquainted as they traveled along the region's network of winding, unmanicured dirt roads. Whitfield described the man as a handsome white Creole, who had a long and troubled past with the law. The scout passed the time by regaling the researchers with tales of his adventures. "He said he had been shot at on several occasions, had served three sentences in jail," Whitfield wrote, "and had been cut twice with a razor by a woman in an attempt at murder." The divorced gatekeeper continued, explaining that he planned to make enough money in the Bosco Oil Fields

to leave his second wife and to live somewhere else (Hebert 1991; Ancelet 1987; Whitfield 1969:22).

The guide eventually led the researchers to the most famous accordion player in Marais Bouleur. Sweltering Gulf Coast heat lingered in the atmosphere as the Lomaxes parked the car and escaped the blazing summer sun by entering a small sharecropper's shanty. The clean-shaven accordionist sat in the middle of his cabin, surrounded by an attentive audience, as he reviewed his repertoire for a wedding dance to be held later that afternoon. He annotated each song by describing how beautiful the composition sounded, or recounting how he learned the tune from his grandfather. With the help of the gatekeeper's endorsement, the bride's father invited the researchers to record the nuptial celebration (Whitfield 1969:23).

The session proved worthwhile. With all of the furniture removed from the tenant house, the newlyweds entered the home and made a circuit of the room in measured steps that followed the cadence of the accordion, fiddle, and triangle combo. After the couple properly presented themselves, the musicians enthusiastically belted out a series of dance numbers, stopping occasionally to imbibe from a bottle of alcohol situated on the floor between their chairs. Following the celebration, the Lomaxes collected their equipment and returned Whitfield and their guide to Crowley. Irène remembered fondly the man who not only guided and entertained the researchers, but "made announcements on records, coaxed singers and pacified drunkards." Upon arrival in Crowley, the gatekeeper dashed immediately into a saloon, only to slither out later rather inebriated. The Lomaxes encountered many such characters in their quest for Western European ballad traditions throughout south Louisiana (Whitfield 1969:23-29).

To the musicologists' great delight, home music was a viable part of social life in Depression-era Cajun society. In some cases, whole families sang traditional ballads,



performing solo or singing together in unison. The Lomaxes recorded seventy-eight unaccompanied ballads, laments, and drinking songs by an assortment of singers, most of whom learned the songs orally from older family members. An assortment of balladeers provided an impressive compilation of French, French Canadian, and American texts. Cajun Country seemingly teemed with singers like forty-two-year-old Luneda Comeaux, an Iberia Parish resident who contributed ten ballads in her shrill falsetto.<sup>1</sup>

Alan Lomax discovered his favorite performer at 611 Hopkins Street in the heart of New Iberia: a fifteen-year-old girl working in a tomato-canning factory named Elita Hoffpauir. “When I found her she was tired and not particularly crazy about singing for me,” Lomax explained in 1938 to a New Iberia reporter, “but she did want a new party dress.” After coaxing Elita with a one-dollar store-bought outfit, she revealed her seemingly inexhaustible repertoire to the ballad chasers. Four of her ballads appeared in the 1937 publication *Our Singing Country*, though Elita contributed eight solo performances, and three *a cappella* trio arrangements with her sisters, Ella and Mary. The Hoffpauir family astonished Alan. He felt as though he had hit the proverbial Western European ballad jackpot. He recorded the girls for an entire afternoon. Towards the end of the session, one of the teenagers mentioned that their singing was acceptable, but their father, Julien Hoffpauir, was the family’s star performer.<sup>2</sup>

A renowned ballad singer, Julien knew a score of European-based compositions and taught his daughters to perform with restraint and precise enunciation. He contributed twelve sides, singing about separated lovers, heartache, and death. In “Au pont de l’anse,” he recounted the story of a stubborn girl who drowns tragically in a river when a bridge collapsed during a

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<sup>1</sup> AFS 33a1; AFS 33a2; AFS 33a3; AFS 33b1; AFS 33b2; AFS 33b3; AFS 34a1; AFS 34a2; AFS 34a3; AFS 34a4; AFS 34b1; AFS 34b2.

<sup>2</sup> AFS 14 A; AFS 14 B; AFS 31 A; AFS 37 A; AFS 38 B; Ancelet 1999; Lomax 1941:xi; Lomax 1999; *New Iberia Weekly Iberian*, April 28, 1938.

local bridge dance. During Hoffpauir's recitation of the European-based ballad "La Belle et le capitaine," a maiden feigns death to escape the clutches of a lecherous captain, thereby preserving her virtue. Despite the French origin of Julien's repertoire, these ballads may reflect the Hoffpauir family's New World experience, not their European roots (AFS 32 A; AFS 32 B; AFS 38A).

The Hoffpauirs first immigrated to New Orleans in the 1770s from the European province Alsace, then a German principality. By the 1780s, the family had relocated to the Opelousas district along Louisiana's western prairies. Bayou Country's multi-ethnic francophone community eventually absorbed the Alsatians, which may account for the similarities noted by Alan Lomax to balladry tradition in France's Poitou region, which contributed the vast majority of Acadia's original colonists. In light of the Acadian genealogical connection to western France and Poitou, and the incredible amount of cross-cultural borrowing taking place in south Louisiana during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Hoffpauirs undoubtedly learned a portion of their repertoire from the surrounding wealth of folkloric material in south Louisiana. Though poignant Cajun expressions, the family's song inventory represents only a tiny segment of the complex Depression-era Cajun musical landscape (Lomax 1999).

In 1934, Cajuns living in south Louisiana performed a wide variety of song styles from European-based *a cappella* ballads and fiddle tunes, to bluesy accordion one-steps, cowboys songs, and popular American compositions. The diversity of these musical styles reflects the both the ethnic composition of early twentieth-century south Louisiana and the accelerating momentum of the Americanization process spurred by mass media, increased mobility provided by trains and automobiles, and compulsory English-only education.

The region's vernacular music acts as a contemporary social and cultural barometer, lending insight into the thoughts and feelings of folk performers, as well as the climate of early twentieth-century linguistic contexts that shaped melody lines and lyrics. The texts of two French songs describing journeymen by the Sonnier brothers and Mr. Bornu help to dispel the notion of Cajun isolation during the early twentieth century (Ancelet 1987; Baker 1978; Bernard 2003:xx-xxi; Gilmore 1933; *New Iberia Weekly Iberian*, April 6, 1939; Savoy 1984).

Between June 19 and June 30, 1934, the Lomaxes recorded members of the Sonnier family in Erath. Three of the four Sonnier brothers—Fenelus, Cleveland, and Issac—presented an eclectic mix of French laments, drinking songs, and ballads to the Lomaxes. Barry Ancelet maintains that Isaac and Cleveland were the most active musicians in the family, frequently performing with their hot-tempered first cousin, Fénélon Brasseaux. Isaac and Fénélon experienced first hand Americana beyond south Louisiana when they served together in the United States military during World War I. Their experiences abroad may have influenced, in part, the characters and the wandering theme that appear in some of the compositions collected by the musicologists (Dronet 2000:52; Lomax 1999).

Themes and images in the Sonnier/Brasseaux arrangements ranged from gambling and wild women, to drink and wander lust. “Chanson des Savoy” describes a fugitive who travels to Louisiana's capital city, Baton Rouge, with brass knuckles and whiskey. Despite the city's French name and small Acadian population, the state capital represented a bastion of American ideals, as Anglo political figures like Huey Long dominated the state legislature. The Sonnier/Brasseaux arrangement is remarkably similar to Jesse Stafford's “Je m'endors,” collected on June 9, 1934 when the Lomaxes visited Crowley. Stafford's song also describes outlaws with brass knuckles and jugs of whiskey “chercher à malfaire” (in search of trouble).

Crowley, a town boasting a large Anglo-American population, replaces Baton Rouge in the latter composition. Though all of the Sonnier/Brasseaux songs are sung in French, images and thematic structures in their compositions suggest cross-cultural interaction with Anglo-Americans. The indigenous Louisiana French ballad “Belle” further reflects the Anglo-American cultural undercurrents prevalent among Francophones, and Cajun Country’s intimate connection to east Texas (AFS-11 B side; Ancelet 1999; Lomax 1999).

The Lomaxes recorded a singer near Morse, Louisiana whom they identified simply as Mr. Bornu—a thin man with olive skin, unruly hair, and a piercing gaze. Bornu’s nasal tone weaves through the blues-inflected jazzy structures of “Belle,” as he chronicles the plight of a man desperate to reach his dying lover in east Texas, where thousands of impoverished Cajuns had migrated to work in the booming oil industry. The protagonist hops a freight train only to find his sweetheart unconscious, a tragic event that forced him to pawn his horse, Henry, to save her life.

Si j'ai une belle ici, belle  
 C'est par rapport à toi, belle  
 Mais si j'ai une belle, ici, belle,  
 C'est par rapport à toi, belle.

If I have a sweetheart here, sweetheart,  
 It's because of you, sweetheart.  
 But, if I have a sweetheart here, sweetheart,  
 It's because of you, sweetheart.

J'ai pris ce char ici, belle,  
 Pour m'en aller au Texas, belle.  
 J'ai pris ce char ici, belle,  
 Pour m'en aller au Texas, belle.

I took this very train, sweetheart,  
 To go to Texas, sweetheart.

Il y avait juste trois jours, belle,  
 Que j'étais là-bas, belle,  
 J'ai reçu une lettre de toi, belle,  
 Que t'étais bien malade, belle.

Only three days, sweetheart,  
 After I arrived, sweetheart,  
 I received a letter from you, sweetheart,  
 Saying that you were very ill, sweetheart.

Que t'étais bien malade, belle,  
 En danger de mourir, belle.  
 Que t'étais bien malade, belle,  
 En danger de mourir, belle.

That you were very ill, sweetheart,  
 In danger of dying, sweetheart.

J'ai pris ce char encore, belle,  
Pour m'en revenir ici, belle.  
J'ai pris ce char encore, belle,  
Pour m'en revenir ici, belle.

I took this train again, sweetheart,  
To come back here, sweetheart.

Quand j'ai arrivé à toi, belle,  
T'étais sans connaissance, belle.  
Quand j'ai arrivé à toi, belle,  
T'étais sans connaissance, belle.

When I reached you, sweetheart,  
You were unconscious, sweetheart.

Je m'en ai retourné de bord, belle,  
Je m'en ai retourné là-bas, belle,  
Je m'en ai retourné de bord, belle,  
Je m'en ai retourné là-bas, belle,

I turned right around, sweetheart,  
And returned there, sweetheart.

J'ai hypothéqué mon cheval, belle,  
Pour te sauver la vie, bell.  
J'ai hypothéqué mon cheval, belle,  
Pour te sauver la vie, bell.

I pawned my horse, sweetheart,  
To save your life, sweetheart.

O si j'ai plus Henry, belle,  
C'est par t'avoir eu aimée belle.  
O si j'ai plus Henry, belle,  
C'est par t'avoir eu aimée belle.

Oh, if I no longer have Henry, sweetheart,  
It's because I loved you, sweetheart.

S'abandonner, c'est dur, belle,  
Mais s'oublier c'est long, belle.  
1999)  
S'abandonner, c'est dur, belle,  
Mais s'oublier c'est long, belle.

Parting is hard, sweetheart,  
But forgetting takes long, sweetheart (Ancelet

Mr. Bornu's original composition suggests the influence of Louisiana's French ballad traditions, though distinctly American influences pervade the arrangement. The singer blends both European and African musical ideas, a technique exploited by popular Depression-era musicians like Jimmie Rodgers, Milton Brown, and Bob Wills. Indeed, John and Alan Lomax believed that popular culture and mass media forms—particularly Westerns and jazz—profoundly shaped this contemporaneous chronicle of the Cajun experience as much as personal contact with Anglo-Americans (Saxon 1954).

“Belle” also affords insight into the impact of increased mobility provided by automobiles and trains, and the role of Texas in the Americanization process. Improved mobility presented the possibility of a long distance relationship for the protagonist, who might not have otherwise found love across the Sabine River. Both his ability to travel and his interstate love affair, emphasizes the important role that cross-cultural borrowing, prompted by interpersonal interaction between Cajuns and their Texan neighbors, has played within the Cajun community during the first half of the twentieth century. Economic opportunities lured thousands of Cajuns to the Lone Star state’s oil fields and shipyards, a phenomenon that would later profoundly affect the structure and sound of commercial Cajun music. Though Texas is a major theme in “Belle,” other factors in the song indicate that English-only education in Bayou Country was essential to the central character’s relationship and proved to be an Americanizing force in his life.

The song’s heroine writes a letter to her lover describing the severity of her illness. His ability to read the message, which was almost certainly written in English, illuminates another underlying American cultural current. Though the song is composed and performed in French, the hero, and evidently Mr. Bornu, have a working knowledge of English. By the 1930s, English began to play a significant role in familiar, everyday routines. Rural working class Cajuns adopted the practice of labeling their draft animals with common English names. In accordance with popular trends in early twentieth century Bayou Country, Henry is the only character in “Belle” to receive specific appellation. Furthermore, it is the only word in the song pronounced in English, making the horse a clear linguistic manifestation of Anglo-American culture within the context of francophone Louisiana (Bernard 2003:19).

Singers used both French and English to express the Cajun experience, adapting English to articulate the immediate needs of the bilingual community. Indeed, the second language did

not express the worldview of Anglo-America, but the perceptions of Cajuns as they confronted Americana on their own terms. Beginning in 1921, Cajun schoolteachers required English immersion in their classrooms in a compulsory effort to impose a Cajun interpretation of appropriate American ethics on a new generation. Pupils improvised their way through the immersion process, in the same way that they improvised and transformed the employment of English to translate their formulating views, values, and beliefs. Though immersion was almost universally a tortuous experience for Cajun schoolchildren, students embraced, however forcibly, the foreign tongue. Like French, English quickly became a Cajun language in south Louisiana, an additional communicative medium that ameliorated and expanded the community's expressive capacity. The song "Belle" represents only one example of the linguistic complexities that shaped the 1934 Cajun musical landscape. English material is sprinkled throughout the Lomax collection (Bernard 2003:33; Brasseaux 1978; Philips 2001:305; Walton 1994).

Many of the arrangements recorded by the Lomaxes featured French lyrics, though a large number of the performers were bilingual, displaying a command of the English language both in their annotated dialogue between songs and during the performances themselves. Several French ballad singers like Elita Hoffpauir communicated quite easily with the Lomaxes in her second language, while other performers actually sang a variety of English-based songs. For instance, the researchers collected a fragmented version of "The Old Chisholm Trail" performed by an unidentified singer with fiddle accompaniment:

I woke up in the morning in the Old Chisholm Trail,  
With a rope in my hand and a cow by the tail  
Tai yai yay, tai yai yay,  
Tai yai yay, yippy yay.

The blend of popular cultural influences from radio, record, and Western movies with the interaction between south Louisianians and the Texas cowboys, resonated with the Cajuns, particularly ranchers. In south Louisiana communities with large Anglophone populations, Cajuns often learned a variety of English songs like “Old Chisholm Trail” (AFS 11b2; Lomax 1960:355-356).

Crowley, Louisiana’s large population of Midwestern transplants dramatically enhanced the cultural complexity of Acadia parish. The Lomaxes discovered musicians in the Parish seat of justice who also displayed remarkable agility in both French and English. In June 1934, Samuel Stafford performed a variant of “The Girl I Left Behind” that he learned from his father.

There lived a rich old farmer down by a town close by.  
He had a charming young daughter, which I can’t deny.  
Being both tall and slender, both beautiful and small...

*Spoken:*

*Sam—“Stop?”*

*Lomax—“Go ahead.”*

I’ve loved many girls in this wide world but I loved her the best of all.  
I asked if it made any difference if I crossed over the plain  
I asked if it made any difference if I returned again  
We shook hands and part[ed]...

We shook hands and parted, then the girl I left behind...  
...out one evening and met the post boy there.  
He hand me down a letter, which give me the understand  
That the girl I left in Missouri had married another man.  
The girl I left in Missouri had married another man.

*Spoken: “I believe that’s all.” (AFS 15b1)*

In addition to this Cajun variation of an Anglo-American folk tune, the Stafford family also contributed French sides like “Je m’endors,” a song describing the amorous escapades of a villainous wanderer. The family’s repertoire suggests that English arrangements played a



complementary role to French tunes in south Louisiana. Not all of the English songs in the Lomax collection are simple regurgitations of conventional compositions.

An unidentified female vocalist performed a disturbing lullaby in English that recounted the story of a young girl seduced on her mother's bed by a dubious "honest boy." Though her pronunciation is decidedly shaped by French inflection, her vocabulary is derived from the rural Anglo-Southern vernacular. Her voice wavers emotionally as the story line progresses and actions intensify. In an unusual twist at the end of the tune, the "honest boy" uses the term "fuck" to reproach violently his victim for wearing her skirt above her knee, unacceptable behavior in polite company and particularly in the presence of distinguished strangers. The singer's poignant use of such strong language leads the listener to believe that the song may be autobiographical.

Went downtown, like an honest girl does  
I went downtown, like an honest girl does  
Went down to the store, like an honest girl does  
Got me a pair of drawers, like an honest girl does  
Then I met a pretty boy, like an honest girl does  
And he come home with me, like an honest boy do  
He took me down in mother's room, like an honest boy do  
He laid me down on mother's bed, like an honest boy do  
Raise my dress over my head, like an honest boy do  
And then he done it to me, and he said, "To hell with you little girl.  
Listen to me little gal, don't ever give an inch above your knee.  
They gone to fuck you, then give you a kick, little gal" (AFS 12 single faced disc).

This unusually graphic description of love gone astray is a contemporary composition illustrating the singer's ability to craft melodically her emotional distress in a second language. The seemingly personal nature of the ditty illustrates that English had invariably become a viable form of communication within the Depression-era Cajun community, a new communicative medium that expanded infinitely the possibility of expression. Because of the sexual nature of the song's climax and the social restrictions concerning premarital sex—even seduction or

rape—English may have been a safer language in which performer could more comfortably sing (Dubois and Horvath 1998a; Dubois and Horvath 1998b; Dubois and Horvath 1999).

The diversity of western Louisiana’s ethnic and musical landscape profoundly affected Cajun music during the 1930s. In addition to European balladry and Anglo-American melodies, the Afro-Creole *juré* field recordings compiled in 1934, a musical form similar to ring shouts and circle dances popular in other parts of the South, stand as some of the most remarkable material in the Lomax collection. The researchers documented several *juré* performances including Wilfred Charles, who can be heard stomping and clapping in self-accompaniment during his solo performance of “Dégo/Zydeco” in New Iberia (AFS 11a1).

In June of 1934, Alan Lomax traveled to Jennings, Louisiana, to rendezvous with members of the black Creole community for an impromptu Baptist church social. As Alan arrived, three men began to improvise up-tempo polyrhythmic cadences sans instruments—stomping, clapping and shouting. Young men and women from the congregation paired up and danced in a circular pattern around the church, while the musicologist arranged his microphone near the musicians, then connected the cable to the AFS recorder in the trunk of his Model A. In the middle of the session, a fight broke out prompting Alan to collect his equipment and leave immediately. Lomax described the episode as one of the most extraordinary encounters of his recording career, despite the hostile interruption (Lomax 1999).

The Lomaxes recorded several *juré* performances in Jennings and New Iberia. Black Creole Wilfred Charles performed a solo rendition of “Dégo/Zydeco,” a secular song that alludes to the tension between ethnic groups in Louisiana. The performance begins by describing a group of Italians (“les dégos”), who become ill and fall into ditches after eating rotten bananas—

and concludes with several lines about “les haricots sont pas salé” (the snapbeans are not salty) (AFS 11a1; Ancelet 1999).

The bilingualism prevalent in Depression-era south Louisiana reflected the reality of both the Cajun and Afro-Creole communities. *Jurés* collected from the period range from the secular Creole French “J’ai fait tout le tour du pays” to sacred English arrangements like the traditional funeral shout “Rock-a-way.” Austin Coleman, Washington Brown, and Sampson Brown provide the best example of linguistic agility in the Lomax collection, as the lead singer improvises through a series of code switches during their performance of “Feel Like Dying in His Army.” Coleman maneuvers seamlessly between French and English, while his ring singers effectively execute English call-and-response refrains—“Feel like joining His army”—within a heavily syncopated rhythmic framework (AFS 79a1; AFS 111a1; Ancelet 1999).

**Refrain after each line:** *Feel like joining His army.*

O Lord, Lord, Lord, my God

O oui, mon cher ami,  
O quoi tu vas faire?

Oh, yes, my dear friend,  
Oh, what will you do?

O quoi tu vas faire, comment,  
hein, petit monde?

Oh, what will you do,  
eh, little girl?

O oui, ma petite, si toi priés pas.

Oh, yes, my little one, if you do not  
pray.

O si to prie pas, tu vas brûler dans l’enfer.

Oh, if you do not pray, you will burn  
in hell.

O Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, my Lord.

O oui, ma petite, si toi priés pas.

Oh, yes, my little one, if you do not  
pray.

O mo voyé après, O mon docteur.

Oh, I sent for my doctor.

O mon docteur, il vini là.

Oh, my doctor came.

O il dit, “Mon petit, to va pas vi.”

Oh, he said, “My little one, you will not live.”

O Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, what you gon’ do?

O sinner woman, you better pray.

O sinner woman, you better pray.

O oui mon petit, si toi pries pas.

Oh, yes, my little one, if you do not pray.

O si toi pries pas, tu vas brûler dans l’enfer.

Oh, if you do not pray, you will burn in hell.

O Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, what you gon’ do?

O Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, what you gon’ do?

O what you gon’ do when I’m dead and gone?

O what you gon’ do when I’m dead and gone?

O quoi tu vas faire quand je suis dead et mouru?

Oh, what will you do when I’m dead and gone?

O cher ami, cher ami.

Oh, dear friend, dear friend.

O lalalilalilalalalalala.

O Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord.

O sinner woman, you better pray.

O Lord, Lord, quoi tu dis?

Oh, Lord, Lord, what do you say?

O quoi tu vas faire quand je vas être mouru?

Oh, what will you do when I’m dead and gone? (Ancelet 1999)

Folklorist Barry Ancelet maintains that “Feel Like Dying in His Army” reflects the religious roots of *juré*, complementing the secular material recorded by Jimmy Peters and his ring dance singers (Ancelet 1999).

Jimmy Peters' ensemble recorded several styles of black Creole music related to the *juré* tradition in Jennings. Some of the material follows the standard *a cappella* shouts with rhythmic accompaniment provided by stomping and clapping. "J'ai fait tout le tour du pays" resembles the improvisation of Wilfred Charles with the familiar Afro-Creole refrain "les haricots sont pas salé." Other sides feature a percussive instrumental accompaniment provided by spoons and a washboard that attempts to recreate the rhythm and syncopation of his *a cappella* performances (AFS 79a1; AFS 79b1; AFS 79b2).

John and Alan Lomax collected an exceptional assortment of Caribbean-based material by black Creole Joe Massie on St. John's Plantation near St. Martinville. In 1915, Massie began working as the plantation's dummy engine operator. Singing became his diversionary means of amusement during the long workday. A series of his sides sought to recreate the sounds an Antilles orchestra.

Massie used his voice to imitate brass and reed instruments on several of his recordings, at times barking out short, syncopated vocal blasts to produce horn-like fanfares. The melody of one Massie recording in particular, (AFS 82b1), sounds remarkably similar to the Creole jazz tune "Mussieu Satan Fache," recorded in 1929 on the island of Martinique by the *Orchestre Antillais de Alexandre Stellio*. Though it is unlikely that the Louisiana singer ever heard the West Indian jazz band, affluent white Creole families from the Antilles who settled in St. Martinville near St. John's Plantation, may have introduced the melody (AFS 82a1; AFS 82a2; AFS 82a3; AFS 82b1; AFS 82b2; Stellio 1993).

The frequent musical exchange between the Afro-Creole and Cajun communities during the 1930s is well documented on 78 RPM recordings. Legendary black Creole accordionist Amédé Ardoin produced a series of commercial releases with white Cajun fiddler Dennis

McGee. In 1934, female musical pioneer Cleoma Breaux Falcon recorded the African-American influenced accordion romp “Blues Nègre” with her husband Joe Falcon. One year later, Cajun Lawrence Walker recorded an English rendition of the Blues standard “Alberta,” recalling the syncopation and call-and-response of Afro-Creole and Anglo-Protestant black music from other parts of the South. The Lomax collection illustrates that this cross-cultural exchange extends well beyond the commercial documentary record.

A snapshot of the instrumentation featured in the Lomax collection reflects the diversity of south Louisiana’s musical landscape and the context in which Cajun music flourished and evolved during the Great Depression. During a period when 78 RPM recordings only hinted at the diversity of the Cajun repertoire, the Lomaxes document a side of Cajun music undiscovered—or ignored by—musicologists, traditionalists, and Cajun music enthusiasts. Sides from instrumentalists specializing in colonial music, a jazz ensemble, and a fiddle prodigy compliment the few dance bands that the Lomaxes did record.

Perhaps the most remarkable instrumental piece in the Archive of Folk Song’s south Louisiana collection features the only known recording of Cajuns playing colonial-era compositions. On June 29, 1934, the Lomaxes recorded two instrumental songs in New Iberia featuring clarinetist Henri Decuir and fiddler Delmar Hebert. According to the annotation following the performance, Decuir and Hebert were over seventy years old and specialized in Louisiana “colonial” music. The musicians, who performed an unidentified waltz, featuring accompaniment by Hebert’s children, claimed the tune was the first waltz introduced to Louisiana during the French regime. Their two distinctly Old World arrangements represent the defunct instrumental convention that enlisted both the clarinet and fiddle for European-styled dance music. The instrumentation employed in this recording coincides with the first description

of Acadians owning musical instruments, a succession record from 1782 that described a clarinet and fiddle. Both instruments remained in the musical landscape, though in different capacities. The clarinet found a voice in local jazz ensembles, while fiddles and resonated with the sounds of various dance music traditions (AFS 41 B side; AFS 41b2; AFS 41a1; Ancelet 1989:15).

Wayne Perry, an accomplished fiddler from Indian Bayou, Louisiana, recorded ten sides for the Lomaxes. Perry's field recordings embody the diversity of the Cajun repertoire in 1934, while reflecting the pertinent influences affecting the southwest Louisiana's musical landscape—namely Creole and Anglo-American. The fiddler performed tunes ranging from an “old time Creole Blues” to Anglo compositions like “Sitting on Top of the World,” “Chickens Cackling,” “Old Joe Clark,” and “Kissing Catherine.” The Anglo influenced tunes, particularly “Old Joe Clark,” features Appalachian fiddle techniques like cross-tuning and haunting drones. Considering his technical command of the fiddle, there is some question as to whether Wayne Perry recorded commercially.<sup>3</sup>

A fiddler usually listed as Wayne Perry recorded thirty-eight commercial sides for the Bluebird and Decca labels in 1937 and 1938 with three different incarnations of Joe Werner's Cajun Swing ensemble: Joe's Acadians, Joe Werner and The Ramblers, and the Louisiana Rounders. All three groups featured Perry on fiddle, Joe Werner on guitar, vocal, and on most sides harmonica, and Julius “Papa Cairo” Lamperez on either guitar or electric steel guitar. Wayne Perry's knowledge of both Blues and Anglo-American material featured in the Lomax recordings would have facilitated the transition to Western Swing or Cajun Swing, if he is indeed the fiddler from the Joe Werner sessions (Spottswood 1990).

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<sup>3</sup> AFS 20a1; AFS 20a2; AFS 20a3; AFS 21a1; AFS 21a2; AFS 21a3; AFS 21a4; AFS 21b1; AFS 21b2; AFS 21b3; Ancelet 1999

The mystery of the fiddler's life can be attributed, in part, to Perry's failing health following the Second World War. After serving in the military during the war, Wayne Perry suffered a nervous breakdown triggered by the trauma of combat. He became reclusive, isolating himself from the music world and the community at large and died alone in his Indian Bayou home (Reed 2004).

The Lomaxes recorded several dance bands in south Louisiana, including commercial recording artist Eddie Segura, who recorded commercially with his brother Dewey in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Like many of the family bands around south Louisiana, the Seguras performed an assortment of material including polkas, one steps, waltzes and two steps. The brothers recorded several sides for the musicologist including "T'en aura plus," a song later used by the Balfa Brothers to close out their concerts. Lawrence Cormier and Cletus Mire recorded a couple of songs laced with emotive yelling, underscoring the emotional qualities at the heart of working class Cajun music. Despite the economic hardships straining the United States, south Louisianians continued to produce viable and eclectic indigenous compositions. The Archive of Folk Song collection also reveals that by 1934 the tentacles of American popular culture touched the lives of thousands of Cajuns, affecting an assortment of cultural traits including musical tastes.

Anglo folk music played just as important a role in Bayou Country as unaccompanied French ballads, or accordion-based dance bands. Meanwhile, black Creole music attracted both black and white listeners, amid the bilingual undercurrents pervading the region's musical landscape. John and Alan Lomax's momentous and unprecedented work preserved in sound the cultural changes percolating in the Cajun community underneath the commercial musical radar.



Reverberations from Louisiana's 1916 compulsory education legislation (and subsequent English-only education), and the impact of new mass media technologies, collectively wrought unprecedented change in Bayou Country. English-language movies, radio emissions and records—and the linguistic skills necessary to navigate the foreign tongue—spawned thousands of cultural articulation points, connecting south Louisianians to a nationwide communications network. Cajuns plugged directly into Americana, an association that spurred the developmental process of the maturing bilingual community; a pivotal moment in Cajun history when English became an essential component of the Cajun experience (Brasseaux 1978; Walton 1994).

The AFS field recordings illustrate that language and culture are not mutually exclusive. French compositions like Mr. Bornu's "Belle" and the Sonnier/Brasseaux arrangement "Chanson des Savoy" demonstrate the effects of Americanization, resulting from increased mobility and interpersonal interaction. These songs are indigenous to Louisiana and express a New World experience removed from Elita Hoffpauir's rendition of the western European ballad "Six ans sur mer," though the songs are sung in the same patois. On the other hand, Cajun interpretations of English material have been adapted to relate the francophone community's experiences and worldview, not the Anglo-American perspective. Indeed, Alan Lomax remarked that whether singing in English or French, Cajuns adjust, decode, and manipulate outside musical influences to correspond with individual tastes and the aesthetics of the community at large. He told a newspaper reporter in 1938 that: "In their interpretations of all music they give it something of their own personality and characteristics that makes it unmistakably theirs." The Cajun stamp can be heard on French and English arrangements through instrumentation, lyrics, phrasing, melodies, and annotations. Likewise, Cajuns adapted American cultural traits to conform to their

reality, thereby creating a cultural paradox: Cajuns are simultaneously both American and a distinct ethnic group (New Iberia Weekly Iberian, April 28, 1938).

John and Alan Lomax's changed the course of American music. The researchers almost single handedly stimulated and popularized the notion of folk music in America popular culture, while validating uniquely American musical expressions. For instance, their brilliant marketing of guitarist and vocalist Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter transformed the convicted felon's image into an extant piece of folklore that affected such iconographic luminaries as Bob Dylan. Likewise, the Lomax Cajun field recordings have provided a database of information that has forever changed America's perception of Cajun music. Although the collection focuses largely on south Louisiana's *a cappella* ballad traditions, several important recordings by Cajun musicians like Delmar Hebert, Henry Decuir, and Wayne Perry shed light on the complexity of the Depression-era Cajun repertoire. Cajuns and non-Cajuns alike have borrowed from the collection to create new arrangements. As early as the 1940s, slightly more than ten years after the researchers submitted their collection to the Archive of Folk Songs, composer Virgil Thompson propelled his orchestrated interpretation of Cajun music to the forefront of the nation's arts scene. Thompson's Pulitzer Prize winning score to pioneer filmmaker Robert Flaherty's 1948 documentary *Louisiana Story* incorporated several melodies taken directly from the Lomax collection. When fiddler Michael Doucet and folklorist Barry Ancelet obtained copies of these Library of Congress materials around 1979, the Lomax dream that the recordings would allow future generations to learn about themselves through a retrospective analysis of their efforts has come to fruition. A large portion of the Grammy award winning Cajun band Beausoleil's early repertoire came directly from Doucet's interpretations of these field recordings. Beausoleil's popularity around the world has provided many non-Cajuns with their

only perception of traditional Cajun music. Meanwhile, the sheer volume of recordings make the Lomax collection one of the most significant contributions to Cajun music studies and American vernacular musical scholarship in the world (Doucet 2004).

## **CHAPTER 4: CAJUN SWING ERA, 1935-1947**

Cajun Swing is a Depression-era synthetic musical form indigenous to southwest Louisiana and east Texas. The genre emerged from a fertile cultural *mélange* generated through cross-cultural pollination, a process stimulated by the region's burgeoning oil industry, mass media, and Americanization. South Louisiana swing bands gravitated away from accordion-based music toward western swing, an arranging style in which the fiddle, guitar, steel guitar, banjo, mandolin, or any combination of these instruments, constituted the primary melodic voices. The introduction of western swing reflects the cultural transformations and the musical dialogue between east Texas and southwest Louisiana underway in the Cajun community during the 1930s. Though outside influences profoundly shaped Cajun swing, the musical form is indeed a valid Cajun expression.

In this chapter I will explore the complexities of Cajun swing. By looking to the ethnic boundaries of the Depression-era Cajun experience, I will illustrate Cajun Swing's connections to influential genres like western swing and jazz. Fiddler Harry Choates' musical career will be used to illustrate the cultural dialogue between Cajuns and Anglo-Americans in east Texas. The evolution of Choates' biggest hit "Jole Blon," will also be discussed to illustrate the Americanization of commercial Cajun music, and its corresponding cultural significance as the song transformed from a regional Cajun phenomenon into an American phenomenon. I hope to illuminate the complexities of "Jole Blon," or "the Cajun national anthem," by peeling back the layers of history and meaning that the song accumulated on its way towards becoming a classic in the American songbook.

The Cajun Swing Era (1935-1947) was the most innovative commercial period in the history of Cajun music. Cajuns experimented with amplification and revamped the traditional

rhythm section to include drums, bass fiddle, banjo, and steel guitar. Meanwhile swing orchestras incorporated hillbilly vocal harmonies and a swinging 2/4 dance beat derived from New Orleans hot jazz. Cajun swing represented the discourse within and beyond the Cajun ethnic boundary. This dialogue between Cajun musical traditions and external genres transpired as emerging mass media, improved roads, and the availability of automobiles, plugged Cajuns directly into the pulse of American popular culture at an unprecedented velocity. Disposable incomes generated by opportunities in the oil patch, augmented and diversified the stratification of Cajun society, and facilitated the acquisition of influential amenities—particularly radios, phonographs, and records.

Entire families gathered around the radio to listen to popular national radio broadcasts from Nashville, New Orleans, Fort Worth, and Tulsa. Young up-and-coming Cajun musicians imbibed and interpreted these new sounds, blending traditional Louisiana musical ideas with American popular music trends. These musicians then found their niche market, and the means to escape the shackles of the cotton fields, by organizing musical ensembles that catered to laborers associated with industrialized Louisiana. In 1935, national record companies began to capitalize on the region's evolving cultural landscape by capturing and marketing the dramatic, reverberating shifts in instrumentation, repertoire, and technique.

Cajun swing orchestras first appeared in south Louisiana circa 1933, during the recording hiatus that restricted commercial Cajun music between late 1930 and 1934. Upwardly mobile Cajun musicians formed string bands sans accordion and began to interpret western swing, a fiddle-based arranging style invented in Texas. The swinging dance music easily translated in southwest Louisiana, where a well-established dance culture helped sustain the Cajun swing. Cajun fiddlers combined western swing melodies, riffs, choruses, and fingering positions with

traditional Cajun bowing techniques, a sound that proved to be commercially viable throughout the South despite the economic crunch created by the Great Depression. Consequently, major record labels dropped accordion bands from their recording stables between 1938 and 1947, a decision that saturated local commercial markets with Cajun Swing. Innovative musicians like Leo Soileau, Luderin Darbone, and LeRoy “Happy Fats” LeBlanc enjoyed regional popularity in both Texas and Louisiana by catering to both working class and middle class tastes, all the while separating themselves from the working class aesthetic by playing an urban Southern music and altering their outward appearance.

Swing allowed folks in Texas and Louisiana to escape the cotton fields and fashion new identities through the opportunities provided by industrialization. The decision to start a new life as a musician came easily for Texas fiddler and influential western swing bandleader Cliff Bruner. Following a short sojourn in Oklahoma, the Bruner family relocated to their native Texas to establish a cotton farm. Bruner left the family business to pursue a career in entertainment, an occupation peripherally associated with east Texas’ developing petroleum economy. The fiddler described his transformation from a day laborer to a bandleader to western swing expert Cary Ginell:

So we came back to Texas, moved out on the farm, and by this time, I was in junior high school and I started playing the fiddle for the little country shindigs they were having in different people’s homes. They’d throw some corn meal on the floor and we’d have a dance. A friend of mine would play the guitar and I would play the fiddle, and we’d get on our horses, put the instruments in a flour sack, and we’d head for blue yonder. Sometimes we’d make three or four dollars, five maybe. That was a lot of money then. People worked for a dollar a day back then. You’d start work when the sun came up and you wouldn’t stop until the sun went down. Pickin’ cotton and choppin’ bermuda grass. In the summertime that could get to around fourteen, fifteen hours. For one dollar. And I thought there just had to be an easier way to make a living (Ginell 1994:178).

Industrialization also affected Cajun swingers. Pioneer Cajun swinger Leo Soileau cited the same reasons for establishing a swing ensemble during an interview with folklorist Ralph Rinzier

in 1965. Soileau exclaimed that life as a professional musician beat the hell out of working in the sun all day picking cotton. However, the Cajun swinger perceived life as a professional entertainer as a job, not as a recreational endeavor. “I wouldn't go and get up out of bed to go play a party, just to hear myself play,” Soileau explained. “You better believe that!” (Soileau 1965). Not all Cajuns shared the fiddler's worldview. Working class Louisianians traditionally equated work with manual labor and music with extracurricular activities associated with leisure and amusement. Soileau, like other swing musicians in Louisiana and Texas, attempted to reconcile these conflicting views by striving for a respectable image of his band and his music.

Swing musicians engaged Louisiana's burgeoning industrial economy and grasped the benefits of industrial society. With the disposable income generated through musical performances, bands like Soileau's Four Aces and the Hackberry Ramblers decidedly separated themselves from working class stereotypes by altering their appearance. Musicians kept their hair neat and kempt, began wearing tailored suits, expensive shoes, and later western garb à la Gene Autry to paint a respectable façade around a profession often equated with drinking and carousing. While Cajun swing's Americanized sound and image reflects the discourse between Louisiana musicians and popular forms of American music beyond the Cajun ethnic boundary, swing became a viable Cajun musical expression.

Cajun scholars have largely neglected the swing era and the musicians who popularized this essential period in Cajun music, relegating the genre to simply an American musical expression. For instance, Barry Ancelet writes in *Cajun Country* that Harry Choates's “music no longer imitated western swing, it *was* western swing, and good western swing at that.” With the exception of Ann Savoy's interviews with fiddlers Leo Soileau, Luderin Darbonne, and J.B. Fuselier published in *Cajun Music: A Reflection of a People*, most music scholars might mention

in passing the movement, in effect, leaving a tremendous void in the documentation of south Louisiana's musical legacy. Developing social trends—particularly the emerging Cajun middle class—have also been neglected and misunderstood. Cajun Swing represents the complex culmination of a variety of cultural and musical influences. Country music scholars, on the other hand, often view Cajun Swing as a sub-category of western swing, because of the many parallel influences that shaped the two genres: the influence of mass media, the petroleum industry, and the emerging middle class. Serious students of Cajun music would be advised to examine the Cajun Swing period and its connection to American musical forms like western swing and jazz to understand the genre's cultural significance in Louisiana (Ancelet, Edwards, and Pitre 1991:158; Savoy 1984).

Western swing instrumentation is rooted in small string band combos who performed at rural house parties and barn dances. By the late 1920s, ensembles like the East Texas Serenaders began to experiment with ethnic and popular fiddle music by incorporating a swinging rhythm section. Texas swing surfaced from cultural diffusion facilitated by profoundly influential mass media technologies like the phonograph and radio. The discourse between white Anglo Texans and ethnic and American popular music forged a new Southern musical hybrid, an amalgam of Mexican mariachi, blues, New Orleans hot jazz, and hillbilly. All of these influences converged in Fort Worth, Texas, where the first swing bands garnered audiences across the Southwest and in Louisiana (Bogan Jr. 2004; Fontenot 2001; King 2001a; King 2001b; Malone 1968:172).

Music historian Cary Ginell recognizes four distinctive eras in the evolution of Western Swing that correspond with the careers of the genre's major figureheads. Jazz crooner Milton Brown initiated the first era of western swing in Fort Worth during the early 1930s. Milton Brown and his Musical Brownies established the rhythmic meter and instrumentation that



became the precedent for aspirant string bands in Texas and Oklahoma. The Brownies adapted the 4/4 meter of Dixieland jazz by transforming the time signature into a 2/4 dance beat. Bandleader and fiddler Bob Wills defined the second era by further emphasizing the parallels between swinging jazz and Texas string bands by incorporating extensive horn sections featuring, trumpets, trombones, clarinets and saxophones. By the 1940s, Wills had expanded the boundaries of western swing to the West Coast (Ginell 1994:xxx-xxxi; Townsend 1986).

Texas swing's expansion to California and the emergence of innovative orchestra leader Spade Cooley mark the third era in the genre's evolution. The musical style garnered the promotional label "western swing" for the first time during this period, as Cooley reemphasized the fiddle's role in arranging schemes and incorporated innovative instrumentation like the chromatic piano accordion and harp. Groups like Hank Thompson and Brazos Valley Boys helped to solidify the arranging style's peripheral association with country music in the western swing's final developmental phase. The first two phases outlined by Ginell are essential to the study of Cajun music, as they coincide directly with the development of Cajun Swing (Ginell 1994:xxx-xxxi).

Cajuns lived in a cultural convergence zone between the rich musical traditions that generated Texas' western swing and fertile ethnic distillate from which New Orleans jazz emerged. In either case, many Cajuns listened attentively to Dixieland-inflected western swingers like Milton Brown, Bob Wills, and Cliff Bruner with the same enthusiasm as the popular compositions performed by jazz orchestras.

Jazz was an essential part of south Louisiana's musical landscape during the first half of the twentieth century. Creoles and African Americans in New Orleans famously put the genre on the map, while lesser-known musicians formed jazz ensembles in rural areas of Cajun

Country. Mass media and improved transportation provided by railways created a cultural exchange in the southwestern and southeastern extremes of Bayou Country. Excursion trains from the Crescent City transported, and sometimes transplanted, jazz musicians in Cajun Country. In 1917, the United States Navy forced the closure of Storyville—the Crescent City’s notorious Red Light District—which, subsequently, led to a mass exodus of prostitutes and Jazz musicians. While many of Storyville’s most famous musicians and bandleaders headed to northern urban centers like Chicago and New York City, some jazzmen headed west on the Southern Pacific railroad line and debarked in Crowley, in the heart of Louisiana’s Cajun country, the first stop west of New Orleans with a legalized red light district (Corrales 2004; Rose 1974).

Jazz seemingly oozed from every crack and crevasse along south Louisiana’s sidewalks, as orchestras found homes in commercial centers across southwestern Louisiana. Towns like New Iberia, Opelousas, Crowley, Lake Charles, Lafayette, and St. Martinville all boasted local ensembles. Even rural hamlets like Parks, Louisiana, a sugarcane community located between St. Martinville and Breaux Bridge, was home to numerous accomplished musicians. Band names were often just as astounding as the number of jazz ensembles in Cajun Country. The Yelping Jazz Hounds, Wicked Jazz 7, Black Eagles Jazz Band, the Banner Orchestra, and Black Diamond Band performed in and around their home communities, often catering to middle class white audiences who supported these combos financially. Indeed, Cajuns were just as connected to the national jazz craze of the 1920s as folks enjoying the music in its native environment along the banks of the Mississippi River. Jazz musician and musicologist Austin Sonnier, Jr. argues that southwestern Louisiana’s diverse ethnic and musical landscapes were just as conducive and accepting of the cutting edge musical experiments that play out in jazz as New

Orleanians. “The area cradled a musical awareness similar to that which existed in New Orleans,” contends Sonnier, “albeit on a much smaller scale.” Furthermore, the context sometimes associated with jazz flourished in both the Crescent City and in Cajun Country. Legalized prostitution rings in Abbeville, Lake Charles, and Crowley paralleled New Orleans brothels, where some jazz musicians found employment (Corrales 2004; Sonnier 1989:10).

Jazz became a major component in the foundation of Cajun swing. Swingers imbibed the energy, technique, and improvisational philosophy of jazz while interpreting and adapting songs from the genre’s core repertoire. Founding member of the Hackberry Ramblers Luderin Darbone learned much of the ins-and-outs about jazz through his conversations with African American trumpeter and arranger Ike Jenkins, who used to frequent Darbone’s Hackberry Rambler gas station in Crowley. The trumpeter taught Darbone an assortment of standard New Orleans jazz compositions like “Eh La Bas” that the fiddler eventually waxed with the Ramblers. His 1935 recording “You’ve Got to Hi-De-Hi” incorporated scat lyrics based on Cab Calloway famous improvisation. Some musicians frequently straddled the small divide separating Cajun swing and jazz. For instance, Crowley resident Tony Gonzales, the first drummer in commercial Cajun music history, performed regularly with a jazz orchestra and Leo Soileau’s Cajun swing band. Jazz’s impression on Cajun musicians is also clearly heard in three versions of the New Orleans hot jazz number, “High Society” (Darbone 2004; Sandmel 2003:7).

Fiddler Hector Duhon began performing Cajun music with accordionist Octa Clark during the 1920s. By the mid-1930s, Duhon had branched out and formed the swing ensemble the Dixie Ramblers. The Ramblers recorded the first Cajun interpretation of the New Orleans jazz standard “High Society” on August 10, 1935 in the Crescent City. Duhon apparently learned the tune from a 78 RPM recording, as his fiddling is a transposition of Creole musician

Alphonse Picou's famous clarinet solo. The composition circulated around the Cajun swing camp. The Hackberry Ramblers also adapted and released the song as "Vinton High Society" one year later. On February 21, 1937, the celebrated Cajun fiddler Oran "Doc" Guidry recorded yet another rendition of the jazz standard with his orchestra the Jolly Boys of Lafayette. Jazz trends in Cajun music served as a popular and danceable form of entertainment, but also reflected a transition in intrinsic nature of music in southwest Louisiana (Ancelet and Morgan 1984:110-114; Sandmel 2003; Strachwitz 1997).

Musically, string bands represented a departure from the collective, egalitarian nature of early commercial Cajun music. Swing embodied both the intrinsic individualism pervasive in jazz and middle-class American ideology. Innovative musicians like Leo Soileau, Luderin Darbone, LeRoy "Happy Fats" LeBlanc, and Harry Choates enjoyed regional popularity in both Texas and Louisiana by catering to both working class and middle class tastes in the region's oil fields.

Record labels marketed groups like the Hackberry Ramblers alongside other variants of mainstream popular American country music.

The most popular Cajun band of the mid-1930s was the Hackberry Ramblers. Led by fiddler Luderin Darbone, from Evangeline, Louisiana, the Ramblers were a progressive band that incorporated influences from mainstream country music, western swing, and blues into their own sound and repertory. By dropping the accordion and featuring a hot, contemporary blend of music, they were able to appeal to a much wider audience than traditional Cajun bands, and their records sold well all over the south, not just in Cajun country (Seemann 1990).

As accordion-based arrangements evaporated from the documentary record, string band music, sung in both French and in English, dominated the commercial market from 1938 until the end of World War II, when independent record labels in Texas and Louisiana altered the sounds of Cajun music (Ace CDCHD 424; Arhoolie 427).

The “race record” markets virtually collapsed in the wake of the Great Depression, silencing several veins of American music in the documentary record, including accordion-based Cajun music. “In 1932, the record industry sold only six million records,” Kennedy and McNutt explain, “one-sixth the volume sold in 1927.” In effect, record companies abandoned segmented market strategies in favor of mainstream genres that sold well nationally, in the process taking advantage of economies of scale in an effort to lower production and distribution costs. Music industry executives dropped from their recording stables those musicians who had little commercial appeal. Companies became extraordinarily selective about promoting Cajuns artists who transcended the local consumer base in an attempt to economize; this managerial decision saturated the market with mainstream music. Cajun string bands, who played a blend of ethnic and popular music, capitalized upon this opportunity and flourished in the evolving cultural and economic climate. Meanwhile, a failing American economy and the dominance of major record labels like Victor and Columbia smothered the commercial voice of accordion-based music, a trend perpetuated by wartime rationing, which made shellac a “scarce commodity” during the Second World War. (Broven 1983:29; Brown 2002:33-34; Kennedy & McNutt 1999:xv, 22; Malone & Stricklin 1979:71).

Fiddles acted as the main melodic voice before the emergence of the accordion, offering Cajun musicians the flexibility to explore an extensive repertoire, including European song structures like reels, jigs, and contredanses. The string band era reinforced and reinvigorated the tradition, when the fiddle reclaimed its position as the main melodic voice in Cajun music. Fiddler Leo Soileau's recordings represent pioneering achievements in both accordion-based music, recording the first arrangement featuring accordion with fiddle accompaniment, "Basile" (1929), and in the shift from earlier arranging styles toward the western swing sound prevalent in

the 1930s and '40s. On January 18, 1935, Soileau and his Three Aces became the first ensemble to cut a Cajun-inflected western swing recording, a session that produced a series of titles including: “Alons À Ville Platte (Let’s Go To Ville Platte),” “Le Grand Mamou” (Big Mamou), “Hackberry Hop,” and “Le Valse De Gueydan” (Gueydan Waltz) (Ancelet 1989:15; Spotswood 1990:89).

Swing music allowed string musicians to stretch out and play in an assortment of keys beyond the restrictive limitations of the diatonic accordion. Leo Soileau explained to folklorist Ralph Rinzler in 1965 that the western swing and Cajun swing genres offered more opportunities for a fiddler to explore the complexities of his instrument. He explicated, “You can play in different keys. That French music,” Soileau continued, “it’s just the one; just like that Rock ‘n’ Roll right now.” While the fiddler found accordion-based Cajun music limiting, he often performed string compositions in French for audiences from south Louisiana to Houston, Texas (Soileau 1965).

Other Cajun fiddlers, like Grand Ole Opry performer Merlin Fontenot, enjoyed national success by embracing popular music when the musical pendulum swung into the American mainstream in the late thirties. Malone and Stricklin maintain that the fiddle bridged the small divide between vernacular Cajun French music and the Anglicized sounds of Texas western swing. “The western swing craze of the 1930s drew many Cajun musicians away from their own music and toward more Anglicized forms, probably because of the prominence of the fiddle in western swing and other forms of country music.” Louisiana’s preexisting fiddle traditions facilitated the transition between Cajun fiddle music and Cajun-inflected Western swing, born of the cultural marriage between east Texas and southwest Louisiana (Caffery 2002:30-32; Malone and Stricklin 1979:62).

A plethora of string bands emerged in Louisiana during the later part of the Depression. Leo Soileau's Aces and Luderin Darbone's Hackberry Ramblers ensured the marketability of Cajun string bands—such as the Alley Boys of Abbeville, Rayne-Bo Ramblers, the Merrymakers, Sons of the Acadians, and the Dixie Ramblers—who enjoyed commercial success on the Decca, Vocalion, and Bluebird labels. Even the Breaux family, who helped usher in the accordion era in the late 1920s, recorded Anglicized musical numbers like Cleoma Breaux Falcon's rendition of Fats Waller's "Lulu's Back in Town" and "It's a Sin to Tell a Lie," A. P. Carter's "Bonnie Blue Eyes," "Hand Me Down My Walking Cane" (1937) and Clifford Breaux's "Continuez de Sonner" (You Keep a Knockin') (1937). Cajun swing enjoyed widespread popularity throughout the South, in part because of a young fiddle virtuoso named Harry Choates (Cohn 1990; Harrison 2004).

Fiddler and guitarist Harry Choates became widely popular both in Texas and his native Louisiana. He played frequently alongside several of the great string band icons, including Leo Soileau, before his rendition of the Cajun classic "Jole Blon" catapulted Choates into the national musical spotlight. He is the most influential Cajun musician of the string band era, his legacy reflected by a series of recordings from an impressive who's who, all-star list of Texas musicians: Moon Mullican, Bob Wills, Waylon Jennings and Buddy Holly, and Jimmie Dale Gillmore. Considering the sketchy details of Choates' personal life—severe alcoholism, gambling, and extra marital affairs—his unbelievable commercial success remains something of a mystery. He overcame the seemingly improbable odds of realizing a national hit with a French novelty song, released on an unknown independent record label, despite his vagabond lifestyle in the Cajun Lapland (Amburn 1996:184-185; Coffey 2003a; Escott 1990).

In 1918, Abbeville, Louisiana natives Clarence Choate (Choate is the original spelling of the surname) and Edolia Menard married in Port Arthur, Texas. Four years later, Edolia gave birth to Cajun music legend Harry Choates on December 22, 1922 in rural Vermillion Parish. His family's relationship with both the Lone Star state and Cajun country would become a model for Harry's own life, as he traveled freely across the Sabine River. Andrew Brown clearly articulates Choates' rambling and marginal lifestyle in *Devil On The Bayou*, "Neither Louisiana nor Texas can exclusively claim him, as he vacillated between these two states, both physically and in musical terms, so often as to render their border irrelevant" (Brown 2002:4).

Following the migratory trend of Cajuns into east Texas, the Choate family returned to Port Arthur in 1929 where Clarence worked at a Texaco refinery, and later as a custodian in Port Arthur. Impoverished Cajuns left Louisiana in droves in hopes of finding a comfortable existence in the Golden Triangle region of east Texas bounded by Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange. Brown maintains that Port Arthur grew from "a mere 7,600 in 1910 to over 50,000 by 1930." Meanwhile, the population of Orange exploded from 765 in 1900 to 46,140 in 1940 as a direct result of the Cajun influx (Brasseaux 2003a:276; Brown 2002:7; Sacré 1995:46).

In 1902, following the establishment of the first Texas Oil Corporation refinery and a company town near Orange, Texas, Cajuns so completely dominated the facility's work force and housing units that the community became popularly known as Petite Abbeville (Brasseaux 2003a:276).

The great Texas exodus marks the decided cultural shift towards Americanization and Anglo-Saxon materialism from pre-capitalistic agrarian Cajun values—based in the European feudal mindset transplanted to the New World in pre-dispersal *Acadie*. Southwest Louisiana's working class continued to migrate to Texas well into the World War II era, after the United States Navy awarded Consolidated Steel of Orange \$5 million contract in 1940 to establish a shipyard for military vessels (Brown 2002:24).



The Golden Triangle represented the periphery of Cajun country and the convergence of several ethnic boundaries. The region also became the conduit through which Anglo and Cajun traditions established a mutually beneficial dialogue. Indeed, both factions interacted and negotiated social spaces in spite of pre-established political boundaries and state lines. This cultural dialogue often took place between oil workers, ship builders, and other working folk at honky tonks and dives, where the sounds of western swing and Cajun string band music filled the thick Gulf Coast air.

If the music scene in east Texas and southwest Louisiana had a nerve center in the 1940s, it was East Orange. Cliff Bruner, Moon Mullican, Toby Kelly, Link Davis, all were stalwarts of the Strip, and Leo Soileau and the Rhythm Boys had been the house band at the Showboat [a floating honky tonk on the Sabine River] since October, 1944 (Brown 2002:27).

East Orange, Louisiana (immediately across the Sabine River) offered an array of entertainment, including cockfighting, gambling, drinking, and live music in defiance of the sanctimonious Baptist attitudes of Orange, Texas. East Orange also represented the cultural convergence of the Anglo and Cajun traditions, the same cultural influences that molded the Cajun string band sound.

As Bob Wills made western swing marketable during the mid-1930s, fiddle virtuoso Cliff Bruner directly influenced Cajun swing bands in the Golden Triangle and in Louisiana. Andrew Brown equates the influence of the former Musical Brownie with the social and economic impact of the Spindletop oil boom.

The arrival, in early 1937, of Cliff Bruner and his Texas Wanderers in Beaumont transformed the entire region musically every bit as much as Spidletop [sic] had done so economically years before. While the records of people like Milton Brown, Bob Wills, and Bill Boyd had undoubtedly been staples on local jukeboxes well before this, none of these groups had actually made live appearances in the area (Brown 2003:10).

Harry Choates drew inspiration from Bruner's music, particularly the work of Bob Dunn, the Texas Wanderers' steel guitar player. Cajun crooner, Buddy Duhon reflects the social dynamics of the cultural lapland and the dialogic musical interaction between Bruner's group and Cajun inflected western swing. Duhon enjoyed a successful career as the longtime vocalist for Bruner, and cut his two last sides—"Old Cow Blues" and "Nobody Cares for Me"—with Harry Choates before the crooner's untimely death. Back in Louisiana, Cajuns embraced the Choates' fresh and innovated musical experiments (Brown 2003:18, 62; Coffey 1996; Coffey 1997; Coffey 1998).

In the winter of 1946, the *Silver Slipper*, a combination rural grocery store and barroom, buzzed from the sounds of local and popular music from the establishment's jukebox. Located between Leonville and Arnaudville, the Silver Slipper served as a gathering place for local sharecroppers and GIs returning from World War II, who preferred to drown the horrors of the war rather than return to the cotton fields.

Eleven-year-old Hadley Castille frequented the grocery with his family, particularly during the work lulls that followed the cotton harvest in the late fall and winter months. On one of his visits, the unsuspecting boy encountered a song that would forever change his life. The Silver Slipper's owner stocked the bar's jukebox with a stunning new rendition of a local favorite, "Jole Blon" by Cajun fiddle sensation Harry Choates. The magical waltz engaged all of Castille's senses from the second he walked into the storeroom. "I can't describe the feeling I got," he remembered fifty-seven years later. "I mean, it's hard to describe how it struck me." "Jole Blon" not only captivated Castille's imagination, but the imagination of a generation. Like the rest of the Gulf Coast, the jukebox at the Silver Slipper played the Choates' record morning, noon, and night (Castille 2003).

“The first time I heard ‘Jole Blon’ from [Choates’] band was on the radio,” recalled Norris Melancon, a long time Harry Choates fan from Acadia Parish. “I’ll never forget. It was on a Saturday.” Before the tremendous success of “Jole Blon,” Happy Fats and the Rayne-Bo Ramblers enjoyed a regional hit about a popular and notoriously violent Cajun dancehall, “Au bal chez ‘Tit Maurice” (At the Dance at the Little Maurice Dancehall). Local bands “covered” the Rayne-Bo Ramblers’ tune until public demand for “Jole Blon” “knocked [“Au bal chez ‘Tit Maurice”] out.” Cajuns who lived through the World War II era vividly recall the first time they heard “Jole Blon” (also rendered “Jolie Blond” and “Jolie Blonde”) with the same remarkable clarity as Baby Boomers who remember the precise moment they first heard about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. “If you’ve ever heard that song, that original 1946 recording, I guarantee you, you will never forget,” explained acclaimed Louisiana author James Lee Burke, whose obsession with the plaintive tune became the inspiration for his 2002 novel *Jolie Blon’s Bounce*. “It stays with you the rest of your life. And you don’t have to speak French to understand the tragic content of the words.” The ethereal fiddle work, the acoustics of the recording studio, and the haunting chord progression of the waltz burned an indelible impression into the minds of many south Louisianians. Castille remembers, “I mean there’s spots where the D note and the piano chord comes together. It’s like,” he continued, “you’ve never heard that before! And people who were buying the record. They didn’t know why. It was that sound that had never been played before.” Harry Choates’ “Jole Blon” quickly became a national phenomenon and represents the apex of the Cajun Swing era (Burke and Hammer 2002; Melancon 2002).

Choates’ interpretation of “Jole Blon” is arguably the single most important recording in the history of Cajun music. Unlike any other Cajun composition, “Jole Blon” evolved in

different directions simultaneously on the local, regional, and national levels. Choates' recording also had an advantage over previous Cajun releases, because it emerged during a critical moment in history when tremendous social and technological advances converged. New recording technologies, the unprecedented strength of a nationwide communications network, the artistic freedom afforded by independent record labels, and the tremendous cultural impact of World War II created, in part, the catalyst for the song's commercial success. While Joe and Cleoma Falcon's debut release "Lafayette" changed the way Cajuns viewed their own music, the record's impact was largely limited to a regional existence. The Hackberry Rambler's "Wondering" enjoyed a warm reception throughout the South, though the English-based tune never achieved the timeless status of Choates' waltz. On the contrary, "Jole Blon" transcended local and regional boundaries and changed the course of American music. Cajun music became part of the American consciousness for the first time as the French tune crossed cultural, ethnic, racial, and socio-economic boundaries. In the wake of the song's tremendous commercial success, both French and English versions of waltz cropped up around the country. In effect, Harry Choates opened the door for musicians from the Cajun Lapland including crossover artists like Jimmy C. Newman and Doug and Rusty Kershaw. Newman and the Kershaws might never have found fame beyond Cajun Country on Shreveport's nationally syndicated Louisiana Hayride radio program without the impact of "Jole Blon." Likewise, east Texas musicians, who shared in Choates' interstate legacy, followed suit and capitalized on the waltz's commercial potential. The song's influence also became a critical impetus in the evolution of independent record labels along the Gulf Coast. This phenomenon that jumpstarted accordionist Iry LeJeune's recordings career, marking the beginning of the Dancehall Era and the return of accordion-based music in south Louisiana's commercial musical landscape. Independent record

labels in Bayou Country allowed Cajuns to determine the fate of their own music, a luxury virtually unknown to pre-war artists. The tune's national popularity stirred the imagination of the country's top musicians. For instance, as Kevin Coffey argues, American icon Hank Williams Sr.'s Cajun-influenced hit "Jambalaya" is rooted in the fertile cross-cultural musical legacy laid in the wake of the plaintive waltz. Harry Choates and "Jole Blon" are, indeed, the exclamation point marking the zenith of the Cajun Swing era (Bernard 1991; Bernard 1995; Bernard 1996; Broven 1983; Coffey 2003).

In essence, "Jole Blon" represents a bizarre dance between Cajuns and Americana. Cajun interpretations of the tune reflect the ethnic groups' attitudes and relationship with Anglo American culture. Off the bat, the central character in the waltz is blonde, an exotic personage for the largely brunette Cajun population. The female protagonist "jole blon" may represent the archetypal Anglo American—a pure, fair-skinned blonde—though Harry Choates never made reference to the character's ethnicity or cultural affiliation. In contrast, Anglo adaptations of the waltz portray the woman in a similar light, though she becomes the exotic ethnic other who lives in a French world on the periphery of Anglo America. Overtime the song developed multiple layers of significance determined by the context in which the song was placed. As "Jole Blon" twisted and turned along its evolutionary path and became part of the American musical repertoire, the tune transcended its original Cajun cultural context and evolved with each Anglo American adaptation to suit the Anglo American perspective.

Unlike other crossover Cajun-Country tunes like "Grand Texas" and "Colinda," "Jole Blon" exploded across the nation. Americans embraced the novelty of the waltz, while Cajuns viewed the song's popularity as a positive and validating affirmation removed from the prejudice that often underscored relationships between Francos and Anglos. The composition's enormous

popularity along the Gulf Coast and in the United States coincided with the nation's blossoming ethnic consciousness.

Harry Choates recorded "Jole Blon" on the heels of a burgeoning American musical and social revolution. Dramatic shifts in the United States' racial and ethnic distribution during first half of the twentieth century affected the dynamics of America's perception of ethnicity, as Southerners, both white and black, migrated to urban centers in the North and West. America's involvement in World War II expanded the country's economic, technological, and social dynamics, a situation that would eventually provide more room for ethnic expression. By the late 1940s, a diverse class of future all-star musicians—including Dean Martin, B. B. King, Lightnin' Hopkins, and Little Walter—all embarked on their musical careers. Meanwhile, artists like Bill Monroe, who issued his seminal "Blue Moon of Kentucky" in September of 1946, brought regional music to receptive American audiences. Musical interpretations of Southern life enchanted the minds of millions under the bright Broadway marquee lights in the theatrical production *Showboat* and in the Hollywood motion picture *Song of the South*. On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first African American to break through the immobilizing racial barricade surrounding America's pastime by taking the field with the all-white Brooklyn Dodgers. The voice of ethnic America resonated after the war. Likewise Harry Choates' recording of "Jole Blon" embodied an exotic piece of Americana that synthesized the sounds of established popular music genres like western swing and hillbilly with the fresh emotive sounds of French Louisiana. As many Americans became increasingly introspective in the years following World War II, the nation discovered its indigenous music through the help of independent record labels who gave voice to a new generation of musicians. Fortunately for

Choates, his musicianship coalesced with luck and the nation's hunger for ethnic expression (Killian 1953:66-69; Malone 1968:184-208).

Of all the Cajun songs recorded during the early commercial and Cajun Swing eras, "Jole Blon" was perhaps the most implausible record to achieve any level of success. Although the Cajun community embraced the song in a variety of forms, the potential for any sort of national exposure seemed nil until Harry Choates' rendition of the tune rode the crest of a cultural tidal wave generated by the nation's post-World War II independent record label explosion and the nationalization of Southern music. Indeed, the "Jole Blon" sensation is a case of "right place, right time." Five major catalysts working in concert generated the waltz's success: (1) the initial 1929 Breaux family recording generated a public demand for the song within the Cajun community, a condition reinforced by subsequent Cajun string band interpretations; (2) an obscure Houston-based independent record label provided a commercial mouthpiece for Cajun music and Harry Choates, who had already refined his interpretation of "Jole Blon" in clubs around south Louisiana and east Texas; (3) the availability and reach of radio and the emergence of the jukebox along the Gulf Coast; (4) national record distribution for Choates' 1946 recording; (5) and remakes by non-Cajuns, many of whom were nationally acclaimed recording artists. The "Jole Blon" phenomenon began in Cajun Country before the song's influence diffused throughout America (Coffey 2003a; Kennedy and McNutt 1999; Malone and Stricklin 2003).

The composition's rise to commercial prominence began on April 18, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia, where Amédé Breaux, Ophy Breaux, and Cleoma Breaux Falcon recorded "Ma Blonde est parti" for Columbia records. However, the origins of the Breaux arrangement are somewhat sketchy. According to Cajun fiddler Wade Frugé (b. 1916), the melody is much older than the initial 1929 commercial recording. Frugé explained to Ann Savoy:

We'd play "Jolie Blonde" and all that...that's old. But they didn't call that 'Jolie Blonde.' They'd call it, like, the 'Courville Waltz' or the 'Savoy Waltz' or the "Frugé Two-Step." They didn't have no names for them songs. They played them all. And my grandpa learned them from people before him. That makes them about 200 years old (Savoy 1984:46).

Amédée Breaux apparently blended the traditional melody with contemporary lyrics about infidelity and lost love composed by his sister Cléoma Breaux Falcon. Dance bands, some of whom learned the song from their phonographs, established the song's position in Cajun's core repertoire by performing "Ma blonde est parti" on a regular basis. The haunting waltz's popularity extended well into the mid-1930s, which subsequently prompted musicologist Irène Thérèse Whitfield to include the song in her study of Louisiana French music (Ancelet 1989:25; Savoy 1984:80; Whitfield 1969:81).

In 1935, Leo Soileau transformed the eerie ballad into a string band arrangement under the title "La valse de Gueydan" during the first Cajun Swing recording session. Soileau incorporated the melody and title from John Bertrand's Paramount release "Valse de Gueydan" recorded in 1929 during the early commercial era. Leo's interpretation of "Jole Blon" carved the path that Harry Choates would later follow. The slightly up tempo fiddle-based waltz followed the same basic storyline as the Breaux version—the male protagonist loses forever his only love, who is affectionately referred to as "jolie" (pretty)—though the lyrics are derived from both "Ma blonde est parti" and "Valse de Gueydan." Soileau's shrill sustained vocal attack and haunting fiddle work provided the blueprint for Choates' version a decade later (Coffey 2003).

In 1936, the Hackberry Ramblers forever sealed the song's fate by renaming the tune "Jolie Blond," a reference to the protagonist's lost love. The Ramblers' swing version of the tune became a crowd favorite. During battle-of-the-bands competitions held at the Silver Star Club in Sulphur, Louisiana, the group often won contests against rival Texas-based string bands



by simply striking up their French version of “Jolie Blonde.” Hackberry Rambler Edwin Duhon recalls performing opposite a number of popular musicians including Moon Mullican and T. Texas Tyler, “and we’d play ‘Jolie Blonde.’ They’d count how many dancers. We’d win every time. Cliff Bruner, same way. We just beat the shit out of him” (Broven 1987:29-30; Coffey 2003:2-10; Duhon 2003; Sandmel 2003:9-10; Whitehead and Sandmel 2003).

Fiddler Harry Choates cut his chops on some of the same demanding audiences. Before his landmark recording, the fiddler mesmerized audiences with his unprecedented showmanship and technical prowess. Band mate and tenor banjo player Charley Slagle recalled a gig at the End O’ Main club in Houston, Texas, where Harry stunned the spectators by launching into “Jole Blon.” “The people quit dancing and came around the bandstand, watching him,” Slagle explained to Choates’ biographer Andrew Brown. “That’s how good he was” (Brown 2002:31; Broven 1983:31).

Twenty-three-year-old Harry Choates was an established veteran of the Gulf Coast club scene in 1946, when independent record label owner and amateur producer Bill Quinn recorded Harry’s rendition of “Jole Blon” on his Gold Star record label in Houston, Texas. Quinn’s upstart label advertised itself to be the “King of the Hillbillies,” though Gold Star released a variety of musical genres including Cajun following Choates’ initial recording session with Quinn. On Sunday, March 31, 1946, the fiddler visited the studio as a sideman with the Texas-based group Jimmie Foster and the Swingsters. The ensemble recorded two French sides “La Value Zulbaugh” and “Jole Blon,” a tune Choates learned as a teenager during his stint with Cajun Swing innovator Leo Soileau’s group. “*Jolie Blonde* required at least a dozen takes before Quinn was satisfied,” according to Brown. “The session took an entire afternoon, between Quinn’s perfectionism and Choates’ beer runs. The final result was an emotionally charged, up-

tempo Cajun swing waltz, featuring wailing vocals and the genius of Choates' trademark fiddle work. Harry added additional tension to the arrangement by transposing the song from the key of G, a comfortable singing key within the tonal range of a C accordion, to the key of A, which allowed Choates to employ the full range of his upper vocal register (Brown 2002:35-37; Broven 1987:29-31; Coffey 2003:2-12.).

Choates did not speak French, though his recordings and previous studies may suggest otherwise. The few phrases and grammatical structures he knew frequently appear in many of his compositions. The "tu m'as quitté pour t'en aller" motif—a theme describing the traumatic departure of loved ones, usually for east Texas—appears in a number of Cajun swing recordings including the "Austin Special," "Port Arthur Blues" and in Choates' 1946 rendition of "Jole Blon." The fiddler sings: "Tu m'as laissé pour t'en aller, avec un autre, mais chere petite, dans pays de la Louisiane [You left me for another, dear girl, in Louisiana]," a verse that accurately reflects of Texas' role in the Americanization of Cajun music. Not only is the song rearranged in a western swing format, but the protagonist is apparently a Cajun living and working in the Golden Triangle, lamenting that his belle left to find love in his native Louisiana (Ancelet 1989:29; Brasseaux 2003a:273-286; Brown 2002:13; Whatley 1983:32).

On July 17, 1946, Choates returned to Gold Star as the bandleader of the Melody Boys, a band comprised of two ex-Swingsters—guitarists B.D. Williams and Eddie Pursley—brothers Abe and Joe Manuel, and drummer Curzy "Pork Chop" Roy. That summer, the band recorded two sides, a reworked arrangement of "Jole Blon" and the "Basile Waltz," Joe Manuel's interpretation of Leo Soileau's accordion-based 1928 recording "Basile." Quinn released the Melody Boy's arrangement of the "Basile Waltz" as the record's A-side. Apparently dissatisfied with the bands performance, the producer replaced the B-side with the Swingsters' version of

“Jole Blon” recorded two and half months earlier. Unfamiliar with French, Quinn misspelled the phrase *jolie blonde*, forever changing the song’s appellation to the English phonetic *jole blon* (Brown 2002).

Houston, Texas, home of Gold Star records, became the launch pad for Choates’ recording. Immediately after the first pressings of “Jole Blon,” a Houston disc jockey created a buzz in east Texas by promoting the new record on air. Rather than broadcasting the A-side, the DJ flipped the disc, causing an overnight sensation. The demand for “Jole Blon” increased dramatically, forcing an unprepared Quinn to reconsider his distribution options. Brown explains that the amateur producer ran Gold Star “in the manner of a glorified hobbyist rather than that of an organized and serious businessman.” Overwhelmed by his unforeseen success, Bill Quinn followed the advice of Lester Bihari, a Galveston-based jukebox operator, to license the record to Modern Music, an independent label in Los Angeles managed by Bihari’s brother. Through Modern’s organized distribution and promotional efforts, “Jole Blon” became a fixture in the American musical landscape. Choates’ fiddle work, emotive vocals, and Austin-based supporting cast propelled “Jole Blon” to number four on the national *Billboard’s* “Most Played Juke Box Folk Records” twice—on January 4, and March 8, 1947. As Brown observes, national recognition came through a concerted effort by Cajuns and non-Cajuns alike. Anglo-Americans who had access to the recording on the Modern label embraced the tune and helped to push Choates’ arrangement to the top of the charts. “Jole Blon” hit, not because Cajuns supported their local musicians, nor through the vision of Harry Choates’ record company, but precisely because Gold Star lost control of their product. The phenomenon continued to grow as the song reached new audiences when Quinn later licensed the record to the east coast DeLuxe outfit in early 1947. Despite tremendous record sales, neither Choates nor Quinn received any royalties

for their efforts because they never took the time to copyright “Jole Blon,” an oversight that could have proven quite profitable when other musicians began to record the tune (Brown 2002:2-12, 32-44; Malone 1968:191).

The waltz’s long and winding history outlines a shared legacy between Cajuns and non-Cajuns, as “Jole Blon” transcended the Cajun experience and became part of American musical landscape. Nationally acclaimed musicians like Grand Ole Opry star Roy Acuff reinforced “Jole Blon’s” place in Americana as they rushed to jump on the bandwagon by recording their own adaptations of the song. En route, the indigenous Louisiana tune transformed, morphing through a variety of arrangements, styles, genres, and lyrical themes as renowned performers like Moon Mullican, Bob Wills, Hank Snow, and Waylon Jennings explored, adapted, and expanded the boundaries of the Cajun theme.

In the Anglo-American context, the song and the female character branded as “Jole Blon” took on new forms. Musicians altered the melody, or scrapped it all together. New instrumental combinations changed the dynamics of the composition, while Anglo-American musicians emphasized “Jole Blon’s” promiscuous character. Some versions retained a hint of the song’s cultural origins through references to distinctively Cajun traditions—particularly foodways—such as rice and gravy, strong coffee, dirty rice, and filé gumbo. While novelty interpretations of “Jole Blon” amused the general English-speaking public, as evidenced by strong record sales, Cajuns were not always receptive to foreign adaptations.

Country and western musicians who performed regularly in the Golden Triangle and south Louisiana recorded some of the first, and most whimsical, interpretations of the so-called “Cajun national anthem.” Pianist Aubrey “Moon” Mullican recorded a trilogy of commercially successful adaptations of “Jole Blon”—“New Pretty Blond (New Jole Blon)” waxed in the Fall

of 1946, “Jole Blon’s Sister” (circa March 1947), and “Jole Blon is Gone, Amen” (December 1947). Gulf Coast music expert Kevin Coffey writes that “New Pretty Blond,” the pianist’s first interpretation, “appears almost certainly to have been the first cover version, although a straight (and fantastic) recording of the tune by the Louisiana Cajun swing bandleader Eddie Shuler on his fledgling Goldband label could not have been far behind” (Coffey 2003:9).

However successful, Moon launched his solo career at the expense of a large portion of his audience. Some Cajuns living in east Texas and southwest Louisiana recoiled at what they viewed as patronizing and inflammatory lyrics in Mullican’s version of “Jole Blon.” “Moon wasn’t all that popular after he come out with that *Jole Blon* thing,” explained fiddler Clyde Brewer, who was already a veteran on the Gulf Coast circuit by seventeen. “[Cajuns] were offended by it. It was like the Star-Spangled Banner being slandered.” Cajuns were not necessarily upset that the tune was being slandered. Expatriates living in east Texas, who dealt with the friction generated by tensions between Anglo-Protestant and Franco-Catholic factions on a day-to-day basis, might have taken Moon’s version as an affront because the tune poked fun at the traditional Cajun lifestyle and language. Music historian Kevin Fontenot maintains that other Cajuns found the song and Moon’s inability to speak French amusing (Brasseaux 2003a; Brown 2002:42; Coffey 2003:21; email to author, July 4, 2004; Laird 1999; Walton 2003:38-50).

Despite the pervasive prejudicial tensions between Cajuns and Texans, Mullican outlined the cross-cultural musical dialogue that frequently transpired between the groups in his quasi-autobiographical composition “Jole Blon is Gone, Amen” (1947), his final adaptation of the Harry Choates hit. The song apparently recounts the first time he heard Choates performing “Jole Blon.” Clyde Brewer provides an atmospheric element to the recording by singing in

French to imitate the performance described by Mullican, who incorporates his garbled rendering of Cajun French through several lines of incomprehensible gibberish.

Many years ago, down Louisiana way,  
I stopped into a honky tonk and this is what I heard 'em play.

The melody was haunting, as I recall that day.  
When a little man got up and sang a song in his own peculiar way:

*Jolie Blonde 'gardé donc, mais quoi t'as fais.  
Tu m'as quitté pour t'en aller avec un autre.  
M'as laissé pour t'en aller avec un autre.  
Quel espoir et quel avenir que moi je vais voir*

These words they sound peculiar,  
No they didn't sound my way  
So I just sang this *Jole Blon* in the old Moon Mullican way.

*Jole Blon skwa tah fay conchie panchie,  
dirty rice and pickin' cotton  
Tawn allay skwa tah roochie  
conchie panchie, seeco peeco...(Mullican 1947).*

Though little more than a novelty song, Mullican's composition describes a scene that played out hundreds, perhaps thousands of times in the Cajun lapland. Musicians and laypersons imbibed the cultural and musical *mélange* created through the interaction that took place in dancehalls, oilfields, and shipyards along the Gulf Coast—a historical snapshot preserved in America's musical landscape by way of Moon's song about Harry Choates and Cajun folk music. "Jole Blon's" position as an American classic became cemented through a series of lucrative adaptations by an impressive list of who's who in country music including Bob Wills, Roy Acuff, Red Foley, Hank Snow, and Waylon Jennings (Coffey 2003).

Gold Star owner and producer Bill Quinn recognized the grass roots demand and the financial potential for vernacular music and insisted that Harry record other Cajun tunes from the accordion's golden era of the late 1920s after the remarkable success of "Jole Blon." Choates

subsequently recorded string band renditions of songs like “*Allons à Lafayette*” and the “Port Arthur Waltz,” all previously issued before the infiltration of Texas western swing in south Louisiana. The efforts of independent record labels like Gold Star and Opera in Houston—and later Khoury, Lyric, Goldband, Fais Do Do, and Swallow in Louisiana—satisfied working-class Cajuns’ appetite for vernacular music, which had again found a home in the commercial market. Though follow-up efforts by Harry Choates never achieved the success of “Jole Blon,” Quinn continued to market swing interpretations of traditional music “in Louisiana and Texas, and that market was large enough to justify Quinn’s continuing interest.” Indeed, the emergence of post-war independent record labels filled the musical void left by larger national companies by releasing recordings made by and marketed to the Cajun community (Brown 2002:45-46).

Bands who played Americanized Cajun-inflected swing music like the Hackberry Ramblers and Harry Choates flourished in the documentary record and in the flourishing east Texas and southwest Louisiana dancehall scenes, while accordionists continued to play underneath the commercial music radar. In early 1940, fiddler Joe Melancon regularly performed western swing throughout southwest Louisiana. While gigging in *Pécanière*, a rural Cajun community, dancehall patrons frequently requested accordion music. The band obliged, on the rare occasions the musicians happened to have an accordion, to the great delight of the dancers. The popularity of the accordion outside of commercial circles is apparent in working-class communities before and during the World War II. Accordion-based music continued unabated in informal settings like the *bal de maison* through the Swing era. However, major record companies did not satisfy the regional consumer demand for accordion music (Melancon 2002b).

In 1937, the same year that the tide began to shift dramatically away from accordion-based music toward string band arrangements in the documentary record, guitarist J. D. Miller played his first professional gig with Joe Falcon's Silver Bell Band featuring accordionist Amédé Breaux. Born in Louisiana, Miller spent his formative years in El Campo, Texas before his family relocated to the bayou state. He admitted in an interview conducted by Bernard, that he had never set eyes on a squeezebox before his performance with Falcon and Breaux at a Cow Island, Louisiana dancehall. In 1946, Miller became the first person to establish an independent record label in Cajun country, catering to those customers who "wanted Cajun records, which were not as readily available as they had been years before" (Bernard 1991).

In 1948, two years after the tremendous commercial success of "Jole Blon," Iry LeJeune, the visually handicapped son of a cotton farmer, released his seminal accordion-based "Love Bridge Waltz" on Opera Records of Houston, Texas. Ironically, Opera label founders Bennie Hess and James Bryant—former associates of Quinn at Gold Star when Choates recorded "Jole Blon"—also capitalized on the grass roots demand for accordion music in Louisiana and east Texas. LeJeune became widely popular throughout southwest Louisiana in the early 1950s until his untimely death.

At the peak of his career (October 8, 1955), Iry LeJeune was killed in a highway accident. He and fiddler J. B. Fuselier were returning home after playing a dance at the Green Wing club in Eunice when they had a flat tire. They got out to fix the flat but didn't put the car off the road. A passing car hit and knocked Iry LeJeune into a field where he died instantly and J. B. Fuselier was dragged under the car for a distance and seriously injured [sic]. (Savoy 1984:153).

Following his demise, LeJeune's popularity gradually increased and an air of mystique developed around the accordionist's memory, undoubtedly due to his tragic death. He was in the vanguard of the accordion revival in the late 1940s, amidst intense Americanization stimulated by World War II. LeJeune paved the way for those musicians following his lead including



Nathan Abshire and Lawrence Walker by piercing through the musical mainstream promoted by the commercial recording industry (Brasseaux 2003b:184; Broven 1983:32; Savoy 1984:152).

Between 1948 and 1951, when the commercial pendulum shifted again towards accordion-based music, Choates and his band released “Old Cow Blues” (1948), “Nobody Cares for Me” (1948), “Maggie Waltz” (c. 1951), and “Oh Meon” (c. 1951) (Coffey 1998:NP). The songs featured the standard western swing arrangements associated with Choates; however, an accordion is incorporated, not as the highlighted instrument carrying the melody, but as an atmospheric or novelty feature, apparently to satisfy the consumer demand for accordion music popularized by Iry LeJeune in the late 1940s (Brown 2002).

Accordion music never left the cultural landscape. Its reemergence in the documentary record resulted from the economic foresight of independent record label owners in Texas and Louisiana. The popularity of “Love Bridge Waltz” compelled record producers to reconsider the financial potential of accordion-based music, contrary to the hypothesis put forth by Barry Ancelet and Ann Savoy postulating that that G. I.’s returning home from the war wanted to eat home-cooked meals, sleep in their own beds, and hear traditional music. Meanwhile, the fiddle continued to play a country tune (Ancelet and Morgan 1984:27; Savoy 1984:14).

In 1949, fiddler Chuck Guillory recorded a song entitled “Grand Texas” (Big Texas) with Jimmy C. Newman, of Grand Ole Opry fame, and Julien “Papa Cairo” Lamperez, the archetypal Cajun steel guitarist. John Broven explains that Lamperez claimed “Hank Williams stole [“Grand Texas”] in 1952 and turned it into the world-famous ‘Jambalaya (On The Bayou).’” Hank Williams Sr. projected to the country a musical interpretation of Cajun culture, completing the Americanization circle, as “Cajun” suddenly became part of the nation’s folklore through the endorsement of a national superstar (Broven 1983:34).

The Tex Williams song “I Have Texas in My Soul” (1946) aptly describes the Cajun experience following the reemergence of the accordion in the documentary record. Cajun musicians continued to play country tunes, transposed onto the squeezebox, accompanied by steel guitar and drums, the vestiges of western swing’s legacy and Texas’ role in the Americanization of Cajun music (Arhoolie 427).

## **CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this thesis I have explored Cajun musical trends during first half of the twentieth century. My study focuses on available recorded materials that sonically preserved the colors and textures of the music as it changed through time. I hope to have provided a new perspective of the Cajun experience during the early twentieth century, which, in effect, validates and authenticates a side of Cajun music that other scholars have neglected. I highlighted intermittent musical styles and recordings that demonstrate the heterogeneous nature of Cajun music between 1928 and 1950.

I have relied heavily on available discographic information for commercial Cajun music in order to identify the personnel involved in recording session, the time periods during which companies produced these recordings, and the names of the songs associated with the Cajun musical inventory. My comprehensive analysis of this information led to the development of a conceptual framework based on predominant musical trends between 1928 and 1950. I structured my narrative about the development of Cajun music based on major stylistic changes in commercial Cajun music between 1928 and 1950.

During Cajun music's early commercial era (1928-1934), the overwhelming majority of Cajun artists recorded accordion-based music in small acoustic ensembles. Recordings by other musicians—namely Blind Uncle Gaspard, Dennis McGee, Lawrence Walker, and Nathan Abshire—demonstrate that commercial Cajun music also explored diverse arranging styles and repertoires different from those mainstream trends that became the crux of Cajun music scholarship.

John and Alan Lomax's 1934 Louisiana field recordings also hint at the expanse of the Depression-era Cajun repertoire. Ballads, work songs, fiddle breakdowns, and clarinet and

fiddle music all existed simultaneously within south Louisiana's musical landscape. These field recordings are dramatically more stylistically diverse than the commercial recordings issued during the early commercial era and illustrate the evolving linguistic climate among Cajuns. The ethnic group's bilingualism opened a world of communicative possibilities that allowed Cajuns to interact in a variety of ways with Anglo-America.

The Cajun swing era (1935-1947) marked a dramatic shift in the sounds and structure of Cajun music. For the first time in the genre's history, Cajuns performed in large amplified orchestras, featuring bass fiddle, drums, and steel guitar. The dramatic impact of mass media such as radio and records left their imprint on south Louisiana's musical repertoire, as Cajuns interpreted and adapted western swing, hillbilly, jazz and other forms of American popular culture. Mass media increased the number of articulation points that bridged the cultural divide between Cajuns and Americana.

The breadth of the twentieth century Cajun repertoire—from ballads, polkas, and mazurkas, to accordion-based blues numbers, colonial clarinet and fiddle arrangements, and Cajun swing—is a testament to the diversity and complexity that shaped Cajun culture. The expanse of the Cajun songbook suggests that Cajun music is defined more by ethos and social context than by a delimited set of stylistic features. Likewise, the relationship between these musical styles reflects the evolving social contexts that define the early twentieth century Cajun experience.

This chapter will demonstrate that the ethos and social context that help define Cajun music are shaped by Cajun ethnicity and identity. I will argue that Cajuns developed and utilized multiple identities within situational contexts for instrumental means. The Franco-Catholic minority group strategically assumed a secondary American identity to increase their negotiating

leverage with Anglo Americans at or beyond the Cajun ethnic border. Individuals within the Cajun community actively developed secondary and tertiary identities without compromising their ethnicity. Multiple identities conformed to the ever-evolving ethos and social contexts that shaped the Cajun experience during the twentieth century. Likewise, styles incorporated by musicians reflect the “traces of the processes through which the performer has effected and realized his choices, and has established his personal (and social) ‘stance’ or position” (Blum 1975:217).

Heterogeneity offered Cajuns a degree of latitude to participate in various musical contexts. During the first half of the twentieth century, musicians had the opportunity to perform at private functions, large public gatherings, in recordings studios, or during live radio broadcasts. The repertoire that accompanied these musical contexts and a musician’s decision to adopt particular styles became emblematic expressions of Cajun identity. According to Waterman, “The total array of stylistic systems and relationships among them provides a ‘map’ of shifting identity patterns in densely populated, culturally heterogeneous urban centers.” The same argument holds true for musical forms performed by a heterogeneous population within a regional rural context. Cajuns selectively interpreted strains of American popular music, and adapted arrangements and musical styles to conform to local aesthetics and the social contexts that shaped Cajun ethnicity and identity (Nettl 1985:19; Waterman 1990:7).

Anthropological theories of ethnicity are often divided into two opposing camps: expressive and situational. During the 1970s, Van den Berghe argued that kinship selection—the preference for kin over non-kin and close kin over distant kin—was intimately linked to ethnicity. He accentuated the role of subjectivism, nepotism and ethnocentrism in ethnicity, which he defined as “deeply rooted, given at birth, and largely unchangeable” (Van den Berghe

1978:401-404). In 1988, Rosaldo argued that ethnicity is most focused and concentrated when expressed within the confines of Barth's ethnic group boundary. The anthropologist explained that ethnics enjoy coming together and concentrating (socializing). Private social functions instilled a "state of healthy vitality and well-being," during which time ethnicity became "strong and thick" as the group concentrated and expressed their ethnicity. The theoretician's line of reasoning points out that expressive ethnicity is a means of protecting the group's resources. He explains that ethnicity thickens to form a protective barrier against cultural penetration by outside groups (Rosaldo 1988). Bun and Kiong concur that expressive ethnicity is expressed most clearly in private spaces at the center of Barth's ethnic boundary:

home, community halls, clan associations social get-togethers or on such ethnic ritualistic occasions as celebrations of festivals, religious worships and ethnic holidays, ethnicity is manifested mainly expressively to meet a personal emotional need for appreciation, affiliation, harmony and pleasure (Bun and Kiong 1993:144).

From this perspective, expressive ethnicity (in an ethnic context) is an end in itself, as satisfaction is derived through communal interaction between people who share cultural backgrounds (De Vos and Romanucci-Ross 1982:379).

Some of the varied social contexts surrounding Cajun music provide evidence of expressive ethnicity in south Louisiana. *Bals de maison* provided localized and private social spaces for the Cajun community through the end of World War II. Cajun musicians performed to intimate groups of friends and family to satisfy the community's courtship rituals and the group's emotional need for social interaction, affiliation, and pleasure. Without intrusion or interruption from outside groups, Cajun dances were an almost unconscious expression of an ethnic identity instilled since birth.

Dancehalls altered the dynamic of this space beginning in the first half of the twentieth century by increasing the range of interaction. Folks from a larger geographic region

concentrated in community dancehalls, thereby altering the dynamics of Cajun ethnicity. Dancehalls increased the range and scope of musical social space, they expanded the boundaries of private interaction between friends and family and encouraged a discourse between rural neighborhoods, thus creating a new community space. Cajun spaces, however, were not always limited to private interaction. Dancehalls in southwest Louisiana and east Texas often catered to Cajun and Anglo-American patrons. Likewise, Cajuns often expressed their ethnicity in instrumental and situational contexts as Texas swing and country musicians toured the dancehall circuit.

Ethnicity becomes increasingly symbolic (situational) when group boundaries are threatened. Anthropologists have defined instrumental behavior in an ethnic context as a goal-oriented means to an end, most visible and empirically expressed along ethnic boundaries (De Vos and Romanucci-Ross 1982:379). The situational ethnicity perspective views people as active agents, who selectively and strategically manifest, present and display their ethnic identity in relation to available opportunities in a competitive and plural environment. Identity, then, is self-ascribed with regard to the “other” (Nagata 1974; Yancey et al. 1976:397).

Rosaldo maintains that ethnic identity can be a circumstantial means of signifying differences from other groups. In essence, identity “comes to resemble clothes, masks, emblems, or badges,” that people use to communicate their solidarity (Rosaldo 1988:164). Foster also claims that ethnic identity is not necessarily a permanent, “all-or-nothing” phenomenon. An individual’s affiliation shifts depending on the potential benefits associated with available economic opportunities and a person’s concern for social affinity, social status, and mobility (Foster 1977:114). Bun and Kiong argue that situational ethnicity emerges at the edge of ethnic boundaries where people can manipulate their inclusion in a group for instrumental means.

At the fringes of ethnic boundaries, in common public places, where materialistic transactions are negotiated and completed, one witnesses the visible emergence of the instrumental use of ethnicity. It is in these places where the situationist view of man begins to gain plausibility. Ethnicity becomes changeable, culturally and ecologically defined, and situationally sensitive (Bun and Kiong 1993:145).

Within the situational context, identity becomes a factor in the ethnic equation. Individuals actively engage and negotiate their own ethnic identity to increase their social leverage at the borders of ethnic boundaries and in the context of heterogeneous plural societies.

During the late 1930s, Cajun musicians often temporarily submerged their ethnic identity to increase strategically their negotiating leverage when they crossed the ethnic boundary for instrumental means. For instance, the Cajun swing ensemble the Hackberry Ramblers—named for the small Cajun oil town near the Texas border—engaged their primary ethnic identity by performing and recording Cajun French music with a swing backbeat. In 1937, the band temporarily changed its name when Montgomery Ward hired the group to be spokespersons for their Riverside Ramblers tires. The band's alter ego, the Riverside Ramblers, recorded and performed live radio broadcasts exclusively in English to appeal to the company's Anglophone consumer base throughout the South. Luderin Darbone and his ensemble accommodated the department store because of the potential financial returns, and thus the group's best interests, by accentuating their secondary American identity as the Riverside Ramblers. When performing within Cajun social contexts for audiences in local dancehalls, however, they group resorted back to their "Cajun French" incarnation and promoted themselves as the Hackberry Ramblers to satisfy the local demand for French music. The Hackberry and Riverside Ramblers embody the situational nature of Cajun ethnicity along the ethnic border where Cajuns engaged American capitalism and American popular culture. Luderin Darbone, bandleader for both swing bands, acknowledged during an interview that he played either Cajun or country and western music



depending on the cultural orientation of the audience. The distinction between the two groups also demonstrates the role of multiple situational identities within the Cajun community (Darbone 2003).

Multiple identities and participation in multiple folk groups are commonplace in plural societies. According to Bun and Kiong, Chinese immigrants living in Thailand developed at least two identities without compromising their ethnicity. Chinese expressed and nurtured a primary, core ethnic identity—or “master identity”—in the same private spaces that sustained expressive Chinese ethnicity. On the other hand, the ethnic group also developed a secondary Thai identity through a public discourse with native Thais. The Chinese acquired, internalized, and adapted their secondary identity to reconcile with their primary identity. These immigrants thoroughly absorbed Thai language, cultural practices, values, and behavioral comportments, while simultaneously perpetuating Chinese ethnic culture. Contrary to assimilation arguments, Bun and Kiong argue that Thailand’s plural society thrived on integration, which allowed the groups to share a common cultural affiliation, while granting the Chinese freedom to maintain their distinct culture and master identity.

Postiglione defines integration as the forced entanglement and subsequent synthesis of two or more individual cultures within a plural society. This “cultural collision” unites, but does not homogenize, separate ethnic groups, thereby allowing the opportunity for cultural variation. Postiglione argues that the intersections between two distinct ethnic groups generate new meaning and yield a creative aftermath (Postiglione 1983:23). Bun and Kiong view integration as one of the influential cultural mechanisms that allow the Chinese in Thailand to maintain multiple identities.

Integration also applies to the Cajun experience in America. The forced entanglement of Cajun and American cultures began in 1803 following the Louisiana Purchase, when Cajuns became subject to American law. Geographers Kollomorgen and Harrison write “since 1803 their destiny has been fully identified with the destiny of our nation albeit the still common usage of the French language. They are therefore American in every sense of the word” (Kollomorgen and Harrison 1946:153). Their assertion acknowledges that Cajuns became part of a larger equation governed by American politics, economics, and law, despite the ethnic group’s cultural distinctiveness. During the late nineteenth century, Cajuns began to formulate a national identity as social forces like the Civil War and new technologies such as the railroad further connected the ethnic group to American cultural trends (Brasseaux 1992; Brasseaux, personal communication, 2004). By the twentieth century, the emergence of a national communications network, the development of Louisiana’s petroleum industry, and the availability of mass media technology facilitated the discourse between Cajun and American cultures. Increased contact with American culture equated to an increase in situational contexts. In turn, Cajuns became progressively savvy about negotiating their multiple identities.

Between 1928 and 1950, Cajuns nurtured their American identity as the ethnic group adapted to the evolving cultural climate in south Louisiana. This survival technique allowed Cajuns to readily identify with Americans and facilitated the negotiation of resources. Cajuns interpreted and adapted American cultural traits such as capitalism, education, and the English language so they could easily cross ethnic boundaries for instrumental means. For example, Depression-era bilingual Cajun politician Dudley LeBlanc represented not only a Cajun adaptation of American political practices, but the agility with which Cajuns shifted between their multiple identities. LeBlanc employed both his primary and secondary identities, engaging

constituents from both sides of the Cajun ethnic boundary—primary Francophones (including Cajuns and white Creoles), and primary Anglophones (including Anglo Americans and some Cajuns).

Well I've been figuring who would be my kinsmen and I discovered that it's everyone who talks French. I'm a Cajun, you know. Everyone who talks French—we are all like cousins. Because you speak French and I speak French, that makes us first cousins. And if you talk English, than I am the cousin of those who talk English as well, because I speak English. And if you talk English and French, well then we are double-cousins, you understand. So don't forget that, my friends, when you go vote (Angers 1977:47).

Cajuns negotiated with Americans on America's terms by voluntarily learning how to navigate Anglo American customs and values, contrary to the Cajun Renaissance preservationists' belief that "Cajuns were reluctantly, though inevitably becoming Americanized" (Ancelet 1989:27; Bernard 2003:146). Pragmatic Francophone Louisianians adapted particular Anglo American traits, such as capitalism, to negotiate Bayou Country's newly industrialized economy and American legal system. Mattern counters the preservationist argument, by pointing out that Cajuns expressed a fully developed secondary American identity at the end of the twentieth century, when Renaissance scholars put forth the argument juxtaposing Franco and Anglo cultures and identities. Mattern writes:

Most Cajuns, preservationists included, live comfortably in both francophone and Anglo worlds...Cajuns selectively adopt some of the beliefs and practices that characterize Anglo culture and identity. It thus makes little sense to argue that Cajuns are opposing or resisting Anglo culture, since this would imply that they are at least partly at war with themselves (Mattern 1998:43).

Cajuns activate the adaptive nature of their culture, the mechanism that sustained the ethnic group for 250 years. In the wake of the rapid industrialization that transformed the South as a whole, the ethnic group redefined its ethnic boundaries and modes of social organization to adapt to their new reality (Larouche 1983; Henry and Bankston 1999a:226).

Cajun Swingers realized that understanding Anglo American culture was the key to regional, even national success. Early in his recording career, Leo Soileau quickly learned that tapping into Anglo American culture equated to fruitful financial returns. Indeed, the fiddler's recordings earned him a substantial amount of cash during the Great Depression. Soileau understood that the same principle could be applied to a performance strategy, thus allowing him to become a professional full-time musician. He absorbed the latest popular songs issued on record and broadcast on nationally syndicated high wattage radio stations, then performed his interpretations to the diverse audience that made up the cultural crossroads between southwest Louisiana and east Texas. Soileau realized that by performing his Cajunized interpretation of swing music, he could exploit a new potential market beyond the limits imposed by south Louisiana niche Francophone market. In turn, Soileau, Luderin Darbone, Harry Choates and other Cajun swing musicians, became veritable culture brokers offering Cajunized swing to Anglo American audiences, and an Americanized repertoire to Cajun dancers, an adaptation that allowed some Cajuns to negotiate Bayou Country's changing value system in the wake of industrialization. The flexibility afforded to Cajun Swing musicians lay in the ability to understand and satisfy the diverse Cajun and Anglo American audiences (Soileau 1965; Brown 2002). On the other hand, musicians like Joe Falcon opted to remain with the arranging format that was so successful for the accordionist during his early recording career. As the social and cultural climate of south Louisiana, public demand for Falcon performances dwindled until the resurgence of accordion music in the post-World War II period, when the musician adapted his musical philosophy by incorporating drums and electric instruments—vestiges of the swing era (Falcon 1965).

Recent studies of Cajun ethnicity by Bernard and Henry and Bankston have further illuminated some of the complex nuances that shape multiple identities during the twentieth century. By the 1950s, Cajuns had maintained at least three distinct identities without compromising the group's ethnicity: ethnic (Cajun), national (American), and regional (Southern). Bernard argues that the group's American identity was in full bloom following the Second World War. One Cajun informant explained to Henry and Bankston that the development of an American identity has helped to level the playing field for the Franco-Catholic minority in the United States:

I think we fared very well having come to the United States. I think that we—and when I say “we” I mean all of our ancestors—we were very tough, determined survivors. But it paid off in a way and we then became Americans. We now have Acadian culture and Cajun cuisine and Cajun music, but we are Americans and we have all the privileges and nonstigma of being part of the United States (as quoted in Henry and Bankston 1999a:244).

The fact that Cajuns are white has also helped Cajuns selectively shift between identities, playing the role of an ethnic or white American. Color has allowed Cajuns to manipulate their identity, as they can “pass” for white in situations with an unequal balance of power, a privilege not extended to ethnic groups of color. Henry and Bankston's informant acknowledges the facility whiteness brings to Cajuns who employ their secondary American identity by stating that “all the privileges and nonstigma” grant to him/her because of the informants inclusion in the United States (De Vos 1982:28).

Cajuns also fully expressed a tertiary Southern identity after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Respectfully standing during a recitation of the Southern anthem “Dixie” at football games or other public events became a social norm after integration. However, the ethnic group's primary or master identity remained intact despite the addition of secondary and tertiary identities. Meanwhile, as Henry and Bankston have pointed out, Cajuns do not feel the

need to hyphenate their ethnic identification, as individuals switch conveniently between their multiple identities for instrumental means (Bernard 2003; Brasseaux, personal communication, 2004; Henry and Bankston 1999a:230).

Cajun musicians frequently drifted back and forth between their different identities when they crossed the Cajun ethnic boundary. Evidence clearly suggests that Cajuns shifted their public identification to adapt to whatever environment they faced. These transformations almost universally occurred when these ethnic chameleons recognized potential gains that could be obtained by cloaking themselves in a particular identity. One of the best examples of Cajuns using their multiple identities for instrumental means took place in Bayou Country's Depression-era political arena.

According to music historian Kevin Fontenot, gubernatorial candidate Jimmie Davis hired Cajun swing bandleader LeRoy "Happy Fats" LeBlanc during his campaign stops in south Louisiana during the late 1930s. The governor preferred to have a dance band—as opposed to his usual country ensemble—when playing in Cajun country to appeal to local aesthetics. LeBlanc not only provided the musical accompaniment for the candidate, but also acted as Davis' interface, addressing the francophone audience in French. LeBlanc's endorsement (Happy Fats, a staunch Davis supporter, was already a celebrity because of his music) helped to ensure the Cajun vote in the future-governor's south Louisiana campaign. Happy Fats supported the politician because he believed Davis' policies had the best potential payoff for the Cajun community. In effect, LeBlanc negotiated both the Cajun ethnic boundary and his American identity by forming an allegiance with the Anglo-Louisianian candidate (personal communication, September 11, 2004).

In the opposing political camp, Davis' rival also decided to engage the Cajun community by hiring a Cajun swing bandleader. Fontenot claims the Anglo incumbent hired Leo Soileau to perform music and interface in French with the Cajun audience. Soileau, also a staunch Davis supporter, cleverly campaigned for Davis in French during his public addresses, a situation unbeknownst to the Anglophone politician. Like Happy Fats, Soileau negotiated the Cajun ethnic boundary and his primary and secondary identities by seemingly "playing ball" with the politician, while secretly ensuring the best interests of the group by promoting the opposing candidate. The ability to maneuver between identities allowed the Cajun community to strategically turn the tide to their advantage in ways often undetected beyond the ethnic boundary. The incumbent clearly stood naively on the outskirts of the Cajun boundary, because he did not perceive Soileau's ruse. The fiddler crossed freely back and forth between his primary and secondary identities without compromising his ethnicity (personal communication, September 11, 2004).

Opportunity sometimes came at the expense of the primary Cajun identity. During the 1930s, western swing bandleader and fiddler Cliff Bruner hired a young Cajun crooner living in Beaumont, Texas named Arthur "Buddy" Duhon. Buddy, a "versatile vocalist, equally at home with pops, blues, Cajun and country," added a new dimension to Bruner's Texas Wanderers band with his warm vocals and extensive repertoire (Coffey 1997:31). The singer also drove the band's bus, kept track of money, and collected the cover charge at the dance hall door, particularly when the group played in Cajun country. Duhon's ability to speak French was an asset to the Anglophone touring group. During a performance deep in south central Louisiana, trouble arose between the predominately Cajun audience and the members of Bruner's

ensemble, after several musicians flirted with the local girls in attendance. Enforcing the ethnic boundary, Cajun men gathered outside the dancehall at the end of the dance. Bruner recalled:

there was about 20 or 30, a flock of 'em. When it was all over and we were fixing to leave, Buddy looked out there and he saw two lines, one on each side of the walkway going to the bus. And it's just lined up with those Frenchmen!—ready to whip our band. There was enough of 'em that they should've been able to, but Buddy had news for them. He reached in that money box and he had the biggest .44 you ever saw—that thing had bullets like a shotgun! He pulled that thing out and waved it at those guys. He said, “I'll tell you what: we're coming right down between you. I'm gonna count 1-2-3 and when I say three, if any of you are not running, you're gonna get a bullet between your eyes!” And he started counting—and, boy, they started running! So Buddy came in handy lots of times! He said, “I know who you are!”—they were all coon-asses, you know? He was something else (Coffey 1997:31).

Duhon engaged both his master and secondary identities by acting as the intermediary and facilitator for Cliff Bruner in Cajun Country. When trouble arose at the end of the dance, Buddy's allegiance was clearly with his Anglo employer and his own safety. The Cajun vocalist privileged his American identity even within a Cajun context because the rewards came not from the Cajun community but financial returns granted by Cliff Bruner. However, Duhon was also conscious of his primary identity. Buddy taunted the crowd with the remark “I know who you are!,” suggesting that he understood the cultural context, social norms, that the limitations of the ethnic boundary in south central Louisiana.

Complex situational contexts prompt Cajuns to nurture and employ multiple identities. The ability to seamlessly flow back and forth between primary, secondary, or tertiary identities is part of a multifaceted adaptation scheme that Cajuns cultivated to survive the ever-evolving cultural landscape in Louisiana and the United States. Some scholars have dismissed these adaptive processes by viewing Cajuns as becoming like the Anglo-Saxon mainstream. Adaptation often takes place in subtle ways in plain view of academicians and outside observers, who fail to recognize the nuances of these subtle cultural expressions. Indeed, bystanders like



Jimmie Davis' political rival did not comprehend Leo Soileau's ruse although it unfolded in front of his eyes. Recent discussions of Americanization have oversimplified Cajun experience during the twentieth century by labeling cultural transformation in south Louisiana as unilinear assimilation and homogenization, despite persistence of cultural values and the retention of the group's primary ethnic identity. This perspective evokes the antiquated definition of Americanization that developed in the early twentieth century (Bernard 2003).

In the wake of World War I, intellectuals and social activists began to conceive of an Americanization movement that hoped to solidify America's ethnic, economic, political, cultural and social factions through mutual cooperation and equality. In his article "Americanization: Its Meaning and Function," sociologist Carol Aronovici defined Americanization as a "synthetic process of social and national integration brought about by an intensified democratic state [that sought] to merge the present heterogeneous masses of racial and national groups into one great people" (Aronovici 1920:702). For Aronovici, the Americanization process was an idealized form of nationalism and democracy patterned after North American Anglo Saxon and Puritan cultures. In contrast to Walt Whitman's multicultural description of America as a "nation of nations," the movement sought to assimilate immigrant populations (non-Anglo Saxons) in an effort to create a homogeneous whole in the spirit of *e pluribus unum*. The Americanization movement coincided with the Progressive Movement, a sociopolitical movement that also sought to unify and invigorate the United States. For both groups, English-only education was the key to create a common communicative medium for all Americans. By the 1920s, state legislatures around the country pressed for the abolition of foreign languages. Louisiana followed suit in 1921 with an amendment to the state constitution that implemented English-only education. Reformists believed that a homogenous America needed a uniform language—English—to

establish a common communicative medium (Aronovici 1920:710). Although Cajuns are not a typical example of American immigrants—the ethnic group not only settled in the Louisiana territory before its acquisition by the United States, but played host to American “immigrants” after 1803—the group fell into the category of white European ethnics along with Italian, Polish, and Irish peoples. In the most recent Americanization study of Cajun culture, historian Shane Bernard contends that Cajuns were victims of the Americanization process stimulated and propelled by unilinear assimilation. The assimilation argument espoused by social scientists does not deal with the complexities of the interaction between Cajuns and Anglo Americans. Nor does this theoretical orientation account for parallel situations outside of the United States, such as case with Chinese immigrants in Thailand. On the contrary, Americanization equates to an adaptive processes in which people interpret and adapt popular culture to regional and local tastes (Henry and Bankston 1999a:224).

There is overwhelming evidence to suggest that the Cajun community did not assimilate into the American mainstream between 1928 and 1950. In their 1999 article “Louisiana Cajun Ethnicity: Symbolic or Structural?,” Henry and Bankston suggest that neither a symbolic nor structural approach to Cajun ethnicity is sufficient to understand the community’s complexities. By the end of the twentieth century, just as Cajuns expressed a fully developed American identity, the symbolic elements of Cajun ethnicity shifted and changed under the pressures of evolving socioeconomic circumstances rather than a movement toward assimilation. On the other hand, geographic concentration, clearly defined ancestry, language maintenance, religious affiliation and endogamy indicate that the symbolic ethnicity argument is not satisfactory. Henry and Bankston’s arguments against assimilation in the late twentieth century also apply to the Cajun community during the first half of the century. Between 1928 and 1950, Cajuns

maintained their cultural values, retained their primary ethnic identity, engaged in bilingual code switching, maintained their religious distinction (Catholic), observed religious rituals, festivals and folk traditions like Mardi Gras, continued to eat ethnic cuisine, practiced endogamy, and faced ethnic stereotypes and prejudices (Ban & Kiong 1993; Henry and Bankston 1999a; Henry and Bankston 1999b).

In 1993, Chan Kwok Bun and Tong Chee Kiong described the same sorts of mechanisms that define the Cajun-American discourse in an article entitled “Rethinking Assimilation and Ethnicity: The Chinese in Thailand.” The interactive processes described in the essay evoke a striking parallel to the social climate situation in south Louisiana between Cajuns and Americans. Rather than viewing the Chinese-Thai discourse as a one-way process, Bun and Kiong discount the exaggerated arguments of assimilationists in light of religious, linguistic, marital practices, social and cultural evidence that suggests the work of adaptive processes. Chinese immigration to Thailand is based on the process of integration, defined in their study as the forced entanglement of two or more cultures that generates a new synthetic cultural situation. This fusion is accompanied by a creative aftermath that spawns new meaning to the cultural product. While two or more cultures may unite, they do not homogenize. The creative aftermath of the “cultural collision” and the resulting cultural admixture does not equate to the demise of Chinese ethnicity, nor the replacement of Chinese culture with Thai culture. Rather, the Chinese selectively adapted Thai traits, and the Thai modified and adapted particular Chinese customs.

Pragmatism in Cajun culture opens the door for individuals to embrace new technologies, cultural traits, values, even identities, if they somehow facilitate life and allow for the continued existence of Cajun ethnicity. South Louisianians improvise, interpret, and adapt culturally to mainstream American culture. From this perspective, the twentieth century Cajun experience

mirrors that of other minority groups in the United States, albeit the ethnic group's freedom to exploit certain privileges because of their phenotype. Cajun interpretations of American culture do not represent the demise of Cajun ethnicity, nor is Cajun ethnicity replaced by an American ethnicity. On the contrary, Cajuns modify and adapt customs to address their constantly evolving cultural milieu, while maintaining their primary identification. During the first half of the twentieth century, language became the lowest common denominator between Cajuns and Americans. English allowed the ethnic group to actively engage in a dialogue with Americana. Bilingualism allowed Cajuns to be ethnic or American depending on their immediate situational needs of the individual, and provided the leverage the group needed to successfully and strategically maneuver between their multiple identities. Commercial Cajun music, Cajun swing, and secondary and tertiary identities are the result of interaction across the porous Cajun ethnic boundary. In the end, Cajuns become part American, and America becomes more Cajun.

From across the ethnic boundary Americans recognize that Cajuns have not been assimilated. Several films produced between the late 1920s and 1950s reflect the popular American perception of Cajuns. Film producers ascribed ethnic stereotypes by romanticizing and highlighting "exotic" traits of Cajuns and their picturesque homeland. Director Edwin Carewe's 1929 adaptation of Longfellow's epic poem *Evangeline*, pioneer documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty's 1948 film *Louisiana Story*, and the feature film *Thunder Bay* (1953) starring Jimmy Stewart are stereotypical portrayals of Cajuns indicating that America unquestionably viewed the ethnic group as the "other." The trend continued into the late twentieth century. Adam Sandler's picture *Water Boy* denigrated the ethnic group and mismatched cultural symbols in an effort to give the comedy a "Louisiana feel."

Anglo American adaptations of the Cajun waltz “Jole Blon” also illustrate that Cajuns maintained a distinctive culture and ethnicity throughout the twentieth century. “Jole Blon’s” long and winding history changed the course of Cajun music by transforming the regional genre into a veritable American musical style. Nationally famous recordings artists catapulted their interpretations of the Cajun experience into the American mind’s eye. Each adaptation, interpretation, and performance of “Jole Blon,” affixed a new layer of meaning to the song as it snowballed down the commercial musical mountain. The plaintive waltz began its roller coaster ride through American popular culture in the Cajun repertoire and accumulated an assortment of cultural implications that compounded and shifted over time depending on the song’s context.

The song’s legacy highlights the dialogue between Cajuns and American popular culture during the first half of the twentieth century. Although sometimes on different sides of the fence, Cajuns and Americans adapt and incorporate cultural information to suit their individual needs, desires, and expectations. In the case of Harry Choates’ recording of “Jole Blon,” the fiddler transforms the plaintive Cajun waltz by employing American imagery embodied by the blonde protagonist and popular musical instrumentation via a western swing arrangement. Within the Cajun cultural context, the song conforms to Cajun views of appropriate sexual behavior and courtship practices. American adaptations, on the other hand, shape the song to conform to an Anglo Protestant perspective. In English renditions of the tune, “Jole Blon” came to represent the powers of female sexuality. American musicians filtered and burlesqued the Cajun heroine’s character, turning her into a sometimes sexually deviant, sometimes perverse seductress, whose wanton ways rival the sexual escapades of other amoral ethnic women. “Jole Blon” acts as a barometer of the nation’s view of sexual expression both in Southern white society and among ethnic groups. Furthermore, Cajuns and Anglo-Americans alike interpret and respond to national

developments by interpreting, editing, and adapting cultural information through an individual's attitude and cultural lens. In turn, context determines the significance of a song like "Jole Blon" that has been reinvented over and over again, in different formats and languages. The waltz's history reveals a behavioral phenomenon that underscored the American experience during the twentieth century: Americans interpret and adapt cultural information, like music, art, theater, and literature, from internal and external sources to make it their own.

Like use of the *Yourba* identity marker in western Africa, American is an umbrella term that is often applied to the United States' ethnically diverse population. "Yourba" ethnic groups like the *Òyó*, *Ègbá*, and *Ìfé* parallel American ethnics such as Latinos, African-Americans, and Cajuns. These groups display primary ethnic and secondary national identities and filter popular culture differently through an ethnic lens colored by the varied groups' cultural orientation and experiences.

Americanization is not based on assimilation and homogeneity, but fragmentation as the heterogeneous population of the United States filters, interprets, and adapts popular culture to conform to local aesthetics. The spectrum of differences range from the extreme to the subtle nuance that distinguishes ethnic interpretations of popular culture from its source. For instance, Louisiana State University and Southern University's marching bands stem from military brass bands traditions popular in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although both university marching bands reside in the same southern Louisiana city, their musical philosophies, aesthetics, and interpretations of marching band traditions are on opposite ends of the brass band spectrum. Likewise, the stylistic gamut associated with Cajun swing bands during the late 1930s and 1940s ranged from interpretations of Cajun fiddling to western swing.

The heterogeneous nature of Cajun musical expression between 1928 and 1950 mirrored the state of Cajun ethnicity and identity. Southwestern Louisiana's pluralistic society represents a microcosm of the American experience. Bayou Country's Cajun community emerged from the integration of the region's diverse array of ethnicity that included Germans, Jews, Afro-Creoles, African Americans, Creoles, French, French Canadians, Acadians, Anglo-Americans, Italians, Native Americans, Lebanese, and Scots-Irish, just to name a few. The concentration of ethnic diversity varied in south Louisiana from community to community, and from enclave to enclave. In many instances, south Louisianians like fiddler Varise Connor developed multiple identities. Connor (b. 1906) grew up in Lake Arthur, Louisiana, speaking French, and identified himself as both Cajun and Irish (Laudun and Mouton 2004).

In accordance with Fredrik Barth's argument that groups establish ethnic boundaries to protect their resources, the Cajun community adapts by engaging their multiple identities. Individuals submerge one affiliation or another in situational contexts, depending on the relative payoffs. Musicians like the Hackberry Ramblers intimately understood the nature of instrumental ethnicity, and used their secondary American identity to their advantage by transforming into the Riverside Ramblers when opportunity knocked. Cajuns are not victims of circumstance and social and cultural forces spurred by assimilation. Rather, Cajuns are proactive participants who shape their own culture. Individuals make decisions that affect their everyday lives, and in effect, the direction of their culture. Musicians have played a large role as culture brokers in south Louisiana. Music makers were highly mobile compared to other members of the community, and displayed a general tendency toward eclecticism, borrowing freely from their own traditions and American pop culture. During the early commercial era, some musicians traveled as far as Texas to perform, spurred by financial opportunities west of

the Sabine River. In turn, musicians often found themselves positioned at interstices along the fringe of the Cajun boundary, where they forged new styles by interpreting cultural information from beyond the bubble. Cajun ensembles then translated and transposed that information musically for their friends, family, and audiences. Musical performances became a public arena for the symbolic negotiation of continuity and change within the social contexts that defined the Cajun community. Ultimately, the community as a whole determined its own fate on the American stage. Cajuns were ethnic actors playing the role, not puppets suspended by the strings an American puppet master (Waterman 1990:15-16).



## WORKS CITED

Abbeville Meridional

1922 Abbeville Meridional, December 16.

Abbeville Progress

1923 Abbeville Progress, May 19.

AFS 11 B side

1934 John and Alan Lomax Collection. Louisiana Digital Folklore Archive, Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

AFS 12 single faced disc

1934 John and Alan Lomax Collection. Louisiana Digital Folklore Archive, Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

AFS 14 A side

1934 John and Alan Lomax Collection. Louisiana Digital Folklore Archive, Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

AFS 14 B side

1934 John and Alan Lomax Collection. Louisiana Digital Folklore Archive, Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

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- AFS 33 B side  
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- AFS 34 A side  
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- AFS 34 B side  
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- AFS 35 A side  
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- AFS 37 A side  
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- AFS 37 B side  
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## VITA

Ryan A. Brasseaux is Director of Research/Project Manager at EXHIBITS, ETC., a nationally recognized museum exhibit design firm based in Scott, Louisiana. He received a Bachelor of Arts in anthropology and Francophone studies from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 2000. In 2005, he published *History on the Table* (Hippocrene Books)—one of the first academically-based explorations of Cajun cuisine’s evolution—with Carl A. Brasseaux and Marcelle Bienvenu. He is currently working on two additional book projects, *Bayou Boogie: A History of Cajun Music, 1765-1950*, forthcoming by University of Illinois Press, and *Cajun Music: A Reader* with Kevin S. Fontenot (Tulane University), forthcoming by the Center for Louisiana Studies. In addition, Brasseaux has published several works in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, *Louisiana History*, *Dictionary of Louisiana Biographies*, and *Louisiana Cookin'* magazine. In May 2004, Brasseaux presented a keynote address entitled “The Once, Present, and Future of Cajun Music” at the International Country Music Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. The Lafayette-based Cajun ensemble, the Lost Bayou Ramblers, provided live musical examples. He also presented invited lectures at Yale University (2002), the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens (2004), and to the Fulbright Institute (2000-2001). Brasseaux served as a Cajun cultural expert and consultant for the Food Network’s “All American Festivals” television program, the Canadian Broadcast Corporation, the Atlanta *Journal-Constitution*, a variety of Canadian documentary productions, and the University of Louisiana at Lafayette’s new record label *Louisiana Folk Masters*. In 2001, Brasseaux began producing, directing and hosting the “Cajun and Creole Hour” (CCH), a weekly one-hour radio program broadcast from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette’s NPR



affiliate, KRVS 88.7 FM. In 2002, the CCH produced a four part series on Acadian culture for the Canadian Tourism Commission, New Brunswick Tourism, and Travel Radio Network. Brasseaux based the emissions—syndicated in Louisiana and Canada—on his field recordings, which included interviews with Canadian Parliamentarian Voila Léger, musicians, poets, city officials, and other locals in conjunction with eastern New Brunswick’s annual *La Fête nationale des Acadiens*. Brasseaux also produced a radio special for Vanguard Records entitled “Beausoleil: A Retrospective,” featuring Grammy award-winning Cajun musician Michael Doucet. On December 17, 2004, Brasseaux will receive a Master of Arts in anthropology (4.0 GPA) from Louisiana State University.