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Exotic folk: old-time French Louisiana music and the politics of culture, 1946-1973

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

**EXOTIC FOLK:
OLD-TIME FRENCH LOUISIANA MUSIC
AND THE POLITICS OF CULTURE, 1946–1973**

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the mid-twentieth century “revival” of the old-time French-language music of Southwestern Louisiana in order to illuminate changing ideas about race, identity, and culture in post-World War II and Civil Rights era America. Rather than being simply an overlooked element of the national folk revival movement, the Cajun-Creole music revival was a larger phenomenon with a broader social and political context, promoted by local, state, national and international actors. The French government conceived of the music revival as one aspect of a global French language movement. National folklorists used the music to prompt conversations on race relations and social justice. Local actors sought to reassert the value of traditional culture in an economically and demographically diversifying region. Ultimately, under the stresses of the ethnic revival movement, Cajun-Creole music, which had been developed by black and white musicians over centuries of collaboration, cohabitation, and sympathetic engagement, split into two genres as Creoles began to identify with urban

African-American culture and Cajuns became caught up in the rhetoric of ethnic identity.

Chapter 1 chronicles the role Cajun-Creole music played in Southwest Louisiana culture in the early twentieth century. Chapter 2 argues that the French-speaking Louisianans who served in World War II played an instrumental role in reviving old-time music. Chapter 3 examines the work of the nationally and state-funded folklorists and commercial label scouts who, while doing fieldwork in Southwest Louisiana, found their long-held conceptions about folk music, race, and culture challenged in a more integrated and “foreign” part of the American South. Chapter 4 illuminates the role of the avant-garde artist Harry Smith in creating the folk revival of the 1960s and introducing a national to Cajun-Creole music. Chapter 5 looks at the Newport Folk Festival and the ethnomusicology fieldwork that put Cajun-Creole musicians on a national stage. Chapter 6 chronicles the history of the French language movement in Louisiana, arguing that the language revival of the 1960s was largely initiated and funded by international entities. Chapter 7 argues that the civil rights and ethnic identity movements ultimately split Cajun and Creole music into distinct genres.

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Introduction

There are two stories in American music history that are told over and over, and one that has not yet been told at all. In all three stories, the state of Louisiana figures prominently, with its complicated history of French and Spanish empire and its status as the center of African culture in the New World. The first story is the cosmopolitan tale of how jazz developed through the collaborations and improvisations of free people of African descent living in New Orleans in close proximity to classically trained white musicians, and of how the two groups mixed European melodies and African rhythms to create a dynamic new sound. The second story is the rustic narrative of the American roots music that developed among isolated populations living in the rural South, among the black field workers picking cotton in the Mississippi Delta who turned call-and-response field hollers into a blues music about hard labor and enduring poverty. But there is another story about music, race and culture in the American South, the telling of which illuminates the relationship between political and social changes on the national level – from World War II to the civil rights and ethnic identity movements of the 1960s – and new understandings about the meaning of race, ethnicity, tradition, and culture in America.

That story is about a music that was the shared cultural expression of impoverished Acadian and Afro-Caribbean settlers in the prairie parishes of nineteenth-century Southwest Louisiana, a music that its regional practitioners

had, for centuries, thought of as simply “French music,” and the way that music was collected, studied and promoted not only by commercial record labels but by state, national and international governments that had distinct and sometimes conflicting interests in “discovering” and promoting it. Old-time French Louisiana music was either, from the perspective of national government, an American folk music that documented the lonesome hardships of an impoverished population of exiles and outsiders, a cultural artifact to be studied by anthropologists as evidence of a disappearing culture, or, from the perspective of state government, a cultural commodity that could enrich the Louisiana tourism industry. A music once heard only in the rural parishes of Southwest Louisiana’s Acadiana region was described by its French and French Canadian promoters as evidence of a vital French Atlantic culture.

The displacement of French-speaking Catholics from the provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia in the decade after the French and Indian War marks the beginning of a story in which exiled Acadians, after first being shipped off to France and the Caribbean, immigrated to Louisiana to settle in the prairie parishes of Southwest Louisiana alongside people of Afro-Caribbean descent. Their shared culture was an island of French language and French traditions in an Anglophone land. French-speaking Creoles had more in common with their far-off Haitian and West Indian ancestors than they did with other Southern blacks, and French-speaking Cajuns had, they discovered painfully, nothing in common with other white French-speaking Louisianans, whose ancestry and

historical experience were more directly a product of the European French settlement of New Orleans. The fact that these two populations, black and white, developed and shared a common musical tradition has been documented by folklorists who have looked at the instrumentation, melodies and French lyrical content of the ballads of Cajun-Creole music to identify the collaborations and borrowings that resulted from proximity, sympathy and inspiration.

The term “Creole” as an ethnic descriptor has varied meanings in the history of Louisiana, having, in the early French colonial period, referred to white Louisianans of European ancestry, and then, by the late eighteenth century, referring to free blacks of African descent living in New Orleans, often members of a prosperous merchant class. Here, the term “Creole” is used in reference to people of African and Afro-Caribbean descent, often of mixed African, French, Spanish or Native-American ancestry, living in the Acadian-settled parishes of Southwest Louisiana and commonly called black Creoles or Afro-Creoles. The experience of isolated poverty and the existence of a shared language allowed the Cajun population to incorporate into their European violin-based waltzes and two-step dances the African rhythms and call-and-response forms of the music of their Creole neighbors, and allowed the Creole population to incorporate into their Afro-Caribbean percussion-based chants the harmonic patterns of European dance melodies.

Cajun-Creole musical forms developed over the century between the first Acadian settlement in Southwest Louisiana and the post-Civil War era. Both

groups adopted the accordion, imported into Louisiana by German settlers on the east side of the Mississippi River in the late nineteenth century. White and black Louisianans, who worked side by side in the rice and sugar cane fields of Evangeline and Vermilion parishes, lived in close proximity to each other, often in the same communities, and played in integrated bands. Given a New Orleans in which race had existed on a continuum and not on a polarity, in which free people of color had attended mixed balls and dances alongside whites from the time of Spanish New Orleans until Reconstruction, the integration of musical groups had a long history in Louisiana.

With the federal and state governments' attempts, early in the twentieth century, to Americanize the French-speaking population of Southwest Louisiana through English-only educational policies, and with the arrival of the petroleum industry and a wave of Texan oil workers, the traditional music and culture of Southwest Louisiana could have become as much a regional historical remnant as the culture of the Pennsylvania Germans was also, by then, becoming. But a generation of Louisiana soldiers returned from World War II determined to revitalize the culture of old-time music in Southwest Louisiana, just as a generation of American folklorists, worried about the disappearance of traditional cultural practices, set out to document, record and popularize that same music. Likewise, the post-war French government, gazing at its former colonial possessions in Africa, the Caribbean and North America and determined to reassert the importance of global French culture, took a proprietary interest in

old-time French Louisiana music, which although uniquely a product of the complicated historical contingencies of Southwest Louisiana culture, was understood as contributing to the French musical tradition. In the 1960s, as Cajun-Creole music arrived on the national American recording and festival scene, French governmental entities funded and sponsored a series of programs to rehabilitate the French language and French-language music in Louisiana. Thus did local, regional, national and international forces conspire to create and then benefit from the revival of a disappearing Southern music.

Other Southern folk music forms have been successfully historicized. Scholars of the Southern rural blues revival rightly look to race relations in the American South and to black popular culture to ground the discussion of the cultural prominence of black musical forms in the mid twentieth century, but a study of the Cajun-Creole music that was performed by integrated bands in a deeply segregated South is absent from otherwise comprehensive discussions of American folk music from the 1930s to the 1960s. The history of country and bluegrass music, and the national popularization of hillbilly ballads, downhome musicians and bluegrass forms, have been the subject of considerable music history scholarship, but the language barrier has been an effective obstacle to an historical study of Cajun-Creole music's strange mid-twentieth-century "revival." Thus Cajun-Creole music has remained "an American musical footnote" within

discussions of American folk music traditions.¹

Folklore studies – the study of the customs, culture, crafts and arts of traditional societies – gained a firm foundation in American universities after World War II,² and the study of folk music has been the largest constituent element of folk studies. The glamour of European high-art traditions was challenged by the experience of a catastrophically violent war that undermined the authority of the European cultural inheritance, and the embrace of folk art was conceived of as an antidote to xenophobia and racism,³ because the cultural contributions of ethnic and minority populations could be illuminated, explained and celebrated. Universities began founding academic programs dedicated to the study of American folkways and the cultural output of the impoverished, the historically marginalized, and the rural isolated.

Folklorists had first begun plying their trade in post-Civil War America, when the political and economic Reconstruction of the South occasioned a soul-searching interrogation into other regional American identities as well, with James Russell Lowell lecturing New Englanders on the history of English poetry and their inheritance as colonists⁴ while Henry David Thoreau wrote about vanishing Native American tribes. The trauma of the war between the North and

¹ Ryan André Brasseaux, Cajun Breakdown: The Emergence of an American-Made Music (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25. Brasseaux argues that Cajun music is not, in any case, folk music (a term Brasseaux finds pejorative and exploitative).

² Regina Bendix, In Search of Authenticity, The Formation of Folklore Studies (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 122.

³ Bendix, In Search of Authenticity, 150.

⁴ Bendix, In Search of Authenticity, 119.

South inspired a new determination to emphasize not only a common national origin but a characteristically America-within-America set of aesthetics, values, and practical, everyday approaches to the problems of human experience.

Collecting and theorizing about folksong became a powerful interest early in the early twentieth century as the nation became predominantly urban and scholars focused on the recovery and documentation of the cultural products of rural America. In an age of rapid, efficient manufacturing and mass production for mass consumption, scholars argued over whether the folk singer was a bearer of tradition, part of “an unbroken chain of transmission” on the assembly line of past-to-present, or a creative interpreter of culture and an individualistic artist: “The song he sings is not his own by right of authorship, but his version of the song is to him the only correct one. Every other version is wrong...At the same time the folk-singer is equally sure that he sings a song learned from tradition exactly as his predecessors sang it....A folk song has *texts*, but no *text*, *tunes* but no *tune*...[The folk singer] is, together with every other folk singer who sings the song in question – past, present or future –, co-author with the author of the text, and co-composer of the air.”⁵ Urbanization, immigration and industrialization gave rise to a powerful set of questions about what constituted American national identity and what the role of the individual was in a pluralistic democracy – that is, in a nation that has *texts* but no *texts*, *tunes* but no *tune*.

The mass production of printed sheet music had been described as a both

⁵ Phillips Barry, quoted in Bendix, In Search of Authenticity, 144-145.

a spoiler of old traditions (because the authority of print would suppress a multitude of other versions of a song), and as a reinforcer of tradition, since at least some versions of a song could be captured before they disappeared under the noise of mass culture. Beneath each theory lay the assumption that some form of cultural intervention was needed to “save” traditional music, and that ordinary people didn’t have the training, sensibility or motivation to preserve their own cultural traditions.⁶

The ethnomusicologist John Lomax grew up in a country restless with that anxiety, and made it his life’s work to record the cowboy ballads and frontier songs of those “real people, the plain people, devoid of tinsel and glamour, some base, a few suspicious and surly, many beautifully kind.”⁷ During the Depression, New Deal projects enlisted Lomax and a cohort of American folklorists to engage in cultural rescue and recovery projects, preserving the cultural remnants that were fading into the past and reviving those cultural practices that were still a vital local resource. Lomax’s son, musicologist Alan Lomax, identified the music of Southwest Louisiana as one such disappearing and vital cultural artifact, and his work collecting and documenting Cajun-Creole music inspired later field workers, including the collector Harry Oster and the folklorist Ralph Rinzler, to follow in his footsteps across the prairies of Louisiana in search of the last “authentic” ballads.

The academic interest in folk music translated into a popular folk music

⁶ Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, 151.

⁷ Alan Lomax quoted in Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, 147.

movement as young middle-class urban liberals began to embrace old-time music in the late 1940s, first through the string-band music of Pete Seeger and The Weavers and then, in the 1950s, through commercial folk bands like The Kingston Trio; Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, released on Folkways Records in 1952, baptized a generation of listeners in the roots music of the American rural past. The old-time Cajun-Creole music featured on Smith's *Anthology* entered the folk music scene as curious evidence of a foreign version of America inside the national culture. Southwest Louisianans, incomprehensible to other Southerners in their attitudes about race, and peculiar in their speech, were a kind of exotic incarnation of the folk, peregrine, strangers.

As Cajun-Creole music came to be appreciated by a new national audience, Southwest Louisianans began to understand themselves differently, no longer as primarily bound by a centuries-old dialect of the French language and by the shared experience of isolation and poverty, but as primarily separated by race. Louisiana, as a new U.S. state, had transformed from the most racially mixed and tolerant place in the American South to a segregated and violent place for people of African descent, and the events of the 1960s occasioned a recapitulation of this dynamic: under the pressures of the French language-reform movement and the civil rights and ethnic identity movements, a culture that had been the shared property of both blacks and whites broke apart, with Cajun-Creole music splitting into separate genres, one shaped by white identification with a European and Acadian past, the other shaped by black identification with urban African-

American culture.

Chapter 1 looks at the dominant role Cajun-Creole music played in Southwest Louisiana social culture in the early twentieth century, on the early recording history of the music, and on its development as the shared cultural heritage of French-speaking black and white Louisianans. This study documents the ways in which Cajun and Creole cultural practices were nearly identical, and the way music culture was shaped by the collaborative adaptation of French and French-Canadian song traditions by white and black musicians.

Chapter 2 follows French-speaking Louisianans from rural Acadiana to World War II military service and back to their local communities, where, newly prideful of their French language and heritage after fighting to liberate France, they became culture activists, establishing venues and events where old-time music could be played. This chapter argues that a reinvigorated identification with France as the ancestral mother country motivated Southwest Louisianans to revitalize regional cultural practices, and that this local movement was antecedent to the national “revival” of Cajun-Creole music.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the work of the nationally and state-funded folklorists and commercial label scouts who, while doing fieldwork in Southwest Louisiana, found their long-held conceptions about folk music, race and culture challenged in a more integrated and “foreign” part of the American South. While ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax understood the music as the collective expression of French speakers in the region, the folklorist Harry Oster,

in the years of heightened tension following *Brown v. Board of Education*, segregated old-time music into the categories “Cajun” and “Negro.” Lomax’s successor, folklorist Ralph Rinzler, believed that an education in America’s old-time music would inspire a public commitment to improved race relations in Civil Rights-era America.

In Chapter 4, the eccentric modernist Harry Smith introduces the music of a vernacular American past to a generation of young, liberal, middle-class music lovers struggling to find ways to believe in the possibilities of a more open and just American future. Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Music* broadly inspires the American folk music revival, and incorporates French-language music into the canon of American folk.

In Chapter 5, old-time Cajun-Creole musicians find themselves on a national stage alongside young urban folk revivalists, prompting debates about “authenticity” and the relationship between regional and national cultures, and inspiring a reinvigoration of traditional music and French language education back in Louisiana. Chapter 6 traces national and state efforts to suppress French-language education in the early twentieth century, and on the central role of the French and French-Canadian governments in funding and promoting French language education programs in Louisiana beginning in the 1960s. Folklorists quickly concluded that the survival of the language and the survival of the music were interdependent, fueling local efforts, funded by the federal government and the state, to raise the profile of old-time music in a changing modern Acadiana.

In Chapter 7, the young generation of Louisiana Creole musicians turns to the sounds of urban African-American culture, leaving traditional music, and the black-white collaborations that had created Cajun-Creole music, in the ancestral past, while a new generation of Louisiana Cajun musicians, inspired by their own pilgrimages to France, turned back to the traditions of old-time music. Although black and white composers, lyricists and performers had improvised, interpreted, adapted and performed music together and developed the genre collaboratively over centuries, by the 1960s, cultural politics and stylistic and technological innovations in music divorced Creole culture from its association with Cajun music, and the music culture of Southwest Louisiana became, like much of American culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, more fractured and self-conscious.

This study concludes by examining the strong drive, in Cajun culture, to celebrate a romanticized Acadian heritage, and the concomitant psychological migration of Creoles out of a shared Louisiana French culture and into mainstream African-American culture. The Louisiana tourist industry celebrates the culture of Southwest Louisiana as historically “Cajun,” emphasizing the endurance of the French language and rural French Catholic traditions, while Creoles now largely identify as African-Americans who speak Creole African American Vernacular English.⁸

⁸ Sylvie Dubois and Barbara M. Horvath, “Creoles and Cajuns: A Portrait in Black and White,” *American Speech* 78.2 (2003): 197.

The fieldwork notes of folklorist Ralph Rinzler and the interviews Rinzler conducted with old-time musicians in the 1960s proved particularly valuable to this study, as did the liner notes written by folklorists for compilations of Cajun-Creole compact discs, and the lyrics of the songs in the Cajun-Creole repertoire. The French-to-English translations of song lyrics are original to the writing of this dissertation. Government documents, texts of legislative hearings, and the records and correspondence of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana illuminated the controversies surrounding the French language and culture movement. Importantly, Louisiana folklorists compiled interviews from the 1960 to the 1980s with some of the most renowned Cajun-Creole musicians, and their first-hand accounts of the music culture of Southwest Louisiana were invaluable source material. These scattered materials, brought together, tell the story of how local activists, folklorists, commercial record labels, and federal, state, and international governmental and cultural organizations all became interested in the old-time music of Southwest Louisiana at the same time, and how their work with the music compelled them to rethink the meaning of cultural identity.

Cajun-Creole music remained a neglected orphan within music folklore studies in part because ethnomusicologists and cultural historians focused their attention on those genres of Southern music that constitute the core of American roots music: blues, bluegrass, gospel, and old-time country. Old-time Cajun-Creole music is not glorified as one of the “sources out of which the twentieth-

century's popular music was created"⁹ in the same sense that blues is celebrated as the source of rock and roll, or banjo-centered string bands are considered the foundational sources of country music. Accordion-based French-language music is the anomaly on the family tree. Yet in its origins and development, and in its encounter with popular culture and the cultural politics of the mid-twentieth century, it has much to teach us about the roots and the fruits of multicultural America.

⁹ Benjamin Filene, Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 4.

1.

Mamou Prairie Renaissance

[On the other hand] is the strength and adaptability of genuine traditions. Where the old ways are alive, traditions need neither be revived or invented.¹

Eric Hobsbawn, The Invention of Tradition

Fred's Lounge, a tiny, concrete-block bar in the isolated village of Mamou, Louisiana on the southern prairies of Evangeline Parish, seems an unlikely place to be memorialized as the starting point of the "French Renaissance" in America, as the plaque beside its front door reads. The building has the architecture of a bunker and the décor of a juke joint, and although Fred's is a music venue, there is no stage for musicians. A handwritten sign on the wall reads "This is not a dance hall." Its doors are only open on Saturday mornings, when third shift oil refinery workers crowd the bar beside crawfish farmers and men who work in the rice mills. It is not a dance hall, but the men have come to Fred's for the sole purpose of two-stepping and waltzing with their wives and girlfriends, and posted signs ask patrons not to stand on the tables or the cigarette machine to get a better view of the dance floor.

¹ Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 8.

Fred's is a place of cigarettes and canned beer. In the summer, the humid darkness indoors provides little relief from the sweltering Louisiana sun, which bakes the streets and sidewalks of downtown Mamou – really just a single street of Depression-era storefronts – with the same intensity as it beats down on the prairie fields and the marshy grasslands of the bayou. In a state world-famous for Dixieland jazz and New Orleans blues clubs, Fred's Lounge is a remote and hard times-looking venue off Louisiana State Highway 13 on 6th Street, but the story the plaque tells is true: In addition to cane sugar and cotton, the Acadian parishes of Southwest Louisiana produced French-language music and Louisiana French culture, exporting it first to the nation and then to an international audience in the decades after World War II. It wasn't far from Fred's that many of the greatest Cajun and Creole fiddlers and accordionists were born, lived and died, some of them uncertain about whether or not they even wanted their music to live on after them.

Ethnomusicologists and cultural historians who have written about traditional Cajun-Creole music –meaning French-language songs played on just an accordion and a fiddle or two, with perhaps a triangle to keep time – have argued that the music was on “the brink of extinction” by the mid 1930s as the new technology of radio, which broadcast string bands, country music and English-language news, drowned out “old home music,” and the political and cultural forces of Americanization effaced Cajun-Creole folkways and the

Southwest Louisiana French language.² In this narrative, there is a *before*, a long interlude, and then an *after*; the *before* is captured by the accounts of Works Progress Administration-affiliated ethnographers who recorded their fieldwork observations of Cajun sharecroppers working in grueling conditions in the hot sun, and then living “like medieval troubadours, traveling about the Cajun settlements, living on the bounty of those who enjoy their music.”³ The 1920s and 1930s were marked as the golden age of old-time French-language music in Southwest Louisiana. Then, for twenty-five years, according to this narrative, the music lost favor in its indigenous region and was silenced until, in the 1960s, the next wave of folklore scholars “discovered” old-time Louisiana folk music and “initiated a cultural revival”⁴ in which local populations again took pride in the music of their French heritage.

Fred’s Lounge, and the cultural activism of Fred Tate and the bar’s other proprietors, Paul Tate and Revon Reed, defies this narrative and illuminates the role of Cajun and Creole musicians, enterprising independent record labels and local radio stations in emphasizing, in the 1940s, the vitality of a centuries-old traditional music that had never really gone away – having been interrupted only briefly by the wartime impossibility of importing German accordions – and that would come to be recognized nationally as every bit as historically and aesthetically valuable as the more famous old-time folk music of Appalachia and

² Mark Mattern, “Cajun Music, Cultural Revival: Theorizing Political Action in Popular Music,” *Popular Music and Society* 22.2 (1998): 31.

³ Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 76.

⁴ Mattern, “Cajun Music, Cultural Revival”: 31.

the Mississippi Delta. Fred Tate, who opened his lounge as a returning GI with the hope of bringing French-language music back to its prominent place in the local culture of Mamou, which now calls itself “The Cajun Music Capital of the World,” was an effective cultural worker in a region that would come to draw its share of “cultural intervenors,” a term David E. Whisnant uses in All That is Native and Fine, The Politics of Culture in an American Region, to describe outside preservationists whose mission is to preserve and revive what they perceive to be an authentic and endangered folk culture⁵. In Southwest Louisiana, returning World War II veterans like Fred Tate, Paul Tate and Revon Reed became the first Cajun-Creole culture workers, magnifying awareness, creating opportunities, and establishing new venues for old-time traditional music.

The fiddle-and-accordion music developed by the inhabitants of the bayou and prairie parishes of Louisiana grew out of the historical experiences and geographical isolation of the impoverished French-speaking settlers, both black and white, who inhabited the region upriver from New Orleans and west to the Texas border, a land that was, for all economic and political purposes, the backyard of empires. Eighteenth-century Louisiana had been governed by Bourbon France as a far-flung colony even more remote than the sugar plantations of Guadeloupe and Martinique, then passed off to Spain after the

⁵ David E. Whisnant, All That is Native and Fine, The Politics of Culture in an American Region (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 260.

French and Indian War to serve as the Spanish empire's northernmost guard post, protecting the silver of Mexico against an Anglo-American incursion into Spanish territory. The territory was briefly French again before being sold in the Louisiana Purchase, and through its seven governments, from colonial to territorial to state and confederate, it sustained the most diverse population in the South, from French-speaking Houma Indians to German immigrants and free people of African descent. It is the only U.S. state with a civil law legal system, having inherited the philosophy and practices of French legal tradition, and was the only Southern state to be as ethnically diverse as a Northern city, with immigrants from Sicily, Germany, the West Indies and Spain inhabiting land alongside the Choctaw Indians. But it was under the legal codes of the Spanish empire that a vibrant music culture was able to develop in the city of New Orleans and the parishes of Louisiana, because the Spanish government, unlike the British and French colonial governments, made no attempt to outlaw musical instruments like the drum, nor to suppress African-derived rhythms and dance in public culture.⁶

Jazz music is an instructive example of how ethnic and racial diversity generated new musical forms in Louisiana. The Irish soldiers who served as the police force for the Spanish empire in New Orleans brought brass bands to the city, while classically-trained musicians, including free men of color, brought African rhythms to the harmonies and syncopation of European music,

⁶ Ned Sublette, The World That Made New Orleans, From Spanish Silver to Congo Square (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2008), 64-80.

experimenting with new instrumentation and improvisational styles. In the mid nineteenth century, German immigrants brought the accordion and polka music to New Orleans. These urban immigrants then migrated out to the lands west of New Orleans on the east bank of the Mississippi River in an area that came to be called The German Coast. The fact that black and white Francophone musicians, living in close proximity in rural areas, taught one another to play the German accordion and learned from each other's fiddle-playing style, is coherent with the story of the diverse cultural origins of jazz. Such cultural collaboration, while stunning in the context of the antebellum and Jim Crow South, was not, then, remarkable in Louisiana.

The liberality of cultural expression and cultural mixing in Louisiana was a shock to Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the architect of the second U.S. capitol building, when he went to New Orleans in 1819 and during a Sunday afternoon stroll around the city stumbled upon a drum circle composed of 500-600 black New Orleanian men and women who were vigorously beating drums to accompany the yelling of singers and the music of banjos.⁷ Rowley, Massachusetts writer Henry C. Knight, ambling around the French Quarter on the Fourth of July that same year, captured the diversity and cultural life of the city when he described first stopping at the Ursuline Convent and overhearing the black-veiled nuns saying mass “in their banishment from the world,” then walking along the Levee, crowded and bustling, where he passed Creek and

⁷ Sublette, The World That Made New Orleans, 275.

Chickasaw Indians, “strolling and idling...half naked...the chief with tall white feathers in his coarse black hair” and finally passing “a drove of forty slaves” and a Scottish Highlander playing a bagpipe before looking into the windows of the Museum Coffee-House, a kind of novelty shop and gaming house, at the patrons and the band: “(The place) is illuminated, and enlivened by a band of musicians, on every evening...Here meet, every night, on the balcony, or level roof of the piazza, in the open air, behind brilliant transparencies, hundreds of people, from the novice shop-boy, to the gray man in spectacles.... (Then) on Sabbath evening, the African slaves meet on the green, by the swamp, and rock the city with their Congo dances.”⁸

Like Latrobe, Knight was struck by the novelty, expressiveness, diversity and intimacy of socializing and music-making in the city, and the images he recorded – the cloistered nuns, the gambling revelers, the shop-boy and the dancing, drumming African musicians – were reiterated in the culture of the Acadian parishes, where the descendants of the French Catholic settlers driven out of British Protestant Canada after the French and Indian War lived in a rural culture of deep faith, economic hardship, a devotion to music and social life, and a history of cultural exchange between people of European and African descent.

Social life in Acadiana, the name given to the twenty-two parishes in which French-speaking exiles settled in the eighteenth century, was organized around four music-based traditions, traditions that Fred Tate and his cohort of culture

⁸ Henry Cogswell Knight, Letters from the South and West (Boston: Richardson and Lord, 1824), 122-127.

workers had grown up with and long heard stories about from parents and grandparents. The *viellée* was an evening visit of neighbors gathered for a meal and music – either the a cappella singing of ballads by the wife and mother of the house, or the acoustic playing of the fiddle and accordion by the men of the house, with foot stomping and hand clapping as accompaniment. The *bal de maison* was a larger gathering of extended families hosted by one household, sometimes called “*fais do-dos*” because late-night dancing for adults couldn’t begin until the children were asleep (“*fais do-do*” is a French colloquialism meaning “go to sleep”). As communities grew and single houses couldn’t hold every uncle, cousin and in-law, these dances expanded into larger Saturday night events held in *salles de danse*, or public dance halls, but were sometimes still called *fais do dos*. These dance halls, which began to be built in Southwest Louisiana in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, were rural versions of the *bal musette* that developed in Paris in the same period – indoor and outdoor dance halls where couples waltzed to accordion and piano music – and that characterized urban French social life in the interwar years. In “Memory of France: April 1944,” the French literature scholar Wallace Fowlie described a typical *bal musette* he visited in 1930s Paris, where couples danced to “a jerky kind of music” featuring the “ever puffing and swelling accordion.” Drinks were served with enthusiasm, and the dancers formed “one universe” as young couples courted in the “dream and silence of love in the midst of raucous accordion playing”: As (the) *bal musette* continued to grow more crowded, I felt more and

more succinctly how in Paris the two worlds of creative achievement and daily living are close together, how they merge in a sane relationship, and how this marriage tends to diminish both the unreality of artistic creation and the monotony of every day living,”⁹ Fowlie wrote.

In American expatriate Carl Van Vechten’s “*Au Bal Musette*,” the dancehalls, illuminated with globe lights and decorated with brightly-painted wall murals, were hidden away among the cobblestone streets of Montmartre, and the music of the accordion droned on until the very late hours of the night. The accordion had replaced the traditional “*musette*,” the bagpipe which had been the fashionable instrument of the French dance in earlier centuries. Van Vechten’s description of a dance hall in post-World War I France could just as well describe a Louisiana dancehall of the same era, with the same music: “The *bal* was conducted in a large hall...There were rows of tables, long tables, with long wooden benches placed between them. One corner of the floor was cleared...for dancing... The music [of the accordion] was both rhythmic and ordered...but never faster or slower, and never ending...[The dancers] whirled to the inexorable music when it was a waltz....In the dances in two-four time... [they danced] in a folk-dance manner....Yes, under their feet, the dance became a real dance of the people....[The accordionist] emphasized the effect of folk-dancing by playing old *chansons de France*...”¹⁰

⁹ Wallace Fowlie, *The Kenyon Review* 6.4, (1944): 578-579.

¹⁰ Carl Van Vechten, “*Au Bal Musette*,” *The Merry-Go-Round* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1918), 137-140.

Van Vechten's descriptions of another Parisian dance hall, with long wooden benches arranged against the walls to make room for dancing to the music of an accordionist and a guitarist, again sounds much like descriptions of the Louisiana version – which featured long wooden benches and bleachers along the wall, and a band composed of an accordionist and either a guitarist or a fiddler. Although the sign on the wall in Van Vechten's French *musette* asked patrons watching the dancers not to stamp their feet in time to the music,¹¹ in the Southwest Louisiana setting, the foot stomp became an integral component of the call-and-response pattern of clapping, stomping and yelling that characterized Cajun and Creole social music.

Among both Cajuns and Creoles, the house dance and dance hall traditions were the same even if the French words that described these social events was different: while Cajuns held *bals de maison*, Creoles called a house party *un diverti* from the French *divertissement*, or entertainment, or a *la-la au soir* [evening fun]. Sometimes younger people would ask older neighbors to host the *la-la*. All the furniture had to be moved out of the house (Creole cottages were typically single-story three-room houses with high gabled roofs) to make room for a dance floor, and in the evening, men congregated on the front porch or in the yard waiting their turns to dance. Creole accordionist Herbert Sam remembered a dance his parents hosted in their rented farmhouse where there were so many people in the house that the floor collapsed and for the next week,

¹¹ Van Vechen, “*Au Bal Musette*,” 144.

neighbors had to return from working the fields every day to jack it back up.¹² Once some of the sturdier old Creole cottages were converted into dance halls and moved to a more central location in the community easily accessible by foot or horse-and-buggy,¹³ there were many more opportunities for accordion and fiddle-playing Creole farmers to find regular weekend pay as musicians.

While dance halls had become just as common in Creole as in Cajun culture by the late 1930s,¹⁴ it was the Cajun *bals de maison* that first moved from homestead to public halls. Cajun dance halls were often converted barns or warehouses consisting of one wide-open room, high rafters and sawdust covering the wooden floor, with a side room that functioned as a nursery for young children (the “*parc aux petits*”), and a card room. The *fais do do* as a building was far less impressive than the *fais do do* as a social and cultural institution.¹⁵

Cajun dances were loud, lively events that customarily ended at midnight, when the Creole musicians hired to play at Cajun dance halls would return home to play Creole house dances, which were often all-night affairs.¹⁶ Cajun musicians likewise played at Creole house parties, according to Creole fiddler Canray Fontenot, who grew up in a family of musicians in L’Anse aux Vaches: “In the early 1900’s, black musicians played at white house parties to supplement their

¹² Michael Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco* (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 44.

¹³ Tisserand, *Kingdom of Zydeco*, 46.

¹⁴ Malcolm L. Comeaux, “The Cajun Dance Hall,” *Material Culture* 32.1 (2000): 52.

¹⁵ Lauren C. Post, *Cajun Sketches: From the Prairies of Southwest Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 156.

¹⁶ Ann Allen Savoy, *Cajun Music: A Reflection of a People*, Vol. 1 (Eunice: Bluebird Press, 1984), 327.

meager incomes and white musicians often joined their black friends to play for Creole “*fais do-do*’s.”¹⁷ Constant musical exchanges took place. A generation of Cajun and Creole musicians interviewed by folklorists and music collectors confirmed Fontenot’s characterization of the collaborative and dynamic social character of music culture in Southwest Louisiana.¹⁸

Creole fiddler Béb  Carriere performed at many Cajun house dances during the 1920s and 1930s¹⁹ and Creole accordionist Am d  Ardoin, whose virtuosity and style were profoundly influential on Cajun music in the early twentieth century, spent the 1920s and 1930s playing both on his own and as part of a duet with Cajun fiddler Dennis McGhee. McGhee and Ardoin met as sharecroppers working the same parcel of land, and became the most cherished performers in Southwest Louisiana. “We played for the whites or the blacks, it didn’t make any difference,” McGhee said. “They all paid us the same.... Am d  was a good accordion player for the blacks and he was good for the whites.”²⁰ Creole farmers would venture into Cajun dance halls just to hear the Ardoin

¹⁷ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 327.

¹⁸ Savoy’s *Cajun Music* is a compilation of musician biographies and discographies, and includes interviews with many of the most celebrated and popular Cajun and Creole musicians. See also Barry Jean Ancelet, *The Makers of Cajun Music, Musiciens cadiens et creoles* [Cajun and Creole Musicians] (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984) and John Broven, *South to Louisiana, The Music of the Cajun Bayous* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 1983), both of which are primarily interview-based and biographical.

¹⁹ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 342.

²⁰ Raymond E. Fran ois, *Y  Yaille, Ch re!* (Ville Platte: Swallow Publications, 1990), 65.

play,²¹ and McGhee was a protective and affectionate partner when the two played house dances and small dance halls, where the volatile mix of rousing music, heavy drinking and close spaces intensified the racial tensions that always existed right alongside the intraracial tensions that flared up between both Cajun families from rival towns and Creole families from different communities.

In the only existing photograph of Ardoin (Fig. 1), he is handsomely dressed in a dark suit jacket, fashionably cut trousers and a high-collared white shirt, his hat tilted to one side, looking much like the New Orleans jazz musicians of his day, and he and McGhee, with his Irish ancestry, white bowtie and tailored vest, and beautiful rosewood fiddle, must have been a striking duo. Many of the tunes that came to represent the Cajun-Creole repertoire are derived from the 1929 Vocalion recordings McGhee and Ardoin made together in New Orleans.²²

²¹ Tisserand, Kingdom of Zydeco, 72-74.

²² Charles J. Stivale, Disenchanted Les Bon Temps, Identity and Authenticity in Cajun Music and Dance (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 146.



Figure 1. Amédée Ardoin

Ardoïn also performed with Cajun fiddler Sady Courville, who played second fiddle to Ardoïn's melodies, for both black and white audiences. "[Amédé] started playing for white people, private dances, and holidays like New Year's and Mardi Gras. I enjoyed and learned a lot of music from Amédé," Courville recalled.²³ Cajun music was popular among the black tenant farmers in Chataignier, ten miles south of Mamou, and on the Prairie Faiquitaïque near the town of Eunice, and Courville said that he and Ardoïn were welcomed in both Cajun and Creole venues: "Everybody, black and white, was nice to us and I was respected among the blacks and Amédé was respected among the whites."²⁴

In both the provenance of the songs, some derived from medieval French ballads, and in the melodies and instrumentation, Cajun and Creole music constituted a shared tradition of borrowed tunes, revised melodies and improvised lyrical adaptations passed back and forth between the two French-speaking populations of Southwest Louisiana. Amédé Ardoïn, having learned the melodies of two-steps and waltzes from Cajun musicians, played them in a slightly different rhythmic style, improvising and adapting.²⁵ And just as Ardoïn played Cajun musical forms, McGhee played "*Mon Cher Bébé Créole*" and "*Pa Janvier*," a song he learned from an elderly Creole woman who sang it at weddings, as well as "*Adieu, Rosa, Demain C'est Dimanche*," about a Creole who would stay out dancing all night; the song's rhythmic structure is derived from

²³ François, *Yé Yaille*, 65.

²⁴ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 40.

²⁵ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 46.

the Creole *juré* tradition.²⁶ Creole *juré* music was the a capella singing of religious testimony, punctuated by yells of “*juré*” [I swear] to the percussive accompaniment of hand clapping and the clacking of a mule jaw or the striking and strumming of a washboard.

McGhee, born in 1893, learned the *juré* form from black musicians. “You’re supposed to yell “*Juré*, my lord!’ every now and then to excite the dancers,” he said. A capella *juré* singers had provided music during Lent or mourning periods when instrumental music was forbidden in the Creole community, but the boundaries between sacred and secular practices blurred, as they so famously did in the state that converted the prelude to Lent into raucous Mardi Gras festivities, so *juré* music was also played at social gatherings when musicians couldn’t be found or couldn’t be paid. The word *juré* may have a linguistic connection to a word used on the West African coast to describe music and dancing.²⁷

Cajun fiddler Joe Falcon recalled hearing, as a young boy in the early 1900s, white musicians sing the Creole song, “Colinda,” a West African song popular in Haiti, Trinidad and New Orleans.²⁸ One of Falcon’s signature songs, “*Hip et taïaut*,” was a Creole folksong Falcon learned from Creole accordionist

²⁶ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 59-61.

²⁷ Barry Jean Ancelet, “Zydeco/Zarico: Beans, Blues and Beyond,” in *Roots Music*, Mark F. DeWitt, ed. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 141.

²⁸ Shane K. Bernard, *Swamp Pop, Cajun and Creole Rhythm and Blues* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 93.

Sidney Babineaux.²⁹ And in the Cajun song “*La Valse du Bambocheur*,” the singer laments the fact that as a man scorned by his beloved and left to wander, he will be pointed at and called a good-for-nothing bum [“*le grand vaurien*”] by black and white neighbors alike [“*Blancs et noirs, ça me point au doigt*”]³⁰, underlining both the proximity in which Cajuns and Creoles lived and the ways in which their mutually felt and communally witnessed experience was converted into narrative and set to a melody to be performed, danced to, and passed on to the next generation. Just as Cajun music was shaped by the strong influences of the black Creole tradition, including *juré*, the lyrics as well as the forms of Creole tunes are indebted to the Cajun tradition, and so “extreme prudence” is necessary for any historian of music trying to account for the melodies and lyrics of these songs, since they come from “mixed French Acadian Afro Caribbean origins.”³¹

Indeed, many of the songs have so many lyrical versions and so many different titles that to cordon off any particular song as predominantly the cultural product of a singular population, time period or style is impossible. In “*Ma Chère Bébé Créole*,” one of the signature tunes of Dennis McGhee, the term “Creole” may have derived its meaning from a quite different New Orleanian use of that word, referring to a Louisianan of European or mixed European and African ancestry, which is how the word Creole was customarily used in New

²⁹ Lauren C. Post, “Joseph C. Falcon, Accordion Player and Singer: A Biographical Sketch,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* Vol. 11.1 (1970): 69.

³⁰ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 251.

³¹ Stivale, *Disenchanted Les Bon Temps*, 136.

Orleans. But in Southwest Louisiana, the word Creole could also take on the connotations it had in the Acadian parishes, describing, to Ardoin and McGhee's audiences, a black Creole woman. Likewise, the term "*ma neg*" appears over and over again in Cajun music as a term of endearment meaning "baby" or "darling" when addressed to a woman and "friend" and "buddy" when used by one Cajun man to another, although the term was obviously borrowed from Creole culture and from the history of black/white interaction in Southwest Louisiana. The term "*neg*," derived from the French *nègre*, appears in both Creole and Cajun music.

The themes and narratives of Cajun and Creole songs were also kin. Both Cajun and Creole vocalists sang drinking songs and playful dance songs handed on from one community to the next ("*Chanson de Limonade*" originated with New Orleans Creoles,³² then passed into the Cajun repertoire), and the place names of towns on the prairies and bayous figure prominently in the shared musical tradition: "*Valse de la Pointe d'Église*," "Lafayette Two-Step," "Crowley Two-Step," and "*Valse de Bayou Teche*," named places where both populations worked the fields growing sugar cane, sweet potatoes and rice. Many of the most popular Cajun and Creole songs tell tales of courtship thwarted by disapproving family members, and of loneliness, heartbreak and separation, but with a tone of resignation. In "*La Valse à Austin Ardoin*," the story of a man who feels both orphaned and rejected by his beloved concludes: "*Il faut que je prends mes*

³² François, *Yé Yaille*, 201.

misères comme ça vient”³³ – I have to take my miseries as they come – a sentiment with which both sharecropping Creole farmers and subsistence farming Cajuns could identify.

Many songs describe itinerancy and homesickness; others were invitations to celebrate and to drink, which many did on summer nights in the yard behind the dance hall, having traveled to the dance in buggies, on horseback, on foot, in wagons and in cars: “Instead of staying in the dance hall, we’d stay outside,” Cajun accordionist Moise Robin remembered. “Especially when the moonlight was shining and we waited for our chance. Back then, the people brought their bottles of moonshine to the dances and hid their bottles everywhere.”³⁴

Such public dances were socially acceptable venues for courtship, and mothers and fathers vigilantly guarded their daughters against unwanted suitors, especially those who congregated outside drinking moonshine. A potential suitor needed the approval not only of a woman’s parents but of her entire extended family, including cousins, and a brief and heavily monitored courtship period was usually followed very quickly by a wedding. When unmarried men entered a dance hall, they were corralled into *la cage aux chiens*, a bullpen behind a gate strung with chicken wire. In a social environment in which blacks and whites mixed more freely than they did anywhere else in the South, the social segregation of women and men was rigidly enforced. While white and black men worked the fields side by side, Cajun and Creole women were confined to working

³³ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 78.

³⁴ François, *Yé Yaille*, 30.

in the home, and this strict division of labor was mirrored in the space of the dance hall, where men and women sat in different sections, coming together only on the dance floor. In both the Cajun and Creole venues, there were often card games for men in a back room. Hundreds of families packed into dance halls, and communities defended themselves aggressively against out-of-town interlopers, with violence sometimes breaking out among young Cajun men from different towns. Local newspapers, all through the post-Civil War era through the Great Depression, recounted dance hall stories of “mayhem and bloodshed” between men from rival towns who had done their drinking first, and then their dancing, and finally went on to fighting.³⁵

Creole fiddler Canray Fontenot described dance halls as vigorously monitored social spaces in which the community matriarchs regulated social interaction and insisted on the observance of traditional customs and forms: “And them old ladies there! It was dancing, but you had to leave a gap. Oh! That’s how come they didn’t want no blues, because they would dance too close to one another.”³⁶ Blues music was considered raunchy saloon entertainment: “Oh, *lawd*, don’t talk about the blues. In my time that was something nasty,” Fontenot explained.³⁷ Rather, Creole dancers did the two-step and danced waltzes just as their Cajun neighbors did.

Rules governing interaction between men and women were the same in

³⁵ Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 40-46.

³⁶ Tisserand, *Kingdom of Zydeco*, 43.

³⁷ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 328.

both Cajun and Creole rural dance hall culture. In Creole communities, a woman was expected to sit on the bench until approached respectfully by a man attired in the mandatory dress shirt in summer or dress coat in winter. The man, who extended his handkerchief to invite the woman to dance, would wrap his hand in the handkerchief so as not to soil the woman's dress with his work-worn hands. The handkerchief was key in Cajun dancing as well: the man wrapped it around his hand so that the position of his hand on his partner's back was clearly displayed and there was another layer of fabric between his hand and the woman's back. This was meant to lessen the provocation of a stranger dancing with a man's brother or sister. In the Creole tradition, a man was expected to serve his dance partner wine or a plate of gumbo at the conclusion of the dance,³⁸ in a reversal of the woman-as-cook-and-server custom of the home, and in the Cajun dance hall, the signature dish, a mix of Cajun and Creole culinary traditions, was served after a long evening of beer, lemonade and black coffee.³⁹

The music of the dance hall, which had migrated from the home to the community social center, returned to the home again as records and radio brought the dance hall sound into the living room. In a region where Cajuns and Creoles had lived in close proximity for a century and a half, record albums and radio served to reinforce a shared cultural legacy, even as the recording industry fought to capture some of its rival medium's listening market. The recording industry faced a crisis when sales of records crashed in the early 1920s as the

³⁸ Tisserand, *Kingdom of Zydeco*, 41-42.

³⁹ Comeaux, "The Cajun Dance Hall," 41.

number of household radios reached three million.⁴⁰ And dance hall music was a belated addition to radio programming, which first brought classical and popular music into Southwest Louisiana homes. The “louder, cleaner and richer sound” of broadcast music, with its live announcers, converted the listening experience into an eternal present-tense moment with which the brief playing of a two-song record couldn’t compete. Before radio came into homes, Cajun accordionist Falcon explained, “We didn’t have nothin’ to hear,”⁴¹ but that silence was replaced by the constant, and unfamiliar, music and voices that radio brought into Cajun and Creole homes.

Columbia was the first record label to sell Southwest Louisianans what they already had: Cajun and Creole music. In 1926, Columbia, looking to compete with that ever-present broadcast music, and looking for new buyers for records, acquired Okeh label and its catalog of German, Polish and Yiddish music recorded for the immigrant market, prompting Columbia executives to think about the foreign-language music market. Okeh had gone from importing foreign albums in Czech, Swedish and German to making its own recordings for the booming foreign-language market.⁴² The 1920s marked the heyday of ethnic media in the United States, from music and foreign-language films to specialized

⁴⁰ Sean Wilentz, 360 Sound, The Columbia Records Story (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2012), 56.

⁴¹ Joe Falcon and Leo Soileau, in an interview by Ralph Rinzler, October 1965, RI 1.011, The Archives of Cajun and Creole Folklore, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana.

⁴² Gareth Murphy, Cowboys and Indies, The Epic History of the Record Industry (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2014), 36.

press publications that catered to the news and entertainment needs of immigrants, linguistic minority populations, and African Americans. Looking to capture the lucrative ethnic market, New York City theaters screened German and Italian films during the “dark time” between matinee and evening shows, and foreign language theatres in Philadelphia and Baltimore drew in both immigrants and curious intellectuals. Theatre owners from Boston to Washington learned that it was profitable to show Italian language films and to dub Hollywood movies into foreign languages; Polish movie houses and Yiddish language theatres opened in Chicago and New York, and Russian, German and Swedish films flickered on the screens in theatres from San Francisco to Milwaukee. Spanish-language films filled the theaters in Dallas, Los Angeles, and Denver during the same years that French films opened in theatres across New York. Once movie-going had become an entrenched cultural habit for middle class Americans, the same movie houses that had eagerly catered to immigrant markets abandoned foreign-language films in favor of the Hollywood fare preferred by their middle-class patrons, who proved to be a more stable source of revenue. But ethnic films remained a key source of movie theatre revenue until World War II-era Hollywood westerns and war movies took over the screens.⁴³

The ethnic press underwent a similar boom and decline. From the early 1900s to World War II, foreign-language newspapers were a newsstand staple in every American city. Publications such as The French New York daily *Courier des*

⁴³ Douglas Gomery, Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), 172-180.

États-Unis presented news about European politics alongside information about local events and practical advice about exchanging foreign currency. Kansas City's Swedish newspaper featured an editorial proclaiming the virtues of George Washington as a way of educating new Americans about the nation's founding. Foreign-language newspapers provided retailers with a way to advertise consumer goods to newly-arrived Slavic, Welsh, Scandinavian and French immigrants overwhelmed by the American department and grocery store. Advertising in the ethnic press cost less than one-twentieth of the cost of advertising in the mainstream English-language press, promising marketers new and loyal markets at small cost.⁴⁴ In 1927, there were more than 1,100 foreign newspapers, in thirty-six languages, in the United States, a phenomenon that baffled some of the "very American Americans" who fretted that political publications were radicalizing rather than assimilating immigrants; the same statistic reassured others that the newly-arrived foreigners, drawn to news about the old country, were being assimilated into the culture by reading recipes for American dishes, articles on American childrearing practices, and the biographies of "interesting and great Americans" featured in the ethnic press. "The newcomer wants a job...he wants a home," wrote one zealous defender of the immigrant press: "If he can squeeze in a phonograph, he will do it."⁴⁵ The first

⁴⁴ Berkley Hudson and Karen Boyajy, "The Rise and Fall of an Ethnic Advocate and American Huckster, Louis N. Hammerling and the Immigrant Press," *Media History*, 2009, Vol. 15(3): 291-293.

⁴⁵ Marshall Beuick, "The Declining Immigrant Press," *Social Forces*, Vol. 6, No 2 (Dec., 1927): 257-258.

and second-generation Polish and Italian immigrants that crowded the working class tenements of Chicago reported that buying a phonograph helped them keep their native culture alive, since they would hold large social gatherings and dance to the music of the old country. Chicago became the center of a significant foreign record industry, and even Chicago's relatively small Mexican community had a shop that sold records of Mexican music.⁴⁶

Like the newsstands and the movie houses, record labels became keen on capitalizing on narratives of immigrant life and the struggles of assimilation. Columbia, inspired by Okeh's success selling traditional old-time music in ethnic and regional markets, began experimenting with recordings of banjo and guitar duets and string bands in the hopes of increasing sales in ethnic rural Southern markets.⁴⁷ It would have been hard for Columbia to find a region in which music played a bigger cultural role than it did in Southwest Louisiana. The music of Améd   Ardoin was popular with the same listeners who flocked to hear Cajun accordionist Joe Falcon and his wife, the guitarist Cleoma Breaux, perform as a duet in packed dance halls throughout Southwest Louisiana. Columbia was hoping that Falcon and Breaux would be the first of many successful regional stars, bringing the couple to New Orleans in 1928 to record "*Allons    Lafayette*" [Let's Go to Lafayette] and "*La Valse Qui Ma Portin De Ma Fose*" [The Waltz that Carried Me to My Grave]. Sound engineers in Columbia's New Orleans

⁴⁶ Lizabeth Cohen, "Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s, *American Quarterly*, Volume 41, Issue 1 (Mar., 1989): 9.

⁴⁷ Wilentz, *360 Sound*, 61.

studio, who were used to recording jazz artists backed by large orchestras, looked scornfully at Falcon and Breaux's fiddle and guitar and tried to cancel the session, saying, "That's not enough music."⁴⁸ But once the Columbia representatives heard the playback of "*Allons a Lafayette*," which told the story of a man imploring a woman to elope with him if she couldn't get her parents' permission to marry him, they agreed that, despite the incomprehensibility of the Cajun French lyrics, the melodies were compelling and the songs had market potential⁴⁹. The Creole fiddler Douglas Bellard and the Creole accordionist Kirby Riley recorded "*Mon Camon La Case Que Je Suis Cordane*" [I Was Convicted Because of My Gun] the following year for Vocalion.

The modest but steady marketability of such ethnic market folk records sustained Columbia in the golden age of radio until the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, which brought music lovers into bars and clubs to listen to record-playing jukeboxes, which were first introduced in 1927.⁵⁰ Then, in the early 1930s, recording companies abandoned the copyright claims under which they had forbidden the playing of recorded music on the radio,⁵¹ and Joe and Cleoma Breaux Falcon's "*Allons à Lafayette*" was played on the radio, in local clubs and in private homes throughout Southwest Louisiana. Falcon's house phone started ringing so much his family wondered who'd died, and he quit working on his

⁴⁸ Post, "Joe Falcon," 66.

⁴⁹ John Broven, *South to Louisiana, The Music of the Cajun Bayous* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 1983), 17.

⁵⁰ Wilentz, *360 Sound*, 76.

⁵¹ Wilentz, *360 Sound*, 58.

father's sugarcane farm and became a full-time musician: "What I had to do was I had to collect my money, so I'd just sit down and scratch 'em off," Falcon said."⁵² He performed in clubs from Southwest Louisiana to Texas, where old-time Louisiana French music was popular with Cajuns and Creoles who had left the state to work in the Texas oil fields.

Those lonely exiles from Acadiana soon had many more choices when they wanted to play the old-time music of the parishes where they grew up. Six months after "*Allons à Lafayette*" was recorded, Columbia's archrival label Victor brought Ville Platte fiddler Leo Soileau and accordionist Mayuse LaFleur to Atlanta, Georgia to record "*Hé, Mom*," about a man who wishes to see his mother's face one last time before he dies, and "*Ton Père A Mit D'Eor*," about a man whose girlfriend's parents kick him out of the house. "*Hé, Mom*" became poignantly successful when LaFleur was killed in a speakeasy brawl in Basile days after recording the song.⁵³ Soileau and LaFleur had been introduced to a Victor talent scout by Opelousas jewelry store owner who sold record players and albums in his store, and who, like other phonograph retailers, knew that local music could sell the equipment it was played on. Record labels usually agreed to record "almost anyone the phonograph retailer suggested."⁵⁴ Customers would sometimes buy multiple copies of the fragile records, which quickly wore out

⁵² Falcon and Soileau, in an interview with Ralph Rinzler, October 1965, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Center for Louisiana Studies, The Archives of Cajun and Creole Folklore, RI1.011, audio recording.

⁵³ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 20.

⁵⁴ Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 56.

under the wear of the heavy needle in the groove, or purchase albums even if they didn't own a record player, in the hopes of playing the music at a neighbor's house.⁵⁵ These late 1920s and early 1930s recordings became the golden classics of Cajun-Creole old-time music. In April 1929, Cleoma Breaux's accordionist father, Amédée, recorded "*Jolie Blonde*" for the Old-Timey label, and other labels followed suit in the rush to record Cajun and Creole tunes, with Old-Timey and OKeh recording Amédée Ardoin as a soloist in 1929 and Brunswick recording Ardoin and Dennis McGhee in 1930. In October 1929, Creole musicians Douglas Bellard and Kirby Riley recorded for Vocalion.⁵⁶ By the early 1930s, Bluebird, Decca, Paramount and Vocalion had added Cajun and Creole recordings to their catalogs, while Cajun and Creole children, fashioning fiddles out of peach tree branches and sewing thread, cigar boxes and the thin metal string of screen doors,⁵⁷ listened to the recordings and learned to imitate, and improvise upon, the music they heard.

Not every Creole and Cajun musician had even been willing to record, however. Those who did record constituted a fraction of the population of musicians in a region dense with talented fiddle players and accomplished accordionists, just as only a very small cohort of Southern folk musicians in other states, playing other genres, had ever recorded. They were the musicians who had gotten up the nerve to attend auditions held by Northern recording company

⁵⁵ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 17.

⁵⁶ Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 56.

⁵⁷ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 328.

scouts, or who had formed bands and “tried to get their fellow men and women, people just like them, to pay attention to them...people who, if only for a moment, looked past the farms and mines to which they were almost certainly chained. The stories they would later tell of journeying to New York to record are almost all the same....They arrived in New York City [and New Orleans and Atlanta] like tourists from some foreign land.”⁵⁸

Both Creole and Cajun populations shared a set of superstitions about recording, and some didn’t want their music to be heard after they were dead.⁵⁹ When Mayeuse LaFleur was murdered, The Eunice newspaper ran a story with the headline “Voice of Dead Man Heard by Eunice People,” in which the writer, after noting that some were happy to hear again “a folk song of their nationality which had never been written but handed down from generation to generation,” explained that others were haunted by LaFleur’s music and the sound of his voice: “The tone of his voice seemed to carry with it a certain sadness, betraying his melancholy attitude...for at the time of his death and even before when the record was made by the Victor phonograph company domestic difficulties has cast a shadow around this man who was only a youth,” the death notice said. LaFleur’s recording sold out quickly, the paper noted, “Before the grim reaper of

⁵⁸ Greil Marcus, “That Old, Weird America,” in booklet accompanying reissue of *Anthology of American Folk Music*, ed. Harry Smith, Smithsonian Folkways, 1997, compact disc, liner notes, 23.

⁵⁹ Dewey Balfa, in an interview with Barry Ancelet, 1981, AN1.193, The Archives of Cajun and Creole Folklore, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana.

time summoned LaFleur from this world” (LaFleur was 23).⁶⁰

Améd  Ardo  also suffered a tragic fate by all accounts, and accounts differ dramatically. Dennis McGhee claimed that Ardo  was poisoned by a jealous Creole fiddle player,⁶¹ while Creole fiddler Canray Fontenot said that Ardo  was severely beaten leaving a Cajun dance hall because he had wiped his brow with a handkerchief offered by a white woman;⁶² Cajun musician Joel Savoy insists that that if there were violence, it couldn’t have been perpetrated by locals: “There wasn’t anyone in this area who would have thought twice about Am    using a white woman’s handkerchief. Everyone knew and liked him.”⁶³ Because Ardo  would weave details of provocative or scandalous local stories into his songs, including stories of men feuding with their wives, he may have “named the wrong people in his songs.”⁶⁴ There is speculation that he died of syphilis at the Pineville mental institution in Alexandria,⁶⁵ but local folklore includes a story of Ardo  leaving the institution and walking back home. Researchers have never been able to locate Ardo ’s death certificate.⁶⁶ But both folklorists and record label marketers found ways to bring Ardo  back into the discussion of Cajun and Creole music for decades to come, citing him as either the forefather of zydeco music, or as the most important innovator in the Cajun tradition.

⁶⁰ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 136.

⁶¹ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 52.

⁶² Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 67.

⁶³ Tisserand, *Kingdom of Zydeco*, 78.

⁶⁴ Tisserand, *Kingdom of Zydeco*, 74.

⁶⁵ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 67.

⁶⁶ Tisserand, *Kingdom of Zydeco*, 78-79.

Cajun and Creole musicians in the decades to come would be powerfully influenced by the legacy of Ardoin's music, even as Cajun music became, in the late 1960s and 1970s, more and more focused on the real and imagined experiences of the descendants of Acadia rather than on the shared Cajun-Creole experience of poverty, subsistence farming and exile. Creole musicians, likewise, began to dramatize and privilege the connections between Creole culture and the larger African-American world. Eventually the music played by Cajuns and Creoles took separate paths, with Cajun musicians not only preserving old-time music, but writing new songs that provoked (white) listeners with a romanticized version of their unique ancestral past, while Creole accordionists developed a faster style that crossed over into, and was shaped by, the music of urban African-American society. The younger Cajun and Creole population of Southwest Louisiana would grow up in a culture in which the old bonds of the French language and shared cultural traditions were weakened under the pressure of the racial and global politics of the mid twentieth century, leaving the image of Dennis McGhee and Améd   Ardoin's musical partnership obscured in the mists of history.

But in the Evangeline Parish of Fred Tate's childhood, Cajun and Creole musicians had played the same songs, "the same kind of rhythm," and no one, Leo Soileau remembered, had even called it Cajun or Creole music in those days. "They called it French music," Soileau said.⁶⁷ Black and white Southwest

⁶⁷ Falcon and Soileau, in an interview with Ralph Rinzler, October 1965,

Louisianans listened to it without conceiving of it as the cultural product or property of one or the other group, black or white. The more germane distinction was between local French-language music and the music of the larger national culture. In fact, one Cajun woman was convinced that the “AM/FM” on the radio dial meant “American Music” and “French Music.”⁶⁸ It was this “French music” that brought Library of Congress ethnomusicologist John Lomax and his son Alan to Southwest Louisiana in the 1930s, and inspired folklorist Ralph Rinzler’s trip in the 1960s on behalf of the Newport Folk Festival Foundation; this Cajun-Creole “French music” that drew song collector Harry Oster to Mamou on behalf of the government of Louisiana in the 1950s and brought Claudie Marcel-Dubois, a scholar of traditional French dance, to Fred’s Lounge in the 1970s on behalf of the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* [French National Centre for Scientific Research]. If there was a joke that began “Three folklorists walked into a bar,” that bar was Fred’s Lounge.

As a World War II veteran returning home, anxious to socialize with friends and neighbors and to hear the old familiar tunes of the accordion and the fiddle, Fred Tate may have thought he was just opening a bar. But through the cultural activism of a cohort of World War II veterans and musicians in Mamou, Fred’s became a cultural institution in its own right, a venue in which some of the most talented Louisiana musicians of the twentieth century played: “At Fred’s

University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Center for Louisiana Studies, The Archives of Cajun and Creole Folklore, RI1.011, audio recording.

⁶⁸ Sara Le Menestral, “The Color of Music, Social Boundaries and Stereotypes in Southwest Louisiana French Music,” *Southern Cultures* 13.3 (2007): 87.

place, every Saturday morning, all the Louisiana Cajuns come out to sing and dance...Nowhere else can you hear such lively folk music...People go to Fred Tate's after stopping by the bank or after going to the barbershop...The whole family is there...The big family of Cajuns, who find their happiness in music...At Fred's, on Saturday mornings, you are in the heart of French Louisiana.”⁶⁹

The experience of war had deepened and radicalized the nostalgia of a generation who, punished in school for speaking French, had been brought up to think of themselves as strangers in a strange land – Catholic, French-speaking rice and potato farmers and bayou fishermen in an increasingly urban, modernized and English-speaking Protestant America. And so the war was something personal, and it was metaphor: even as the United States mobilized its industry, economy and military in the fight to liberate France, the residents of Acadiana understood that the battle to sustain the French language in Louisiana, and the French music and traditions of Louisiana, could be lost year after year as the products and promises of a mass American culture took root across Southwest Louisiana's prairies. When the language was gone, the cultural practices that developed from the experiences and exchanges of Cajun-Creole history would be gone, too.

⁶⁹ Revon Reed, *Lâche Pas La Patate: Potrait des Acadiens de la Louisiane* (Montreal: Éditions Parti pris, 1976), 86. Reed was the first to publish a book in Cajun French. The original reads: “*Chez Fred Tate, chaque Samedi matin, c'est toute La Louisiane des Cajuns qui chante et que danse.... Nulle part ailleurs on peut écouter une musique folklorique aussi vivante.... On va Chez Fred Tate après avoir passé à la banque, après la barbier.... La famille est là.... C'est grande famille des Cajuns, qui trouve son bonheur dans la musique... “Chez Fred,” le samedi matin, on touche le coeur de la Louisiane française.*”

Music seemed to be the best hope for sustaining the language, and in doing so, sustaining the social and cultural values and practices that constituted French Cajun-Creole identity. And so Fred's, with its windowless, bunker-like ambiance and improvised dance floor, became the perfect place for returning veterans to set up camp and plan a campaign whose goal was to raise the flag of French New World culture and hold the ground. In the decades that followed, this campaign would take Paul Tate to Paris and then to Niamey, Niger in West Central Africa, Revon Reed to Newport, Rhode Island and Montreal, and the governor of Louisiana to the dance floor of Fred's Lounge to declare that the day the bar opened on November 20, 1946 had been a special day in the history of Louisiana, and that its fiftieth anniversary was "Fred's Day," in honor of Fred Tate.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Jeff Katz, "Cajun French Fever Rages Early for Tribute: For 50 years, Fred's Lounge is where le bons temps roulet. Governor, priest mark day," Los Angeles Times, November 26, 1996, http://articles.latimes.com/1996-11-26/news/mn-3039_1_fred-tate.

2.

French Communion: The World War II Generation

But why had he always felt so strongly the magnetic pull of home, why had he thought so much about it and remembered it with such blazing accuracy...if this little town, and the immortal hills around it, was not the only home he had on earth? He did not know. All that he knew was that the years flow by like water, and that one day men come home again.¹

Thomas Wolfe, You Can't Go Home Again

World War II was a watershed in the history of the American South, with over one and a half million Southerners joining the rural-to-urban migration from their ancestral homeland to other parts of the country,² most renownedly to the northern cities of Chicago and Detroit, even as industrialization and urbanization were transforming the South. Meanwhile, many of the thirteen million Americans who served in the wartime military, including northern white ethnics who had never ventured beyond their city neighborhoods, were brought together on southern military bases, where nine of the country's largest army

¹ Thomas Wolfe, You Can't Go Home Again (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 84.

² Morton Sosna, "Introduction" to Remaking Dixie, The Impact of World War II on the American South, ed. Neil R. McMillen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), xv.

training camps were located, from Camp Claiborne in Alexandria, Louisiana and Camp Shelby near Hattiesburg, Mississippi to Fort Knox south of Louisville, Kentucky.³ Southern blacks pledged their support to the war effort as over 1,154,000 blacks nationwide joined the U.S. military between 1941 and 1946.⁴ Many southern blacks undoubtedly discovered, through conversations carried out in their shared segregation with northern blacks, that they had lived a different history than people of African descent in other parts of the country. Many black southerners, proud of their service as Americans and increasingly distraught at their status as second-class citizens, would return after the war with a new determination to challenge southern race relations, founding local chapters of the NAACP and launching voter registration drives. The bus boycott movement began not in Alabama or Mississippi but in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1953,⁵ as the racial consciousness shaped by the war generated a set of expectations and actions that would drive the Civil Rights movement.

And it was not only black southerners who were changed by the war. More young men returned with a sense of purpose – political, social and reformist – than from any other American war.⁶ Returning GIs participated in campaigns to reform local politics, overthrow entrenched political machines, and boost the

³ Sosna in Remaking Dixie, ed. Neil McMillen, xvi.

⁴ Harvard Sitkoff, “African American Militancy in the World War II South,” in Remaking Dixie, ed. McMillen, 73.

⁵ Neil McMillen, “Fighting for What We Don’t Have: How Mississippi’s Black Veterans Remember World War II,” in Remaking Dixie, ed. McMillen, 94-95.

⁶ James C. Cobb, “World War II and the Mind of the Modern South,” in Remaking Dixie, ed. McMillen, 5.

economic status of the South as a region.⁷ Southern GIs, encountering northerners for the first time in boot camp and in military exercises, had become painfully aware of the South's image as a region still burdened by a history of racial injustice and violence, rampant and casual political corruption, backwardness and illiteracy.⁸ Southwest Louisiana native Delesseps S. Morrison, a reform-minded liberal whose family was from Pointe Coupée Parish, won the mayoral election of New Orleans in 1946 after being discharged from the army and immediately launched a program to promote the "New South" as a place of racial moderation, political reform and urban progressivism.⁹

French-speaking Louisiana had always been more populist, socially liberal and racially tolerant than the rest of the Deep South, and in some parishes, blacks had been voting long before the 1965 passage of the Voting Rights Act.¹⁰ Indeed, some of Morrison's political enemies, alarmed by the Southwest Louisianan's more relaxed ideas about race, issued a poster condemning him as a traitor: "Morrison Betrays White Race! Mayor of N.O. Gives Negroes Equal Political and Social Rights. It is even reported that King Zulu will take Rex's place at the next Mardi Gras."¹¹ Black working-class men in New Orleans had, since early in the

⁷ Cobb, "World War II" in *Remaking Dixie*, ed. McMillen, 7.

⁸ Sosna in *Remaking Dixie*, ed. Neil McMillen, xviii.

⁹ Michael L. Kurtz, "deLesseps S. Morrison: Political Reformer," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, 1 January 1976, Vol. 17 (1): 20.

¹⁰ J. Heppen and D. Mesyanzhinov, "Political Geography and Regionalism in Louisiana: The Impact of the French Influence in the post-World War II Era," *Political Geography*, 2003, Vol. 22(5): 521.

¹¹ Kurz, "deLesseps Morrison," *Louisiana History*, 29.

century, performed a satire on the white Mardi Gras celebrations of King Rex, the crowned monarch of carnival, by assembling the Zulu Krewe, black men in blackface, decked out in grass skirts and palmetto leaves. The Mayor of New Orleans traditionally presented the key to the city to the newly-crowned King Rex; two years after the anti-Morrison poster appeared, Louis Armstrong returned to his native New Orleans to serve as Zulu King, and was indeed presented with the key to the city by Morrison, though Armstrong, disgusted that he had to stay in a Jim Crow hotel, vowed never to return to New Orleans.¹²

Morrison's tenure as mayor was marked not only by debate over changing race relations, but by the rise of New Orleans to the status of gleaming Southern gem. Morrison appointed New York City's celebrated urban planner Robert Moses to oversee a master plan to improve New Orleans' infrastructure and public services, adding parks and playgrounds and a new public library. During Morrison's fifteen-year tenure, New Orleans became the second-busiest port in the United States,¹³ and New Orleanians took renewed pride in their historic city and its French heritage. Across the state, the aspirations and initiatives of a generation of returning World War II soldiers reshaped the self-identify of people of French descent in New Orleans, of black Louisianans across the state, and of French-speaking Cajuns in the Acadian parishes. This renewed pride in language and heritage was intensified by the fact that wartime industries had brought a flood of Anglophone Texans across the border, bringing country music and a

¹² Steven Ives, dir., "American Experience: New Orleans." DVD. PBS, 2007.

¹³ Kurz, "deLesseps Morrison," *Louisiana History*, 36-37.

nationalist sensibility into a region in which many still identified with the history, culture and customs of France.

Louisiana had raised its citizens to have the highest regard for France as a nation, French as a language, and the historic contributions of France to the American colonists' struggle against Great Britain in the Revolutionary War. Southwest Louisiana's Abbeville newspaper *The Méridional* had explained to nineteenth-century readers that the colonists had won their independence only with the help of France and Lafayette, and that it was therefore only proper that French be maintained as the language of commerce and society in the entire country. English was described as incoherent, neither literary nor poetic, the language of the defeated British army rather than the French "saviors" of the colonists. The use of English even interfered in day-to-day commerce in busy shops, where a local resident who ordered bacon was mistakenly sent the works of Bacon. "Let's speak the language of the liberators of the United States," the editorialist argued. "If France hadn't helped the American people to gain their independence, they would still be the horrible slaves of the British. This is why the Americans should hate the British and never open their mouths to say a word in English."¹⁴ The Americans: that is what French speakers in Louisiana went on calling English-speaking Protestants late into the twentieth century.

The most widely-read newspaper in Louisiana, New Orleans's *Time-*

¹⁴ C.A. Mouisset, *The Méridional* (Abbeville) October 8, 1881. Accessed through chroniclingamerica.loc.gov

¹⁴*Times-Picayune*, April 24, 1942, 14. Accessed through nl.newsbank.com

Picayune, focused its World War II coverage on the consequences of the war in France, describing, in headlines such as “France Shall Live Free”¹⁵ the bravery of the French people despite their physical, material, spiritual and moral trials. Such stories had particular resonance with Louisiana’s Francophone population, which was comprised of several hearth populations: the white New Orleans descendants of the first French colonists and the black New Orleans population, sometimes of mixed European and African ancestry; the rural black Creole population descended from free and enslaved people of African descent, including Caribbean immigrants; the French-speaking Houma Indian, and the Cajuns of Southwest Louisiana.¹⁶

Louisiana newspapers documented the response of French Louisianans to the wartime suffering of the French during World War II: in New Orleans, traditional Bastille Day celebrations were suspended and a high Mass was held at St. Louis Cathedral in the French Quarter in memory of French soldiers killed in the war – not New Orleanian soldiers, but French soldiers.¹⁷ General DeGaulle was likened to Joan of Arc,¹⁸ and the lyrics of the *Marseillaise* were quoted in articles that proclaimed the valor of the Free French forces and extolled the virtues of the “ideas and institutions” of France.¹⁹ The Old French Quarter Civic Association sponsored a benefit fundraiser called Free France, and the chairman

¹⁶ Adapted from Cécyle Trépanier, “The Cajunization of French Louisiana: forging a regional identity,” *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 157, No. 2. (July 1991): 161.

¹⁷ *Times Picayune*, July 14, 1942. Accessed through nl.newsbank.com

¹⁸ *Times Picayune*, May 19, 1942.

¹⁹ *Times Picayune*, 15 July 15, 1942.

of The American Friends of France told *Times-Picayune* readers, “More than ever, France needs friends to stand by her in this, the most tragic hour of her long and brilliant history.”²⁰ There was anxiety about the safety of former Louisianans living in unoccupied France, where there was “no milk, no heating and no coal. In the center of Tours there isn’t a single house left standing.”²¹ And there was melancholy among New Orleanians over the fact that in the kindred city of Paris, there were “no big dances, no large parties, jazz music is forbidden by the French authorities, and only classical music is heard.”²² Assurances were made that France would be restored to its greatness, that Paris would be liberated, that the Resistance fighters would prevail. At war’s end came the proclamation that “Frenchmen were never conquered!” and that the French spirit, exemplified by Paris, was unconquerable: “Long live France!”²³

In the Cajun and Creole provinces, *Mardi gras* festivities were suspended during wartime, and dance hall culture was transformed when men from Southwest Louisiana went off to Camps Beauregard and Livingston in the Anglo-Protestant north of the state, Camp Claiborne in Rapides Parish, Camp Polk in Vernon Parish and Camp Shelby in Mississippi, or to jobs in wartime industries in Baton Rouge, Shreveport and across the border in Texas. Nearly twenty-five thousand Cajuns served in the U.S. armed forces during World War II, in units with nicknames like “The Bayou Battalion,” a U.S. Marine Corps brigade, and the

²⁰ *Times Picayune*, June 21, 1940, 24.

²¹ *Times Picayune*, January 14, 1941, 15.

²² *Times Picayune*, April 2, 1941, 3.

²³ *Times Picayune*, September 18, 1944, 12.

“Swamp Angels,”²⁴ and once at boot camp, they found that the traditional folk music of back home was nowhere to be heard. Instead, soldiers were offered the country and pop repertoire of the Grand Ole Opry’s Camel Caravan, which, starting in 1941, provided musical entertainment to servicemen on military bases. The Camel Caravan, designed to “boost morale” among the troops, support the war effort and, of course, sell cigarettes, traveled more than seventy-five thousand miles, rolling across thirty-two states in four red buses painted with logo of Nashville’s WSM radio station. Country and pop music stars Roy Acuff, Ernest Tubbs, Eddy Arnold, The Golden West Cowboys, Sarah Colley’s Minnie Pearl and Caravan troupes from Nashville, New York and Hollywood performed in sixty-eight military camps, hospitals, air fields and bases, bringing the same country music format into the bunkhouse.²⁵ The station broadcast segments of its country-pop fare on NBC’s Sunday afternoon Army Hour as well as from an airborne B-24 bomber.²⁶ Wartime was a boon to the folk music of the white Protestant South, a music that became identified with patriotism and core American experiences and values. Ernest Tubb’s recording of Redd Stewart’s “Soldier’s Last Letter” – in which a mother receives a letter written from the trenches by a son about to go into the battle that will cost him his life - was a

²⁴ Shane K. Bernard, The Cajuns, Americanization of a People (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 14.

²⁵ Craig Havighurst, Air Castle of the South: WSM and the Making of Music City (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 118.

²⁶ Havighurst, Air Castle, 199.

Billboard hit for seven weeks in 1944.²⁷

In the summer of 1941, the United States War Department staged, across much of the state of Louisiana, the largest war exercises ever held in the United States. WSM's reporters and engineers set up camp at the war games headquarters in Winnfield, famed for being the hometown of former Louisiana governor Huey Long. Generals George Marshall, Dwight Eisenhower, George Patton and Omar Bradley participated in the mobilization of The Blue Army and the Red Army, and WSM broadcast the sounds of a pontoon bridge being built, the rumbling of tanks, and the boom of artillery fire.²⁸ WSM, broadcasting from Winnfield alongside national media organizations NBC and CBS, gained much prestige from its wartime reporting and did much to introduce American servicemen from Northern cities to country music and to promote WSM and the Nashville music scene, but it did just as much to quiet regional music by proclaiming country music as the popular genre of a nation at war. Southern radio stations, after presenting news of the war, broadcast country and pop music to provide a diversion on the home front. The Opry's "homespun music" may have spoken to many Southern soldiers and, for some, been "inextricably tied to the vision of hearth and home that inspired the troops,"²⁹ but for many other troops, it was an alien sound.

²⁷ William H. Young and Nancy K. Young, Music of the World War II Era (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing, 2007), 157.

²⁸ Havighurst, Air Castle, 114.

²⁹ Colin Escott, The Grand Ole Opry: The Making of an American Icon (New York: Center Street, 2006), 85.

With the departure for war and wartime jobs of a number of key traditional musicians, including Cajun fiddler Dewey Balfa, who worked in a shipyard in Orange, Texas, and Cajun accordionist Nathan Abshire, who was drafted into the army, and given the wartime difficulty of obtaining German accordions – it was notoriously difficult to repair old ones, and there were as yet no Louisiana manufacturers – a number of Cajun musicians back home turned to the new country and swing styles. But this was a pragmatic, not an aesthetic, choice. It had been impossible to import German Sterling, Monarch and Eagle brand accordions during the pre-war and war years, and the war would devastate the German factories that produced them; the once-dominant accordion disappeared abruptly.³⁰ After the war, some of the most successful surviving manufacturing interests were located in the Russian sphere of influence, so Cajun craftsmen had to teach themselves how to repair and refurbish the old German accordions and then how to build accordions from scratch.³¹ Characterizing the wartime disappearance of traditional music as entirely a function of changing popular tastes in Louisiana (“The accordion fell victim to the newly Americanized Louisiana French population’s growing distaste for the old ways”)³² ignores the political dimensions of government sponsorship of country music and the wartime scarcity of one the key instruments of traditional music.

³⁰ Barry Jean Ancelet, Cajun and Creole Music Makers (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 25.

³¹ Malcolm L. Comeaux, “The Cajun Accordion,” *Louisiana Review* 7 (1978): 117-28.

³² Barry Jean Ancelet, Cajun and Creole Music Makers, Jackson, University of Mississippi, 1999), 25.

It is not that the wartime experiences of Cajuns who left their towns and region for the first time to serve alongside Anglo-Protestant Americans from Virginia, Hawaii and New York prompted them to abandon their ethnic and regional identities in favor of the “rapid, widespread Americanization” that would also transform immigrant life in urban American culture in the post-war era.³³ On the contrary, the wartime experiences of a significant core group of Cajun soldiers provided them with ample evidence of the vitality and usefulness of their cultural identity, native language and heritage. French was the primary language of nearly seventy-five percent of Cajun GIs, and some spoke only French.³⁴ Since the U.S. military needed French-speaking soldiers to act as interpreters in France, Belgium, North Africa, and Southeast Asia, Cajuns were recruited by the Office of Strategic Services to act as secret agents to meet with operators in the French resistance and to serve as linguistic liaisons between the American military and French troops. Cajun French, spoken with its anglicizations and irregular grammatical structure in a Franco-Southern accent, wasn’t the U.S. military’s strategic and diplomatic language of choice for its interpreters, but it turned out that Southwest Louisiana French sounded so much like the dialect of French spoken by farmers in the Southwest of France that German linguists didn’t suspect the Cajuns were in fact American soldiers. As French filmmaker Jean-Pierre Bruneau explains in Pat Mire’s documentary film about Cajun soldiers in World War II France, *Mon Cher Camarade*, if the United States

³³ Bernard, The Cajuns, 11.

³⁴ Bernard, The Cajuns, 6-7.

military had used Québécois speakers of French, expert German code-breakers could have figured out that the Canadians weren't "French peasants," whereas "Cajuns passed for French locals," and it was "possible to completely fool the Germans."³⁵

Cajun soldiers did more than pass for Frenchmen— they identified with, socialized with and depended on French men and women they could imagine as distant, distant ancestors. When retired Brigadier General Robert J. LeBlanc from Abbeville, Louisiana served as an OSS agent in France in 1944, he found Normandy, Brittany, and the Loire Valley to be "a land of people like we are." LeBlanc felt that his life was "more in French people's hands more than it was in American hands," since he counted on French locals to get him back and forth from one side of the German line to the other. The locals acted with generosity and courage in putting themselves at risk, LeBlanc said: "A lot of Americans don't know how many Frenchmen laid down their lives to save American lives during World War II." As an OSS agent, LeBlanc would communicate with the French Resistance by going to a local café and ordering a certain aperitif, the ordering of which was a coded message to the Resistance.

As convincing as LeBlanc was as a Frenchman, he was always careful not to extinguish and toss a half-finished cigarette, since that would have aroused German suspicions: "You better damn well smoke 'em 'til they burnt your fingers or they'd know you were an American. A Frenchman would stick a toothpick in it

³⁵ Pat Mire, dir., *Mon Cher Camarade*. DVD. Pat Mire Films, 2008.

and smoke it to the bitter end,” LeBlanc said. It wasn't until commanders in the field saw that Cajuns could be very effective operators, getting valuable information and communicating strategy, that they stopped thinking of Cajuns as “peasants from Louisiana who had been surrounded in the swamp,” LeBlanc said, and Cajun speakers became an essential part of the military communications network in France, Indochina and North Africa.

Cajun soldiers felt more at home in France than any of their fellow American soldiers ever could have. Felix Mire, who left Pointe Noire to serve in Patton's 3rd Army, 11th Armored Division, told his fellow soldiers while fighting at the Siege of Bastogne in Belgium, “I can get things you can't because I can speak French.” Mire, needing medical help when his eyes were burning with the sting of gas, knocked on the door of a local home, where a French-speaking couple gave him water to wash out his eyes. Lee Bernard of Erath, whose three brothers were also in the army, was with the first Americans to liberate the village of Mailly-Champagne, arriving with the 739th Batallion. Bernard befriended a grateful local man, who gave him five cases of wine to carry in his tank.³⁶ And Creole accordionist Moss Anderson, a native of Maurice, Louisiana whose family had moved to Texas in 1928 when the price of rice dropped precipitously, played his accordion on a street corner in France to an appreciative French public: “You talk about some people who can all dance all night long,” he remembered. Moss was ordered to get rid of his accordion because the old-time music he played was

³⁶ Pat Mire, “*Mon Cher Camarade*.”

making the other Louisiana men in his barracks too homesick.³⁷

The generation of Louisiana soldiers who served in World War II had grown up at a time when French was spoken at home but forbidden in schools, and finding that their French language skills were now critical to war strategy was a point of great pride. “I don’t think there was a day [during my service] that officers didn’t get me to speak French,” Bernard said.³⁸ Bernie LeJeune of Church Point, who worked as a translator in Casablanca, was very proud when a Frenchman asked him where he had learned English. Elvin Thibodeaux of Grand Coteau was called on to interpret for a group of Alsatians and Lorrainers who had been trying to tell an American officer that they had been forced into the German army and wanted to fight for the Allies.³⁹ The war gave Cajun soldiers a new understanding of the global reach of the French language and brought new relevance, meaning and cachet to their identities as Francophones who were citizens of an Anglophone United States, and these soldiers would bring this renewed consciousness of the ancestry, provenance and value of their native language back home after the war. Revon Reed found that Cajun pride in the French language was revitalized by the war: “After World War II when we came back from overseas in France, North Africa, we saw the value of our second

³⁷ Michael Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco* (New York: Avon, 1998), 94.

³⁸ Pat Mire, “*Mon Cher Camarade*.”

³⁹ Robin Meche Kube, “Cajun Soldiers During WWII: Reflections on Louisiana’s French Language and People,” *Louisiana History, The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*,” Vol. 35, No. 3. (Summer 1994): 345-349.

language,” Reed said.⁴⁰

Military life dramatized the unique culture of Cajuns not only at war but on military bases in the United States. One recruit from Breaux Bridge, arriving at boot camp, said that he felt as if he had come from a foreign country and was treated as such. Cajun soldiers were referred to as “A Foreign Legion” or nicknamed “Frenchies” in military training camps across the country.⁴¹ These soldiers spoke French among themselves, cooked traditional Cajun-Creole crawfish bisque and oyster gumbo together, and sang Cajun-Creole folksongs together in camp. Their wartime immersion in “Anglo-American society” was, Bernard says, “a bewildering experience.”⁴²

French-speaking Creole soldiers must have felt the same outsider status encamped with African-American soldiers under the U.S. military’s strict segregationist policies, which were enforced in training programs, recreational and barracking facilities, and the assignment of military duties. Black soldiers were restricted for the most part to noncombat military assignments, as one Southern black war veteran explained: “They never did decide we was equal...It was just a mirror of our civilian life, that’s all. The way of life that we’ve been living all them many years.”⁴³ The national media, as evidenced in NBC Blue’s August 1941 broadcast program “America’s Negro Soldiers,” sponsored by the

⁴⁰ Alan Lomax, dir., “American Patchwork: Cajun Country.” DVD. 2006.

⁴¹ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 11.

⁴² Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 7.

⁴³ Twelve-year military veteran Henry Murphy, quoted in *Remaking Dixie, The Impact of World War II on the American South*, ed. Neil R. McMillen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 101.

War Department, could imagine only one kind of black soldier – the English-speaking soldier who liked tap dancing.⁴⁴

After years of separation from the traditions, food and music of their home region, returning soldiers sought out the social events, cuisine and culture of their pre-war years. They returned to the dance halls and requested old time two-steps, waltzes and ballads like “*Jolie Blonde*,” “*J’ai Passé Devant Ta Porte*” and “Eunice Two Step,” each of which told stories about men who – perhaps like some of the soldiers who’d come home to find their girlfriends hadn’t waited for them faithfully – had been betrayed and heartbroken in love.

In the popular dance hall song “Eunice Two Step,” first recorded by Amédé Ardoin in New Orleans in 1929, the singer tells his beloved that he would love to be there on Saturday nights to see what she is doing, but knows it’d break his heart to see that she has taken up with another man:

*Si t’es gone, toi, mignonne,
Partie de marier toi, catin,
Tu connais ça, mais, toi, jolie,
Ça m’a fait du mal.*

*Tout ce qui m’a reconsole, jolie
Tu va trouver ton erreur
Qui, t-a l’heure, jolie
Pour ça, toi, tu m’as fait⁴⁵.*

[If you’re gone my lovely one,
If you’re going to marry someone else, dear
You know, oh how you know
That hurts me bad, dear, what you’ve done.

⁴⁴ Donald Meckiffe and Matthew Murray, “Radio and the black soldier during World War II,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15:4: 341-343.

⁴⁵ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 70.

The only thing that can console me, dear
 Is that you'll realize your mistake
 Soon enough, my pretty darling
 And you'll see you did me wrong.]

Another post-war favorite was the traditional “*Jolie Blonde*,” one of the first commercially recorded Cajun songs. The song is perhaps descended from one of many medieval French folk songs about lovely blondes, the most famous of which is “*Auprès de ma blonde*.” “*Jolie Blonde*” has become such a classic of the Southwest Louisiana folk repertoire that it is sometimes referred to as the “Cajun National Anthem”⁴⁶:

*Jolie blonde, 'gardez donc, quoi t'as fait,
 Tu m'as quitté pour t'en aller.
 Pour t'en aller avec un autre, oui, que moi,
 Quel espoir et quel avenir mais moi je peux avoir....*

*Jolie blonde, tu croyais il y avait juste toi,
 Il y a past juste toi dans le pays pour moi aimer,
 Je va's trouver juste une autre jolie blonde,
 Bon Dieu sait, joi, j'aime tant.*⁴⁷

[Pretty blonde, look what you've done
 You left me to go off away
 To go off with someone else than me, yes
 So what hope and what future can I have....

Pretty blonde, you thought you were the only one
 But there's not just you in this world for me to love
 I'm going to find myself another pretty blonde
 But God only knows I love you so.]

⁴⁶ Francois, *Yé Yaille*, 177.

⁴⁷ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 84.

But these dance hall favorites were no longer being recorded by major labels, which, since the hard times of the late years of the Depression, had abandoned regional and ethnic music in favor of music with a broad, national appeal for a more stable, lucrative market.⁴⁸ It was during these crucial post-war years that independent record labels stepped in and began to record, promote and popularize traditional Cajun-Creole music.

Amesbury, Massachusetts native Bill Quinn, the son of Irish immigrants in a heavily French-Canadian New England mill town, had moved to Texas just before World War II. By trade a sound engineer, Quinn became intrigued with the mechanics and technology of recording, and taught himself how to record phonograph records, a complicated production process that was a jealously guarded industry secret of the commercial labels. From a record pressing shop in the back room of his radio repair store, Quinn set out to capture his own little share of the independent recording industry in Texas, opening his studio in 1941 and founding his own label, Gold Star Records.⁴⁹

Quinn began experimenting with record production at a time when the major labels were suffering under both an American Federation of Musicians' recording ban and a War Production Board order that severely limited new recordings by rationing the supply of shellac, a key material in record production. Musicians' union president James Petrillo, worried that union musicians were

⁴⁸ Ancelet, *Cajun and Creole Music Makers*, 25.

⁴⁹ Andy Bradley and Roger Wood, *The House of Hits, The Story of Houston's Gold Star/Sugarhill Recording Studios* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 12.

losing live gigs to album sales, imposed a ban on all new recordings beginning in August 1942 and lasting until November 1944. Petrillo believed that if Americans could buy recorded music, they wouldn't pay to hear live bands in nightclubs, and musicians would find it hard to make a living as performers. His assumption was that the experience of listening to recorded music at home was so analogous to the experience of listening to music socially in taverns and clubs that music consumers would opt for the least expensive option of a one-time purchase of an album over the continued expense of going out to hear live bands.⁵⁰

In 1942, the War Production Board ordered a seventy-nine percent reduction in the non-military use of shellac, freezing new album production.⁵¹ Record labels zealously scouted clubs and house parties so that as soon as the recording industry could return to pre-war production levels, the talent was lined up and waiting in the wings. Quinn's strategy was to make the kinds of records that might be stocked in jukeboxes. Quinn bought all the old 78s he could find at second-hand shops and pulverized them in a coffee bean grinder, then melted them down to extract the shellac and press new albums, which would be recorded direct from microphone to disc in the back room of his shop, Gold Star Studios, then mastered. Quinn was entirely self-taught, a pioneer of independent record production, and because his goal was to put regional talent in record stores and in jukeboxes, he recorded everything he thought would appeal to the regional

⁵⁰ Robert Gordon, Can't Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters (New York: Back Bay Books, 2002), 70.

⁵¹ Young, Music of the World War II Era, 90.

demographic, from gospel to blues and country to Cajun, with lyrics in French or in English.⁵² Quinn's studio recorded both black and white musicians years before Sam Phillips founded his more famous Sun Records label in Memphis in the early 1950s, which became renowned for recording both blues musicians and white rockabilly singers like Elvis Presley.

With an ear for the musical preferences of older Louisianans who had migrated across the Texas border during the early twentieth century oil boom and younger Louisianans who had moved to Texas in search of wartime jobs, in 1946 Quinn recorded Vermilion Parish native Harry Choates singing "*Jolie Blonde*" under the title "*Jole Blond*." Choates worked at the shipyards of Texas Consolidated Steel in Sabine, Texas, where he played for workers as they came off shift. At Consolidated, he met a fellow Southwest Louisiana native, fiddler Dewey Balfa, who had moved to Texas for wartime work. Choates, who during the Depression had moved to the heavily Cajun town of Port Arthur, Texas, ninety miles east of Houston, sang the mournful ballads of the traditional Cajun-Creole tradition with a "plaintive enthusiasm,"⁵³ bringing an energy and excitement to his performance that inspired Balfa's longing for the music of his native Mamou, Louisiana. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Choates had played at clubs and dancehalls throughout east Texas and Southwest Louisiana, and his decision to audition "*Jolie Blonde*" for Quinn's Gold Star label was inspired by the popularity of the song among the soldiers who frequented the Lake Charles, Louisiana club

⁵² Bradley and Wood, *The House of Hits*, 17-18.

⁵³ Bradley and Wood, *House of Hits*, 21.

where Choates played on Saturday nights.⁵⁴

With the release of “*Jolie Blonde*,” Gold Star Records became the first independent record label to produce a national hit, with Choates’s rendition becoming Hit #4 on the Billboard charts for “Most Played Juke Box Folk Records.” The song was so popular that Choates recorded a series of Southwest Louisiana traditional songs, including “*Allons a Lafayette*” and “*Basile Waltz*,” for Gold Star and other labels. “*Jolie Blonde*” turned out to be Choates’s only hit record, but Quinn’s interest in French-language music was not an exception. A number of entrepreneurs in Louisiana launched their own labels in the post-war years to record and promote regional music, although the music they were promoting under the label “old-time traditional French-language music” was more often a hybrid of traditional French-language music and the newly popular string band, country and hillbilly styles. Music retailers, by necessity more opportunistic than nostalgic, knew that French lyrics were a key selling point in Southwest Louisiana. Crowley’s J.D. Miller founded the *Fais Do Do* label to meet the demand for French language music at a time when the old recordings were no longer available. Major labels like Columbia and Decca solved the problem of the shortage of French-language music by having “hillbilly songs” translated into French, and country swing bands like the Rayne Bo Ramblers wrote French lyrics for country music songs,⁵⁵ capitalizing on the rage for French: “They called for [French] man,” said the group’s fiddle player. “We’re selling that from here to

⁵⁴ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 31.

⁵⁵ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 37-40.

Houston.”⁵⁶

Old-time music, still played in homes and in dance halls, existed in a social world parallel to the commercial world of recorded country-Cajun music, which was not looked upon favorably by purists of the old-time tradition. Arhoolie Records founder Chris Strachwitz, who in the 1960s became a passionate advocate of old-time Cajun-Creole music, called the popular singer Happy Fats "one of the oldest and worst exponents of that brand of pseudo-Cajun music which is really more Country-and-Western than Cajun." Reviewing a 1968 reissue of one of Fats' albums, Strachwitz referred disparagingly to the singer's television appearance, his large following, especially among non-Cajuns, and the fact that there was no accordion in his band: "His commercial, sweet, phony style represents the worst outgrowth of the Cajun tradition."⁵⁷ To old-time music purists, that outgrowth included all recordings that featured Western-hillbilly instrumentation, the string band sound, amplification, and any slickness in production values or self-consciousness in performance. Country music, like other commercial pop music, put the focus on the performers by dressing them in flashier clothing and elevating them on the stage at one end of a performance venue, whereas in Cajun-Creole music culture, the musicians were dressed in their everyday attire and played in the middle of the venue, and all eyes were on the dancers and not on the band. Many small label owners listened to country

⁵⁶ R. Brasseaux, Cajun Breakdown, 141.

⁵⁷ Chris Strachwitz, "Cajun Music on LP – A Survey," *The American Folk Music Occasional* (New York: Oak Publications, 1970), 27.

and swing radio programs and concluded that the market for country music was more sustainable than the market for old-time music and phased out their Cajun-Creole repertoire in order to record and promote country songs. Yet there was a disconnect between the assumptions and ambitions of many entrepreneurial independent label owners and the realities of public demand. Local investors new to the recording business erred on the side of the novel and popular “hillbilly” and swing sounds, taking their cues from radio stations in Nashville, Shreveport and Houston and from conversations with recording studio owners in New Orleans; meanwhile, from the late 1940s and all throughout the decade that followed, Cajun accordionists played traditional French songs night after night in dance halls packed with patrons from ages fifteen to seventy five. The country and gospel singer James Houston “Jimmie” Davis knew enough to use “*Jolie Blonde*” and “Big Mamou” as his campaign music in Acadiana when he ran for governor of Louisiana in 1944, knowing that it was the old-time traditional music of Southwest Louisiana that would most appeal to voters in those parishes.⁵⁸

Eddie Shuler, who founded Folk Star Records in 1949 in Lake Charles, described the post-war years as a boom era for French-language music, popular on military bases and with listeners of Shuler’s popular radio show. Shuler was the first to record Cajun-Creole music’s second-wave recording hero, the Point Noir accordionist Iry LeJeune, who had learned to play by listening to Ardoin’s recordings and is considered the purest, most traditional of recorded Cajun-

⁵⁸ Broven, South to Louisiana, 40.

Creole musicians, second only to Ardoin himself. Once LeJeune's "high-pitched hurting vocals" were broadcast on Shuler's KPLC radio show, the station wound up broadcasting eight hours a day of Cajun music.⁵⁹

So even while radio shows like Shreveport's "Louisiana Hayride" promoted the country music sound, and string bands became increasingly popular among younger music enthusiasts, Southwest Louisiana business owners understood that what attracted French-speaking listeners in rural Acadiana was old-time Cajun-Creole music, and they used their advertising dollars to support radio shows that played French-language music. Although LeJeune's music was described in later years as having been a throwback to an earlier time, old-time music had been very much alive at the time anyway, Cajun fiddler Dewey Balfa remembered. Balfa was playing traditional music six days a week in nightclubs, lounges and at weddings.⁶⁰ Old-time music simply hadn't been recorded in the later years of the Depression and the war.

At a time when country music influences, both lyrical and instrumental, and the jaunty, amplified rhythms of popular banjo and steel guitar music were becoming embedded in commercial Cajun music, and popularized among younger listeners (notorious for their attraction to the novel in music), traditional Cajun-Creole music continued to be performed at house parties and in dance halls by musicians who, with very few exceptions, had always had day jobs in

⁵⁹ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 52.

⁶⁰ Dewey Balfa, Interview with Barry Jean Ancelet in Basile, 1981, AN.193, Archives of Cajun and Creole Folklore, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

farming or industry. LeJeune was forced to try to earn a living as a musician because he was nearly blind and couldn't work on his father's farm. In 1948, fiddler Floyd LeBlanc and LeJeune traveled to Houston to record "*La Valse du Pont D'Amour*" ("Lovebridge Waltz") and "Evangeline Special" for the Opera label, and these recordings, featuring LeJeune's wailing vocals, modeled on Ardoin's emotional performance style, lifted old-time music above the clamor of country and swing, and the songs became big regional hits.⁶¹

These were the very same rich, complex songs the World War II generation had grown up with, and LeJeune's impassioned style and melancholy lyrics spoke to Southwest Louisiana listeners in a way that the happy-go-lucky melodies of popular country songs could not. The Cajun sound was upbeat, but in a way that was defiant of circumstance, mournful as well as celebratory, more down-on-the-luck than lucky, and LeJeune's music embodied the enduring mood and themes of the Cajun-Creole tradition:

*J'ai été au bal hier au soir
 Je vais retourner encore a soir
 Si l'occasion se présente
 Je vais retourner demain soir.
 'Gardez donc les jolie filles,
 Personne qui veut m'aimer
 Gardones voir si ça c'est pas
 Mais misérable pour moi.⁶²
 (J'ai Eté au Bal)*

[Last night I was at the dance
 I'm going back again tonight

⁶¹ Iry Jejeune, "The Definitive Collection," Ace Records, 1992, compact disc, liner notes, 9.

⁶² Francois, *Yé Yaille*, 169-170.

If I get the chance
 I'm going back tomorrow
 Look at all the pretty girls
 No one wants to love me
 Let's see if that's not just
 So miserable for me]
 [I Went to the Dance]

“Duralde Waltz” was another favorite. Duraldo is a small community near
 Mamou:

*‘Gardez donc, tu croyais ta famille aurait toujours
 Pris pour toi, parce que tu m’as fait quitter catin
 À bien jongler, toi, tu vois pour toi-même, bébé
 Tous nous chagrins qu’on après se passer
 Ça fait pas de bien.’⁶³*

[You see, you thought your family would always
 Take care of you once you left me, my dear,
 But if you think about it you’ll see for yourself, baby
 That all the troubles we’ve been through
 Didn’t help us after all.]

At a time when string and country bands had “charming, scrubbed band-leader personas and kept smooth, gliding beats to please the dancers,”⁶⁴ LeJeune, who carried his accordion in a pillowcase and had to hitch a ride from the prairie to the nearest town to play a gig at a dance hall, had a deeply moving presence. Rather than fronting a polished, freshly rehearsed band, with instruments in conversation with each other, LeJeune seemed to make the music about himself as the performer, as Ardoin had done, backed by musicians who

⁶³ Ann Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 174.

⁶⁴ “Iry Lejeune, The Definitive Collection,” liner notes, 5.

played for each other and for themselves. LeJeune seemed to deliver the message, in a modern commerce-driven urbanizing world, that “a man could be himself...he could wear his own clothes, he could speak his own French and he could let out his deepest emotions....He could, in fact, be a Cajun...”⁶⁵ Like Ardoin and LaFleur, LeJeune died tragically, hit by a car while changing a flat tire on US highway 190 on the way home from a performance in Eunice. He was 26.

LeJeune is credited with “reviving” the Cajun-Creole accordion-based musical tradition, but in order to call the post-war era a revival era, the music must have first disappeared. But the timeframe for its disappearance, if we take at face value the testimony of traditional musicians, is confoundingly narrow: Accordionist Shirley Bergeron remembers that his father, Alphee Bergeron, “got rid of his accordion” in the forties, “and then after the war, when everyone was coming home they wanted to hear their own music again and the Cajun accordion music got popular once more...A bunch of war veterans had started a band and people started asking for the accordion in the dance hall, so they asked daddy to join the band.”⁶⁶ Thus Alphee Bergon, who had performed over many years with Amédé Ardoin, Nathan Abshire, Joe Falcon, and Mayuse LaFleur, merely stopped playing accordion from the pre-war to the post-war years, at which time the band he joined, the Veteran Playboys, began broadcasting over radio stations all over

⁶⁵ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 4.

⁶⁶ Shirley Bergeron, “French Rocking Boogie,” Ace Records UK, 1993, compact disc, liner notes.

the region, in Crowley, Opelousas, Eunice, Ville Platte.⁶⁷ Likewise, Abshire is said to have switched to fiddle in the early forties “when the Texas oil people 'invaded' South Louisiana,” at which time the accordion, “had died down in popularity,” but “a few years later, [Abshire] went back to his favourite instrument,”⁶⁸ again making the silencing of the accordion, and traditional Cajun-Creole music, a very short “few years.”

Certainly it was the case that commercial music, meaning country, swing and pop, was broadcast throughout Southwest Louisiana, and that entrepreneurial record labels, musicians and radio stations capitalized on every opportunity to profit from the new trends, as well as that certain populations, including the English-speaking, Protestant “Anglo-Americans” who moved into Louisiana to work in the oil industry formed a lucrative market for pop music. But this doesn’t mean that traditional music wasn’t still being played in the homes of Cajun and Creole families, or at neighborhood events or community gatherings. It’s impossible to label as “traditional” only that music played by self-taught musicians for friends and family and at local dance halls, and then claim that the music disappeared using as evidence the fact that country and swing music were being performed by professional bands, and commercially recorded and broadcast.

There was no single music aesthetic either locally, regionally or nationally,

⁶⁷ Bergeron, “French Rocking Boogie,” liner notes.

⁶⁸ “Nathan Abshire, The Great Cajun Accordionist,” Ace Records, 1992, compact disc, liner notes by Revon Reed, 1973, 4.

and anxiety about old-time music's demise or corruption by new influences and genres was reflective of a larger anxiety about modern intrusions into traditional culture, and about the compromises that had to be made between the values and practices of regional culture and the practical demands of living in a mass-media nation in which the music of eight-piece swing bands, with their polished orchestral sound, was nationally popular. Old-time Cajun-Creole music was declared the loser in the post-war era by critics who saw performance of country or swing music by Southwest Louisiana-born musicians as evidence of the failure of traditional music to endure in a mass media age of national markets, and it was declared the winner by those who saw the influence of Cajun music on swing and country as evidence that Southwest Louisiana musicians "Cajunized" other genres by introducing swing and country bands to new songs and styles.⁶⁹ Evidence for this "Cajunization" is that Buddy Holly produced, for the Brunswick label, Waylon Jennings's cover of "*Jolie Blonde*," and Hank Williams, Sr.'s "Jambalaya" was based on the Cajun-Creole "Pine Grove Blues."⁷⁰

It is natural that such debates about boundaries took place in a region in which cohabitation and territorialism always existed in dynamic tension. One of the symbolic functions of the Mardi Gras *courir* was to demarcate "the perceived geographical and social boundaries" of each neighborhood and then "socially integrate" particular neighborhoods by inviting the more dispersed members of

⁶⁹ "*J'ai Été Au Bal*, The Cajun and Zydeco Music of Louisiana," Vol. 2, Arhoolie Records, 1993, compact disc, liner notes, 11.

⁷⁰R. Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 170; 179-180.

the community to participate in a communal dinner at day's end.⁷¹ Musicians, too, made incursions into the territory of other genres, borrowing and imitating where they could. But there is also a demographic force at work beneath discussions of musical taste. When music historians described the drum kits, steel guitars and electric guitars of country music as becoming more common in Louisiana, they could just as easily have been describing what the "French" population of Louisiana felt about the Texans migrating across the border for jobs in Louisiana: "The hillbilly element was becoming more intrusive."⁷²

It was that "hillbilly element" that dominated the airwaves in much of Louisiana. And some traditional musicians did experiment with new genres to challenge themselves technically and to develop their musicianship, just as listeners turned to new genres to develop and challenge their appreciation of music. The diversity and vitality of the post-war music scene in Southwest Louisiana is evidence of a sensibility of experimentation, curiosity and collaboration that always marks the richest musical traditions. Most importantly, though, while some Southwest Louisiana musicians did form string bands and play swing and country music in nightclubs, the rural Cajuns who danced to traditional French-language music at a neighbor's house party were not the same people who danced to the music of country and string band sounds in Acadiana's growing cities. In the first decades of the twentieth century, following the

⁷¹ "Cajun Mardi Gras: Cultural Objectification and Symbolic Appropriation in a French Tradition," *Ethnology* Vol. 38, No. 4 (Autumn, 1999): 300.

⁷² Broven, South to Louisiana, 30.

discovery of oil in Acadiana in 1901, hundreds of oil companies were extracting oil and gas from fields in Evangeline, Hell Hole Bayou and Anse La Butte,⁷³ bringing Anglo-Protestant workers from Texas to Southwest Louisiana and creating new urban centers that were transformed by the migrating population. Lafayette, a farming town of 19,200 in 1940, became a city of 33,500 by 1950, with subdivision after subdivision built to house the petroleum industry laborers. A Lafayette newspaper noted in 1949 that “the buggies and leisurely pace of an earlier Cajun day have given way to all the furor and speed of modern wealth and initiative.”⁷⁴

Savvy dance hall owners in newly urban Lafayette catered to these 15,000 new residents by hiring Texas-style country and string bands to play in the dancehalls. This doesn’t demonstrate that the musical taste or habits of long-time residents of what had been “a sleepy Cajun town” in 1940⁷⁵ had completely changed by 1950, only that a population boom created by Texans brought Texas music into Acadiana. Likewise, petrochemical companies built factories and transplanted workers from Texas to Lake Charles, where Leroy “Happy Fats” LeBlanc appeared at the Silver Star Club. A new population brought new music: Texans and other Anglo-Protestant migrants found Texas country and swing appealing, and this new music then coexisted with old-time music, which was still a vital force in the lives of French-speaking Catholic Southwest Louisianans.

⁷³ Bernard, The Cajuns, 36.

⁷⁴ Bernard, The Cajuns, 37.

⁷⁵ Bernard, The Cajuns, 37.

Country and swing bands may have appealed as well to younger listeners, notorious for their attraction to the novel in music, but old-time music was still the only music for adults, Creole fiddler Canray Fontenot testified: “Most of the old people, whether they was white or black, they didn’t care too much about string music. They wanted to hear an accordion and a fiddle.”⁷⁶

The migration of Texans to Southwest Louisiana throughout the first decades of the twentieth century alternated with the movement of Cajuns and Creoles to East Texas. Cajun-Creole music took root in Texas Gulf towns through Nathan Abshire’s 1949 recording of “Texas Waltz.” Abshire taught himself to play accordion when he was eight, and by the time he was a teenager, was asked by Amédé Ardoin to play during Amédé’s breaks at house parties.⁷⁷ Like LeJeune, Abshire had made somewhat of a living from his music, although getting to dance halls, which were sometimes fifty miles apart, could mean walking twenty miles to play for three dollars.⁷⁸ Abshire had switched to playing violin during the wartime years when accordions weren’t available. “*Aussi, le monde aimait mieux le son du violon,*” Abshire said, “*Particulièrement les Texans.*”⁷⁹ [And everyone liked the sound of the violin better, especially Texans.] When Abshire took up the accordion again after the war, his emotional personality and dramatic playing style quickly popularized the Creole song “Pine Grove Blues,” and he developed such a loyal following that a year later, he was playing to a packed house at

⁷⁶ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 330.

⁷⁷ Nathan Abshire, “French Blues,” liner notes.

⁷⁸ TVTV, “The Good Times Are Killing Me,” 1975, DVD.

⁷⁹ Reed, *Lâche pas*, 76.

Basile's Avalon Club seven nights a week.⁸⁰

*Eh, négresse! (Quoi tu veux, neg?)
 Ou toi, t'as était hier au soir, ma négresse?
 Tu as 'rive a c'matin
 Soleil 'tais après s'lever
 Ça m'fait d'la peine pour toi!⁸¹*

[Hey, darling! (What is it, dear?)
 Where were you last night, my darling?
 You came home this morning, the sun was coming up
 I feel so bad for you!]

Sung by Ardoin, “negresse” would have had a racial connotation, but like the term “neg,” it was a common term of endearment in many Cajun songs. Another popular Abshire tune was “Service Blues,” in which a soldier going off to World War II breaks into tears when he hears the train whistle blowing, knowing he has to leave behind all that he loves:

*Quand j'ai parti pour aller dans l'armée,
 J'ai quitté tout ça mois, j'aimais
 Moi, j'ai pris le grand chemin de fer
 Avec le coeur aussi casse.*

[When I left to go into the army
 I left everything that I loved
 And I look the train
 With a broken heart.]

Abshire performed for fifty-six years and recorded on many labels, including Swallow Records, Old Timey and La Louisiane, but hoped his music would die with him: “When I die, I'd like all my records to be broken, so that they'd never be

⁸⁰ R. Brasseux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 179.

⁸¹ Francois, *Yé Yaille*, 445.

played again. I don't think it's right for radio stations and everyone to keep playing the music of a musician after he's gone. When I die...I'd like to be remembered the way I was....and that my music would be buried with me in my grave." ⁸²

Abshire's belief in music as belonging to an individual in a particular historical time and place, an art that should disappear along with its maker lest it haunt the future, is, like the desire to recapture a lost historical or autobiographical past, inherently romantic. Abshire saw his music as so particular an expression of his own life experiences and circumstances that he could not conceive of the music as having a universality that would appeal to people who hadn't had endured a life of field labor and poverty, and who had never experienced the urgent and joyful obsession with music, dancing, and drinking that he saw all around him in the dance halls. Both the poverty and the musician's life took a toll on Abshire, and at the end of his career, he wrote in colorful letters on the side of his accordion case: "The good times are killing me." ⁸³

But the popularity of Abshire and LeJeune's recordings of Cajun-Creole classics convinced Fred Tate and Paul Tate, Mamou's only attorney, and Revon Reed, a Mamou High School, that the music, and the language and culture that fostered it, had to live on, and they spent the next decades guiding their French language, music and culture campaign into the national spotlight,

⁸² Ancelet, *Cajun and Creole Music Makers*, 103-105.

⁸³ "Nathan Abshire, The Great Cajun Accordionist," liner notes.

bolstered by help from surprising academic, commercial and political sources in New York, Quebec, Washington and Paris.

3.

“It’s all French Music”¹

[The folk-lyric form] came together [when] there were enough fragments, passing back and forth between Blacks and Whites as common coin, to generate more fragments, to sustain within the matrix of a single musical language an almost infinite repertory of performances, to sustain the sense that out of the anonymity of the tradition a singer was presenting a distinct and separate account of a unique life.²

Greil Marcus, “The Old, Weird America”

Local efforts to preserve and promote the French-language music of Southwest Louisiana came at a time when academic and governmental interests were focused on the goal of discovering, preserving and promoting the art and music of regional cultures. The work of intellectuals and the interests of community culture boosters came together in a kind of ongoing conversation over three decades in which “federal” folklorists like Alan Lomax and Ralph Rinzler were collecting music to serve the culture interests of the nation, while academic music collectors like Harry Oster and commercial collectors like Chris Strachwitz went over the same ground in the interests of the state, the university and the record label.

¹ Creole musician Danny Poullard, quoted in *Acadiana: Louisiana’s Historic Cajun Country*, Carl A. Brasseaux (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 161. Poullard was often asked about the differences between Cajun and Creole music. This was his (exasperated) response.

² Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 18.

Government musicologists, record label executives, and folklore academics had very different ideas about the relationship between folk music, identity, and the larger culture. Musicologist Charles Seeger, who had described folk music as “a defensive weapon on the [wartime] home front” because of its status as pure Americana³ believed that folk music, with its narratives about the lives of ordinary impoverished Americans, could inspire economic and social reform. Academic folklorist Harry Oster, one in a long line of college literature professors-turned-collectors, was part of a generation of scholars keen on professionalizing folklore studies. Universities had been building their folklore programs throughout the 1920s and 1930s, offering folklore courses in their music, literature, anthropology and sociology departments.⁴ Independent record label owner Chris Strachwitz wanted to record and market what he thought of as the last authentic old-time Southern music to northeastern and west coast urban audiences. But local activists didn’t conceive of their work as the preservation of folklore, nor did they conceive of musicians as folk or of the French language as an exotic cultural artifact. They returned from World War II believing, as the federal government would declare three decades later in the American Folklife Preservation Act, that they simply had a right, as did all Americans, to preserve the distinctive “ways” of their family, ethnic group and region,⁵ the good time ways of Cajun-Creole culture.

³ Charles Seeger, quoted in Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, 151.

⁴ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 164-165.

⁵ The American Folklife Preservation Act S.1591, March 20, 1969.

In Evangeline Parish, those ways had always meant music, dancing, cooking and Mardi Gras. In Mamou, as in other rural communities, the war had taken some of that away, but as soldiers returned, married and started families, the population of Mamou doubled, from 1,379 in 1943 to 2254 by 1953, and once again young couples went out to dance halls like Pursall's Café, bringing their young children with them. Mamou, with its lucrative rice and cotton farming, was a fairly prosperous community by Evangeline Parish standards; Mayor J. Classie Duplechin told a New Orleans *Times-Picayune* journalist that the number of pick-up trucks lining 6th Street, the main thoroughfare, was evidence of prosperity in a parish in which horse and buggy remained a common mode of transportation.

Wednesday night was the big night out for older couples at Vidrine's, where the most requested song was the Cajun-Creole waltz "Big Mamou." Doxie Manual, and old-time fiddler in Mamou, recalled at mid-century having heard the song as far back as 1895, and having played it at many *fais do-dos* as a "sad, very sad waltz with no words": "Suddenly, it would stop being sad and people would holler "Ah, ha, ha," and would stamp their feet 'til the kerosene lamps would flicker and nearly fall off the tables."⁶ The two main variations in the lyrical storylines are either that the singer tells his disloyal girlfriend that he is setting off for Mamou because she betrayed him, or complains that his disloyal girlfriend has run off and left him behind in Mamou. The song had been "sung, hummed

⁶ *Times Picayune*, June 14, 1953, 37.

and fiddled” in Mamou dance halls, on farms and in homes for decades before⁷ country pop versions of the song were recorded. According to a June, 1953 *Times-Picayune* story on Mamou, every week, local dancers in one of Mamou’s seven bars dropped 6500 nickels in one of the town’s eleven jukeboxes to hear some version of the song. Revon Reed described Mamou as “a town that had been hit hard by a hit song.”⁸

Reed returned to his native Mamou in 1946 after serving as a stevedore officer in World War II. Long before the war, he had left Mamou for Lafayette, where he taught at a Catholic school after receiving a graduate degree from Boston University, but while stationed in Okinawa with fellow Mamou native Pascal Fuselier, he decided he would move back to Mamou, where the bonds between extended family members – the Fontenots, the Landreneaus, the Soileaus, the Ardoins, the Deshotels – were strengthened by wartime service, and by the combat deaths and grief of many Southwest Louisiana families from Ville Platte to Eunice and Breaux Bridge. The names Ardoin, Fontenot, Le Jeune and Breaux filled the rosters of the war dead.⁹

⁷*Times Picayune*, June 14, 1953.

⁸ *Times-Picayune*, June 14, 1953.

⁹ State Summary of War Casualties from World War II for Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard Personnel from: Louisiana, 1946, National Archives 305202, <http://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/navy-casualties/louisiana.html#list> and World War II Honor List of Dead and Missing Army and Army Air Forces Personnel from: Louisiana, 1946, National Archives 305293 <http://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/army-casualties/louisiana.html>

Reed worked as a part-time insurance salesman to supplement his teaching salary, but gave up that job to devote himself, as head of the local Rotary club's "Big Mamou" committee, to promoting Mamou. Reed and Paul Tate, who had served as Army Tech Sergeant in the war, weren't joining the cultural mood of nationalism after the war but rather participating in a small-town civic boosterism that looked back to their home region's very different origins. This cohort of veterans took a leadership role in the post-war community: veteran Jack Tate became the elementary school principal, veteran Calvin Landreneau became mayor, and Matthew Guillory returned home and opened the town's first movie theater, The Joy Theater.¹⁰ And Fred Tate, who had purchased "Tate's Bar" on Sixth Street with his twin brother Alphan and a friend named Dudley Rozas, bought out his partners, renamed the bar Fred's Lounge, and decided, along with Paul Tate and Revon Reed, to make Fred's the center of French heritage folkways in Evangeline Parish. That heritage meant not only old-time music but the Mardi Gras *courir* and *tournoi* that had been centuries-old traditions among Cajuns and Creoles, traditions that had disappeared during the war. This group of culture comrades set out to bring those festivities back to Mamou.

Each year, to mark the arrival of Lent, farmers, sharecroppers, oil industry workers and shop owners had gathered in the town center to mask themselves and costume themselves as peasants, clowns, and women for the annual *courir*

¹⁰ Richard Deshotel, personal correspondence with author, August 15, 2014.

de Mardi Gras, or run. Men ages eighteen to seventy-five would gather at seven o'clock in the morning and ride on horseback or in covered wagons a thirty to forty mile course around the prairie of Mamou, stopping at farm houses so the uncostumed "captain" of the *courir* – a role assigned to a highly respected townsman (in Mamou, Paul Tate served as captain)¹¹ – could ask for ingredients for the communal gumbo that would be made that evening: "*Une petit poule maigre, un sac de riz, une et deux pieds de saucisses, or quelque cinq-sous.*"¹² ["A skinny little chicken, a bag of rice, the heel end or two of a piece of a sausage, or five sous."] Begging quests – *faire courir carnaval* – had been part of rural tradition in parts of nineteenth-century France,¹³ and riders expected entrance into the household. In the Cajun version, *courir* participants, linking arms as they approached the house, would congregate in the front yard and sing a Mardi Gras song in their ragged and outrageous clothing, grotesque masks, and pointed *capuchon* hats with bells and streamers.

Donations were expected in exchange for the singing, dancing and comedic carryings-on of the assembled *courir* troupe, and intoxicated and rowdy

¹¹ "Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians," rec. Harry Oster, Arhoolie Records, 1994, compact disc, liner notes, 16.

¹² Reed, *Lâche Pas*, 111.

¹³ Harry Oster, "Une 'Tite Poule Grasse ou la Fille Ainee (A Little Fat Chicken or The Eldest Daughter): A Comparative Analysis of Cajun and Creole Mardi Gras Songs," *Journal of American Folklore*, Volume 114, Number 452, Spring 2001, 205-206.

revelers were likely to enforce that expectation.¹⁴ Likewise, a seventeenth-century description of a begging quest in France documents the way that “overzealous” celebrants made their requests in a manner that bordered on extortion.¹⁵ The ritual of begging and donating made a social event out of the harsh necessities of economic interdependence. The *courir* was thus a theatrical expression of communal interrelationships in a culture in which subsistence “lived and died by reciprocity.”¹⁶

There was much beer drinking and eating of “*boudin chaud*” (blood sausage, a Cajun speciality) along the route, and at day’s end, the *courir* arrived in procession on the main street of Mamou, followed by a street dance, the singing of Mardi Gras songs, and the cooking of the gumbo in large iron pots. A masked ball and at a dance hall followed, and then midnight mass was held in the town church to usher in the first day of Lent. The *courir* was common to both Cajun and Creole traditions, and in both cases, participants used the event as a way to anonymously settle old scores or grievances or to remind social outliers about the consequences of defying social mores; in the Creole *courir*, the riders might playfully “rough up” or scare “community miscreants” or “perpetual drunks” encountered along the route,¹⁷ while in the Cajun *courir*, the whip-wielding captain would eject from the festivities any participant who violated the

¹⁴ Rocky L. Sexton, “Ritualized Inebriation, Violence, and Social Control in Cajun Mardi Gras,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, Volume 74, Number 1 (January 2001): 32.

¹⁵ Oster, “*Une Tite Poule Grasse*,” 206.

¹⁶ R. Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 43.

¹⁷ Sexton, “Ritualized Inebriation,” 32.

expectations for cooperation and comportment.¹⁸ The structure and style of the Cajun and Creole *courir* were fundamentally similar, and in both, the event was a rite of passage for aspiring musicians, who would play fiddle and accordion for the householders in an attempt to demonstrate that they were preparing for the time when they would be recognized as competent performers in the community.¹⁹

Mamou, like most rural towns, had suspended Cajun Mardi Gras first during the Civil War and then during World War I and World War II because there weren't enough men left in town to carry on the tradition. No military parade for returning veterans could have felt as much like a homecoming as the *courir*: all across the landscape, on the vast prairie where the horizon receded far beyond the sugar cane fields, men in homemade costumes rode past the massive oak trees draped with Spanish moss down narrow dirt roads that cut through rice fields, drinking and reveling under the late winter Louisiana sun.

Creole Mardi Gras *courir* ran in an uninterrupted fashion from the time of settlement in the eighteenth century²⁰ and was not suspended during wartime because the U.S. military quota for the number of black Americans who could serve in the armed forces kept Creole men back home in their rural communities. Creole revelers, unlike their Cajun counterparts, had also never found their

¹⁸ Sexton, "Ritualized Inebriation," 31.

¹⁹ Nicholas Spitzer, "Zydeco and French Mardi Gras: Creole Identity and Performance Genres in Rural French Louisiana" (PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 1986): 431.

²⁰ Spitzer, "Zydeco and French Mardi Gras," 416.

festival traditions scrutinized under the 1926 Louisiana law that banned the wearing of masks outside of religious or cultural events “in any open place in view,” a law aimed specifically at members of the Ku Klux Klan.²¹ The Creole participants in L’Anse de ‘Prien Noir, a rural community founded in the mid-eighteenth century by Cyprien Ceazer, a free man of color of Spanish, French, Native American and African descent,²² dressed as clowns, devils, beggars and women, wearing the same pointed hats, decorated with the diamond pattern of medieval French harlequins, as the Cajun revelers, although many more participants were on foot because fewer could afford to own horses. Although the Cajun and Creole Mardi Gras runs were separate events, the bands would sometimes visit the same households, and Creole bands made a point of visiting the homes of “crucial Cajun figures” in their mixed communities, including store owners and priests. Cajuns would be invited to the Creole gumbo dinner at day’s end, and thus the *courir* heightened “a sense of inclusion in the Cajun/Creole community”²³ whose traditions descended from a shared Francophone heritage.

It was this Francophone cultural heritage that Fred Tate, Paul Tate and Revon Reed wanted to reassert after the war, and thus the plaque attached to the brick front of Fred’s Lounge also reads “In 1950 *Courir de Mardi Gras* was revived at Fred's Lounge.” Wanting the community to focus on the pageantry and symbolism of Mardi Gras, Paul Tate and Revon Reed put rules and checks in

²¹ La. Rev. Stat. Ann §14:313.

²² Spitzer, “French Mardi Gras,” 423.

²³ Spitzer, “French Mardi Gras,” 432.

place to prevent the Mamou Mardi Gras run from becoming too rowdy and hedonistic. These rules served as models for other local communities that were also inspired to revive the traditional *courir*,²⁴ including Church Point, Ville Platte, and Eunice, where participants gathered in front of the National Guard Armory in 1946 to depart for the ride. The *courir* may also have seemed, for returning soldiers, like a paramilitary exercise, with “troops” massing in front of the captain and the entire crew riding into neighboring towns in a posture of rivalry and triumph and returning home to share the spoils of the day with the assembled community.

The *tournoi*, a Mardi Gras version of a medieval French jousting tournament designed to train men for cavalry combat, reappeared in the post-war era as well, reestablished in Ville Platte by members of the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign War posts. The *tournoi*, said to have been introduced to Southwest Louisiana by Marcellin Garand, an officer in Napoleon’s army and the founder of Ville Platte, had been played in Ville Platte by the eighteenth-century settlers of the town, and the competitive tournament had been the predominant source of entertainment until the arrival of baseball and horseracing. Nineteenth-century participants had dressed as knights and masked their faces; twentieth-century competitors rode a quarter-mile track trying to lance rings suspended from posts along the route.

²⁴ Barry Jean Ancelet, “Mardi Gras and the Media: Who’s Fooling Whom?” in *Mardi Gras, Gumbo, and Zydeco: Readings in Louisiana Culture*, ed. Marcia G. Gaudet et al (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 4.

Veterans held the first revival *tournoi* on July 4, 1948, and in anticipation of the first tournament of the 20th century, The *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans ran a story with the headline “Ville Platte Revives the Sport of Knights,” featuring a photo of 74-year-old Jules Tate on horseback passing a lance through an iron ring hanging from a post. Tate, born in the 1870s in Evangeline, had won his first tournament at 19.²⁵ Most of the contestants were World War II veterans, and rather than charging either other wielding lances, as French medieval riders had done, the veterans battled the seven deadly enemies of the cotton crop by attempting to capture a series of seven rings that represented the environmental foes of cotton – flood, drought, the boll weevil and the bollworm – and the market enemies of cotton in the industrial age: silk, rayon and nylon.

Some veterans, perhaps nostalgic for the drama and action of war, may have embraced the *tournoi* as a war game, and *courir* planning was customarily done at a local bar, giving veterans another reason, and location, to assemble.²⁶ Other revivalists, like J.D. Buller, whose son Sergeant Wilton Bernie Buller, First Gunner, was killed in action in WWII,²⁷ may have conceived of the Cajun *tournoi* as reminiscent of an earlier historical moment before combine harvesters filled the rice fields and Anglo-Protestants moved into Southwest Louisiana to work in agribusiness and oil. Veterans founded the Ville Platte Cotton Festival in 1953 to provide a venue and occasion for an annual grand *tournoi*, which, like the *courir*,

²⁵ *Times-Picayune*, June 20, 1948, 95.

²⁶ “Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians,” liner notes, 16.

²⁷ World War II Honor List, Louisiana, 1946, National Archives 305293

combined the spirits of revelry and rivalry. *Courir* and *tournoi* events were, in the period between 1946 and 1961, reestablished in a number of Acadian parish towns. Returning veterans took up the cause on the airwaves, bringing French-language talk radio and news programming to the Cajun-Creole parishes.

Bertrand DeBlanc, returning to Lafayette after three years in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, used his training in military communications networks to begin broadcasting a daily French-language news program over KVOL in 1948.²⁸

Dudley Bertrand, who had served as a French interpreter in North Africa and Southern France, returned to Louisiana after five years to work as a French announcer and disc jockey on KLFT in Golden Meadow. The host of Jennings's KJEF "*Allons Danser*" show, Jerry Dugas, reported an exasperating number of requests demanding "that the same French recordings be played time and time again."²⁹ Lee Lavergne of Lanor Records in Church Point remembered that it was French-language music that dominated local radio in the post-war years: "People started getting radios. You'd hear some country music, there wasn't all that much. And then after a while there started being some Cajun bands that started broadcasting. I'm talking about somewhere around 1947.... And they started promoting local talent, like Nathan Abshire was coming in."³⁰ Cajun fiddler Dewey Balfa was playing dances every night of the week and broadcasting over KSLO Opelousas. Soldiers were returning to Acadiana with money, and they

²⁸ R. Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 190.

²⁹ R. Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 191.

³⁰ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 267.

wanted to hear old-time music.³¹

It was the enduring popularity of traditional French-language music, and the reemergence of French cultural traditions, that attracted the attention of folklorist Harry Oster when he began teaching in the English Department at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge in 1955. Oster, the son of Russian-Polish parents who had immigrated to Cambridge, Massachusetts, gave a well-appreciated lecture and concert at Louisiana State on the work of the nineteenth-century folk music collector Francis James Child, an early and influential collector of English and Scottish ballads. Child, a Shakespearean scholar whose home base was Harvard, had collected, analyzed and published every ballad and every known variant of every Anglo-Scotch ballad he could find,³² and his meticulously-compiled The English and Scottish Popular Ballads was the foundational text in music folklore scholarship. Oster's presentation on Child's work prompted the state of Louisiana to sponsor fieldwork, to be conducted by Oster, in which the folk music of Louisiana would be documented and recorded.

On this music hunting trip, Oster found "a profusion of unusual material" that constituted "an abundance of riches – ancient French ballads, some of them sung by blacks; Cajun dance music as well as a mass over dead (empty) bottles, Afro-Cajun blues; Afro-French spirituals; a survival of a West African shout ceremony." Oster was especially drawn to what he called "The Negro French

³¹ Cheryl Brauner, "A Study of the Newport Folk Festival and the Newport Folk Foundation" (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1986): 270.

³² Benjamin Filene, Romancing the Folk, Public Memory & American Roots Music, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 14.

cantique,” a song form analogous to the Protestant “Negro spiritual,” probably taught by Catholic priests to Creole parishioners. He was fascinated by the parallels between nineteenth-century religious songs collected in France and the twentieth-century songs he heard sung in Louisiana.³³

Oster’s interests ran from the sacred to the vernacular and the historical, and he sought to document each song’s provenance and antiquity, collecting songs that were popular “in the Paris of the Revolution and in the Empire,” songs known in French-speaking Canada, and songs brought to Louisiana by enslaved people from the Antilles and Santo Domingo.³⁴ In 1958, Oster produced “Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians,” featuring music recorded in Mamou. With no real understanding of the production process, Oster undertook a project of “record production as a kind of folk craft,” using an eighteenth-century lithograph process in which a stone was hand-cranked onto paper to produce the album jacket art; the design on the lithograph stone melted in the Louisiana heat and humidity. In his liner notes for the album, Oster describes a prairie culture in which the nineteenth-century building of roads and twentieth-century television’s “mass-produced, homogenous entertainment” had exposed a French-speaking population to modernized Anglo-Protestant systems and values, and threatened the “old folk dances and songs.”³⁵

³³ Harry Oster, “Negro French Spirituals of Louisiana,” *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, Vol. 4 (1962): 166.

³⁴ “Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians,” liner notes, 2.

³⁵ “Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians,” liner notes, 6.

Oster stated, with no elaboration, that the return of World War II soldiers after years living elsewhere was “upsetting the ancient ways,” as if the now-worldly soldiers were transmitters of modern international culture, and lamented that the disappearance of Cajun-Creole music constituted a case study in “the modification of a minority culture.”³⁶ Despite this conclusion, Oster quickly thereafter attested to the enduring and vital role of the *fais do-do* dances featuring accordion and fiddle music, and on the “hilarity and exuberance” of the family-attended gatherings in which all danced to traditional fiddle and accordion music, including “*La Dance de Mardi Gras*” and “*Contredanse Francaise*.”

Oster’s descriptions of the musicians he recorded reveal much about his conception of the Cajun folk. He describes Cyprien Landreneau as a big man full of *joie de vivre*, “father of a typically large Louisiana French family of eleven children” and the head of a household in which “almost every weekend there is a family party...enlivened by an ephemeral case of whiskey. The whole family joins in the furiously spirited dancing.” The jovial Arcemus Dupre “spontaneously bursts into song” – songs sung by “lively carousers,” in which “love, liquor and food are given strong emphasis” because, Oster wrote, “the typical Cajun has no inclination to sing about the supernatural”: “When a Cajun’s woman has run off with someone else and the bottle is empty, he sings of his sadness...[tunes that have been] “sung, hummed and fiddled in dance halls, on farms and in homes for

³⁶ “Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians,” liner notes, 6.

as long as anyone around Mamou can remember,” Oster explains in the liner notes. Cajun women are, like the guitarist Mrs. Rodney Fruge, built “of matronly proportions” and the men have physiques “like a bull.” “Of course,” Oster wrote, “no collection representative of Mamou would be complete without a drinking song.”³⁷

Oster made the observation that it was only the monolingual French-speaking older generation who “still sing songs of early France,”³⁸ songs that had been handed down from grandparents and parents, and that only the older musicians still played in a “pure folk style characteristic of the country fiddling of the nineteenth century and earlier,”³⁹ yet in his descriptions of dance hall culture, as well as in his depiction of Mardi Gras, it is clear that he understands both as cross-generational social celebrations in which teenagers participated as a rite of passage.

Oster’s key interest was the survival of French folk music in the New World, and in May 1958, he received a grant from Louisiana State University to study French folksongs in Quebec and Ottawa.⁴⁰ Although Oster’s mission was to trace the songs of Acadiana back to the Canadian provinces, later folklorists found that Canadian and Louisianan folk music had little in common beyond the language of the lyrics because of the strong contribution made by Creole musicians to “Cajun” music: “The percussive improvisational African influence

³⁷ “Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians,” liner notes, 7-24.

³⁸ “Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians,” liner notes, 16.

³⁹ “Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians,” liner notes, 22.

⁴⁰ *Times-Picayune*, May 19, 1958, 10

especially sets Cajun music stylistically so far apart from its Acadian and Quebecois counterparts that comparisons have not been tempting.”⁴¹

Oster didn’t understand, or didn’t wish to highlight, this “improvisational African influence,” and in his liner notes to the album, he ignores the Creole role in the development of the music. Importantly, although the Oster recordings include the Afro-Caribbean “Colinda,” along with a song called “*Tu Peux Cogner Mais Tu Peux Pas Rentrer*” [You Can Keep on Knockin’ But You Can’t Come In]⁴², a song that most likely had its origins in the red light district of early New Orleans, as well as “*La Danse de Mardi Gras*,” which is sung with minor variations by both Cajuns and Creoles, Oster titles this collection “Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians,” and not, as the musicians themselves called it, “*musique française*,” French music, or even “Cajun-Creole Songs” or “Creole-Cajun Music.” Ignoring the way the musicians themselves conceived of the music, Oster essentially created a category called “Cajun folksong” – a genre that had not existed in the work of the folklorist Alan Lomax, who titled his 1934-1937 recordings from Southwest Louisiana “Cajun and Creole Music.” Thus Oster was the first to promote French-language music as the cultural property of white, and not black, Southwest Louisianans.

Traveling in the Lake Charles and Jennings area during the Depression, Lomax had made the first recordings of Creole *juré* music (which Lomax called

⁴¹ Barry Jean Ancelet, “Lomax in Louisiana: Trials and Triumph,” *Folklife in Louisiana*, <http://www.louisianafolklife.org/>.

⁴² Most famously covered by Little Richard in 1957.

“ring shouts”).⁴³ Although some of the songs Lomax recorded in Acadia in the 1930s were old enough that they could have originated in medieval France and then made their way to Nova Scotia in the sixteenth century and Louisiana in the eighteenth century, most of the French-language songs sung by Cajun and Creole musicians on the Lomax recordings have a complex and mixed provenance, some written in continental France long after the Acadians arrived in Louisiana⁴⁴ – evidence that musicians in Southwest Louisiana constantly absorbed and adapted newly-introduced French-language songs rather than simply working from a repertoire that was inherited, memorized, transmitted whole cloth, frozen in time. Thus the fact that the songs are sung in French by musicians living in Southwest Louisiana is what constitutes them as a genre, whether those songs were written by or adapted by Creole or Cajun musicians. Labeling that genre “Cajun-Creole music” helpfully particularizes it to Southwest Louisiana in a way that the locally-used “*musique française*” does not.

⁴³ Ronald D. Cohen, ed., Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge: The Library of Congress Letters, 1935-1945 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 254.

⁴⁴ Joshua Clegg Caffery’s *Traditional Music in Coastal Louisiana: The 1934 Lomax Recordings* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013) provides a comprehensive and learned account of the Lomax’s Louisiana recordings, including Alsatian ballads sung by the Hoffpauirs, whose ancestors were from the border of northeastern France and Germany, and a number of songs that also existed in the French-Canadian Maritime provinces. See also Joshua Caffery, *Folklife Lecture on Louisiana Music*, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., December 11, 2013. <http://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/transcripts/2013/131211afc1200.txt>.

For Lomax, the crucial designator was the word “folk”: he was drawn to the self-taught, or community-taught, musicians who were known only in their own immediate communities, or who traveled the same ground to play in small venues. The distinction between professional and folk musicians mattered more to Lomax than racially-determined genre categories like “Cajun” and Creole”; in a letter to his father, he refers to the “remarkable Negro Cajun songs” he’d heard sung by Joseph Johns and Cleveland Benoit in Jennings.⁴⁵

Lomax’s field work in Louisiana captured the attention of the *Times Picayune* in New Orleans, which featured a story headlined “Music of Cajuns Termed Untapped State Resource”: “To date, [Louisiana] has failed to either develop or conserve one of the richest heritages of her glamorous past – the unplumbed mine of folk music and culture in her Cajun country. This is the opinion of Alan Lomax, assistant in the Library of Congress’ music division...”⁴⁶ Lomax was after the non-commercial “home music” – the older, unaccompanied, unamplified sound that had not attracted the attention of record labels and that Lomax feared was “being smothered by the urbanized, orchestrated sound” blasting from radios.⁴⁷ He went to dramatic lengths to record musicians in their own time and place, preferring to sacrifice sound quality for the authenticity of on-the-spot recording: after Cajun ballad singers Lennis Vincent and Sidney

⁴⁵ Cohen, Alan Lomax, *Assistant in Charge*, 253.

⁴⁶ *Times-Picayune*, April 17, 1938, 32.

⁴⁷ Ancelet, “Lomax in Louisiana,” *Folklife in Louisiana*.

Richard stopped off at a bar while riding a borrowed horse to church, Lomax persuaded them to record in a loading chute at one of the local rice mills.⁴⁸

Volume 1 of the Lomax recordings includes “Cajun Waltz” and “Creole Blues,” and this simple linguistic exchange might have been instructive to Harry Oster, for the fact that songs in the Cajun-Creole traditions are variously titled “Blues” or “Waltz” is evidence of a shared tradition: Creole musician Bois Sec Ardoin’s “*Valse de Opelousas*”/Opelousas Waltz”; Cajun musician Nathan Abshire’s rendition of “Pine Grove Blues”; Creole fiddler Canray Fontenot’s “*La Valse de Mom et Pop*” and Douglas Bellard’s “*La Valse de la Prison*”; Cajun musician Amedee Breaux’s “Tiger Rag Blues.” But in his liner notes to “Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians,” Oster never mentions Creole musicians or the shared traditions that shaped the folksongs he wished to preserve.

A year earlier, Oster had produced “A Sampler of Louisiana Folksongs: Negro, Negro French, Cajun, Old French, and Anglo-Saxon,” on which he had established his categories: “Negro French” music included religious songs inspired by the Catholic hymn tradition, whereas “Cajun” songs were danceable polkas and two-steps about Mardi Gras. In 1959, Oster produced “Louisiana Folksong Jambalaya,” singing traditional Cajun-Creole songs himself. Oster believed that collecting was “both an art and an addiction,” and that it was important for folklorists to build an intense rapport with informants by themselves performing, and sustaining an atmosphere in which the musician

⁴⁸ Caffery, Traditional Music in Coastal Louisiana, 264.

would “play and sing naturally and enthusiastically.”⁴⁹ Oster had located the musicians through his friendship with Sarah Gertrude Knott, who had organized the Louisiana Folk Festival in 1955 in southwestern Louisiana. Knott introduced Oster to Paul Tate and Revon Reed, who explained that they were eager to perpetuate the French tradition of their town, urging Oster to record in Mamou. Oster returned to Mamou many weekends, often, he said, just letting the tape recorder run while he danced with the locals at *fais do dos*. He also rode in local Mardi Gras celebrations, learning much about the culture from Tate and Reed.

Following Lomax’s trail, Oster went on to record prison work songs at Angola, a project for which he became esteemed as a popularizer of the blues. He had worried that work songs were being eliminated by the grinding metal noise and deafening motors of industrial machinery like cotton pickers and cane cutters. Largely as a result of the success of *Angola Prison Blues* (1959) and *Angola Prison Spirituals* (1958), his recordings of New Orleans Jazz and what he called “bayou bluegrass,” in 1960 Oster received a Guggenheim fellowship. In 1970, Chris Strachwitz of the one-man record label Arhoolie in Berkeley, California, bought all of Oster’s field recordings. Strachwitz became a passionate commercial recorder and promoter of Cajun and Creole traditional. Thus Oster’s collection, second only to Lomax’s, became one of the founding compilations of old-time Louisiana music.

⁴⁹ Harry Oster, “Evolution of Folk-Lyric Records,” *JEMF Quarterly*, Volume XIV No. 49 (Spring 1978): 148-149.

Oster had enacted a perfect model of categorization, exclusion and appropriation over the course of the three albums: first, he created the category “Acadian folksong” as a separate tradition from both “Old French” music in the New World, and from “Negro French” music; then, rather than further recording local musicians, Oster became the performer of the music, not acknowledging in his notes that the music had innovators, writers and performers from both European and African traditions. But the old-time Southwest Louisiana music Oster collected was exactly like the “Jambalaya” in the title of his third album: although the parts could be traced back to Europe, Africa and the Americas, the whole could never be called simply African-derived or European-influenced. Likewise, although the spicy Louisiana rice and meat dish “jambalaya” has been variously described as developing primarily from a Catalan, Provençal, Congolese, Dominican or Native American or African cuisine, food historian Andrew Sigal, after studying New Orleans cookbooks, books on the plants of West Tropical Africa, the immigration history of the French Huguenots to the Carolinas, the Occitan language, and the nineteenth-century poetry of Southern France, concludes that while both Cajuns and Creoles have a long-held belief that “jambalaya is their dish”⁵⁰ the dish belongs collectively to all the groups whose ingredients and culinary styles contributed to its creation – meaning French, Spanish, African, American and American Indian: “Depending on where any individual learned the recipe, they would have different folk stories to support

⁵⁰ Andrew Sigal, “Jambalaya By Any Other Name,” *PETITS PROPOS CULINAIRE* 84 (2007): 112.

their ideas of its origins... Many would have no particular name for it at all, simply referring to it as the dish mama always made....[Africans] would point to the long history of rice cultivation on the West African coast...Cajuns might then tell you with equal assurance that they invented it to use the rice they found when they arrived in their *nouvelle Acadie*.”⁵¹

The problem of naming and categorization introduced by Oster would endure and intensify during the decades after his albums were issued. The 1934-1937 Alan Lomax recordings from Southwest Louisiana were reissued by Rounder Records in 1999 as a two-disc set: Volume 1 has cover art depicting Cajuns sitting on benches at a dance hall, and features “Creole Blues,” and Volume 2 has cover art depicting two Creole musicians and features “*Je M’Endors*,” in which a Cajun singer says goodbye to his pretty blonde girlfriend before leaving for Baton Rouge with a deck of cards in his hand.

Beyond the work of academic folklorist Oster, talented Creole musicians went unrecorded in the war and post-war years. “Race record” labels like Queen and Apollo recorded gospel and rhythm and blues, and in 1942, *The Billboard* introduced the first chart of black music, Harlem Hit Parade,⁵² but there was no national African-American audience for French-language Creole music. The fact that labels weren’t soliciting records by Creole musicians didn’t reflect local attitudes about race, as Ardoin continued to be a revered figure in old-time music. There were social boundaries between whites from different communities

⁵¹ Sigal, “Jambalaya,” 115-116.

⁵² William H. Young, *Music of the World War II Era*, 30.

and between blacks from different communities, just as there were boundaries between blacks and whites, but a common musical tradition and a common mother tongue softened the edges, if not entirely, as Creole accordionist “Bois Sec” Ardoin explained: “Back then, you stayed in your own neighborhood...If young people from around here went to Mamou to court girls, there was always trouble. You just couldn’t do that.” Ardoin described the initial tension between the “lighter-skinned” residents of one neighboring community and the inhabitants of the town where he lived: “They didn’t want to mix with us. They were mulattoes. We couldn’t go to their dances...it was just like trying to go to a white dance in those days. Then, once they started going out of their own community to other dances, they saw that they didn’t know how to dance. So in order to have a good time, by and by they started going out with us. Then, later, once we really started to have a good time together, we all became brothers and sisters.”⁵³

Ardoin, Amédé Ardoin’s cousin, recalled the many talented Creole musicians who never recorded and who died without ever being known. Accordionist Adam Fontenot, a cotton and corn farmer in l’Anse des Rougeaux near Mamou, had played with Amédé Ardoin, and Fontenot’s music was so appreciated that “any person in the black race or the white race, they heard of him,” his son, fiddler Canray Fontenot said.⁵⁴ But Adam Fontenot, like Nathan Abshire, didn’t want to be remembered through his recorded music: “You see,

⁵³ Ancelet, *Cajun and Creole Music Makers*, 85.

⁵⁴ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 326.

black and white alike would come home all the time to meet my late father.... People came several times to get my father to record. ‘No,’ he would say, ‘when a person is dead, he is supposed to be gone. You’re not supposed to hear him on records. When I die, I want to be finished.’ And he never did make a record. But he sure could play.”⁵⁵

Although in the post-war years talented Creole fiddlers and accordionists were either ignored by labels or didn’t aspire to being recording artists, Nathan Abshire and Iry LeJeune, by reintroducing the accordion into traditional French-language music, paved the way for a contemporary accordion-based music, zydeco, to develop among Creole Louisianans who had migrated to the industrial towns of Houston, Galveston and Port Arthur, Texas. Younger Creole musicians began experimenting with rhythm and blues and rock music using the accordion, imitating the highly amplified blues sound they heard on records and on the radio,⁵⁶ and this new urban sound would come to eclipse the popularity among the younger generation of the waltz and ballad-based old-time Creole repertoire. Bill Quinn’s Gold Star Records again played a key role in the story.

After recording Harry Choates’s version of “*Jolie Blonde*,” in 1949 Quinn began recording blues guitarist Sam “Lightnin’” Hopkins, who lived in the Third Ward neighborhood of Houston near Quinn’s studio. Hopkins’s “Zolo Go,” which he played on the organ in an attempt to imitate the sound of the accordion music popular among the French-speaking Creoles who lived in his neighborhood, was

⁵⁵ Ancelet, *Creole and Cajun Music Makers*, 79.

⁵⁶ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 119.

soon featured on Houston jukeboxes,⁵⁷ along with Welsh, Louisiana guitarist Clarence Garlow's hit song "Bon Ton Roula" on the Macy's label. (Since Cajun French and Creole French were not written languages, many variations in spelling appear when even common phrases like "*laissez les bon temps roulez*" are transcribed; for example, The Bon Ton Roulet was a popular dancehall in World War II-era Lafayette.) Quinn, unaware of the music of the local subculture of Southwest Louisiana immigrants in Houston's French Town neighborhood,⁵⁸ wasn't even aware that the term "zolo go" was Hopkins's version of a term, zydeco, that had been used for decades by Southwest Louisiana Creoles to describe a fast-tempo accordion-based dance music and the dance hall parties at which it was played.

Hopkins' and Garlow's hit songs, by showcasing French-language music, lyrics and instrumentation, introduced accordion-based Louisiana music to a wider audience unfamiliar with the shared traditions of Cajun and Creole music history. "Zydeco" was a word that had long been used by Creoles to describe a dance hall party and the old-time accordion music played there, and John and Alan Lomax had encountered the word on their fieldwork tour in 1934. The Lomaxes traveled some thirty-two thousand miles in nine Southern states and recorded about six hundred songs,⁵⁹ including, in Port, Arthur Texas, a song by the Creole singer Jimmy Peters. Peters performed in *juré* style a song whose

⁵⁷ Tisserand, *Kingdom of Zydeco*, 17.

⁵⁸ Chris Strachwitz, *Folk Music Occasional*, 23.

⁵⁹ Tisserand, *Kingdom of Zyedco*, 9.

lyrics date back to an old Acadian folksong. But Peters included the lyric “*O mam, mais donnez-mois les haricots. O yé yaie, les haricots sont pas salé.*” [Oh, mama, give me the snap beans/Oh (high-pitched cry), the snap beans aren’t salty.] The interjection “*Oh yé yaie*” (or *Yé yaille!*) appears commonly in the lyrics of Cajun dance hall music, just as lyric about snap beans without salt became the signature phrase of zydeco music. Cajun fiddler Dewey Balfa, in response to a question about the characteristic yell in Cajun singing, recalled a time when someone had asked singer Jimmy Newman the same question: “Well,” he says, “back in Louisiana, in the bayous, among the bayous and the woods, whenever you hear a yell like that,” he said, “somebody yell back.” And he say, “You can be sure that he’s lost too”....When you yell like that, you’re just letting your heart out,” Balfa explained.⁶⁰ Crying out loudly that the snap beans aren’t salty is the zydeco musician’s way of letting his heart out, serving as a catch phrase for all sorts of lamentation and protest, including financial or romantic. The grievance phrase also appears in the lyric of a song sung by Wilfred Charles in New Iberia: “*Pas mis de la viande, pas mis à rien/Juste des haricots dans la chaudière*”⁶¹ [“There’s no meat, there’s no nothing/just beans there in the pot.”]

To Creole fiddler Canray Fontenot, the word “zydeco” was an old word for an old kind of music: “That’s just a word....The black people used to call a party “*un diverti.*” And the white people would call that “*un amusette.*” Then, when we was coming out in our prime, they started callin’ that a “zydeco,” because they

⁶⁰ Brauner, “Newport Folk Festival,” 140.

⁶¹ Tisserand, Kingdom of Zydeco, 12.

had an old guy there that had a big house and a lot of children. And we'd go around there and he'd say, "We're gonna' have a zydeco at the house." We knew it was a dance. Then the blacks learned about it, zydeco here and zydeco there. And the whites had *fais do-dos*."⁶² Opelousas, Louisiana native Clifton Chenier, who grew up cutting sugarcane, began playing accordion in 1947, accompanied by his brother Cleveland on washboard, and because the older generation called a dance party a "zydeco," Chenier labeled his syncopated dance music zydeco.⁶³ But Chenier was using the word "zydeco" to mean French-language music sung by Creoles in a band that included an accordion, even if there were few French words in the lyrics and the accordion was one of several amplified instruments rather than one of two or three unamplified instruments, as in the old Creole music of his childhood. That old Creole music, with just an accordion, a fiddle and a washboard, was remembered by Creole accordionist Sidney Babineaux as being older than even his nineteenth-century childhood. "That's been here since before I was born," Babineaux told Chris Strachwitz.⁶⁴ And that old-time sound was exactly what Strachwitz was after.

The son of German immigrants, Strachwitz began a love affair with American music when he first listened to swing bands on Armed Forces Radio as a teenager living in the British zone of West Central Germany. His family had been removed from Silesia under the terms of the Potsdam Conference in August

⁶² Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 350.

⁶³ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 373.

⁶⁴ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 119.

1945, under which the Allies agreed that Silesia would be resettled with Poles in a territory to be administered by the Russians. This experience of a “massive evacuation,” “one of the great social upheavals of recorded history,” may account for Strachwitz’s deeply-felt sympathies with the Acadian “*Grand Dérangement*” that brought French-speaking Catholics to Louisiana after the French and Indian War and for his particularly strong sympathy for people of African descent whose ancestors had been brought against their will to the New World.

When Strachwitz’s family moved to the United States in 1947, to Nevada and then California, he tuned into Los Angeles stations playing New Orleans jazz and blues, Baptist church gospel music, and Bill Quinn’s recordings of Lightnin’ Hopkins.⁶⁵ Like Quinn, Strachwitz developed an interest in recording technology, and began playing around with rudimentary equipment, recording a blues musician working a shoeshine stand on the University of California at Berkeley campus where Strachwitz was a talented and restless student who had majored in engineering, then physics, then political science before being drafted into the U.S. Army in 1954. Like the Cajun soldiers whose native language had gotten them stationed in France, the German-speaking Strachwitz was stationed in Austria and then Germany, and when he returned to Berkeley in 1956 and finished his education on the G.I. Bill, he got a job teaching high school German. Strachwitz spent evenings at the V.F.W. Post listening to jazz bands and going to nightclubs

⁶⁵ Larry Benicewicz, “Chris Strachwitz and the Arhoolie Records Story, Part 1: The Early Years,” Blues Art Studio Journal.
<http://www.bluesartstudio.at/NeueSeiten/pageA54.html>.

to hear rhythm and blues, and if it hadn't been for a summer road trip to Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1959, he may have remained simply the most musically knowledgeable high school teacher in California⁶⁶ without ever becoming one of the most successful and devoted independent record producers of the twentieth century.

Charged with the task of dropping his sister's car off in Albuquerque, Strachwitz took a detour to Houston in the hopes of meeting with Lightnin' Hopkins at Quinn's Gold Star studio. Inspired by Quinn's achievements with his one-man label, Strachwitz bought new recording equipment with money he had made selling some of the thousands of vintage albums he had collected in the 1950s, and set up his own label, Arhoolie Records, developing, over the decades that followed, a rich, extensive, varied catalog of Louisiana music. Quinn's studio would, over the long course of the two men's friendship, host a number of recording sessions for Strachwitz's label, including many with Clifton Chenier, who was Hopkins's cousin by marriage,⁶⁷ and Arhoolie would become one of the primary recorders of Cajun-Creole music and the primary re-issuers of the music of classic Cajun-Creole musicians, including Améde Ardoin.

Strachwitz was fascinated and confounded the first time he listened to Ardoin's recordings. Familiar with accordion music from his childhood in Germany, and hearing it played to French-language lyrics by a Southwest Louisiana musician, he assumed that Ardoin was "a white Acadian." "I never

⁶⁶ Benicewicz, "Chris Strachwitz and the Arhoolie Records Story."

⁶⁷ Bradley and Wood, *House of Hits*, 25.

would have guessed that he was a Negro, and since he often was recorded in company with the white Acadian fiddler, Dennis McGhee, I had assumed he was a white Acadian as well. It was not until Clifton Chenier told me that Ardoin “was the first colored man to play the accordion (on record, at least) that I was made aware of the true situation,” Strachwitz explained in a 1970 article, “Zydeco Music – i.e., French Blues” in *The American Folk Music Occasional*.⁶⁸ It was then that he realized that in order to understand what was being called “zydeco” music or “Negro-French” or “Negro Cajun” music, he would have to look “primarily at the evolution and development of Acadian (of “Cajun”) music in general.”⁶⁹

The fact that Strachwitz couldn’t distinguish the music of the Cajun tradition from the music of the Creole tradition, and thereby had an epiphany about the shared roots and deep connectedness of the music of black and white Louisiana musicians, would have brought a triumphant smile to the face of another old-time music collector, the eccentric and brilliant Harry Smith, whose “*Anthology of American Folksong*,” released in 1952, first introduced Strachwitz and a whole generation of folklorists and folk musicians to the music of Southwest Louisiana. It had been Smith’s goal for listeners like Strachwitz to hear the songs of the Cajun-Creole tradition as a pure expression of the spirit and legacy of democracy, and to hear all American folk music as neither black nor white, but as an interconnected artistic folk music steeped in the strange, particular history of the

⁶⁸ Chris Strachwitz, “Zydeco Music – i.e., French Blues,” *The American Folk Music Occasional* (New York: Oak Publications, 1970): 22-23.

⁶⁹ Chris Strachwitz, “Zydeco Music,” 22.

American South.

The folk revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s, including the introduction of Cajun-Creole music to a national audience, is, fundamentally, the legacy of Smith, a record collector, experimental filmmaker, erudite visual artist and itinerant bum who believed that the true narrative of American national life could only really be told through the warped and scratched-up albums recorded in the down-and-out American past of the Southern poor. An anthropologist by training, Smith took a social scientist's approach to folk song as artifact, collecting, analyzing and arranging the most important old-time songs in American recording history into an anthology he hoped would compel listeners to reexamine their understanding of democracy, race, and art, and cause them to see that, despite the strange and alien-seeming voices of regional music and the unfamiliar ways of regional culture, Gunnar Myrdal got it right in his 1944 An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy. Myrdal had argued that despite being a vast democracy of great cultural disparities, America had preserved its exceptional emphasis on the "essential dignity of the individual human being." Smith believed that folk song was a powerful expression of that dignity, and that while the "cacophony" of American life hadn't exactly become a "melody" through the common national belief in liberal humanistic ideals, as Myrdal had put it,⁷⁰ the cacophony at least had become, in Smith's view, a

⁷⁰ Gunnar Myrdal, "Selection from An American Dilemma (1944)," in The American Intellectual Tradition, Volume II: 1865 to the Present, sixth edition, ed.

discordant, captivating, dissonant and intensely beautiful series of songs that had the power to inspire a new national narrative of a less divided and alienated American life.

4.

Brand New Old-Time Southern Americana

A great uproar of voices that were at once old and new was heard, as happens only occasionally in democratic cultures – but always, when it happens, with a sense of explosion, of energies contained for generations bursting out all at once.¹

Greil Marcus, “That Old, Weird America”

Call them regionalists, call them nationalists; call them musical conservatives, call them political radicals; call them folksingers, call them interpreters; call them folklore democrats with a small d. Their project was to constitute a collective memory of made-in-America folk music, and they succeeded in ushering in a folk revival...²

Jeff Todd Titon in *Journal of American Folklore*

In the post-World War II years, American folk art and its aesthetic of the modest symmetry of homespun craftwork occupied a prominent place in the hearts of American modernists.³ John D. Rockefeller’s wife Abby Rockefeller’s

¹ Greil Marcus, “Old, Weird America,” *Harry Smith Anthology*, liner notes, 20-21.

² Jeff Todd Titon, review of Gone to the Country: The New Lost City Ramblers and the Folk Music Revival by Ray Allen, *Journal of Folklore Research Reviews* <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/jfrr/article/view/3001/2877>.

³ Andrew Perchuk, “Struggle and Structure” in Harry Smith, *The Avant-Garde in the American Vernacular*, ed. Andrew Perchuk (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2010), 12.

collection of Americana - weathervanes, decoys, doorstops, cigar store figures, lawn ornaments and watercolor paintings – had been one of the founding collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York when it opened the week after the stock market crashed in 1929, introducing lovers of avant-garde painting to the handiwork of the anonymous American everyman. Sidney Janis's book They Taught Themselves, American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century, published in 1942, celebrated the work of sign painters, cabinet makers, blacksmiths and stained-glass workers, and the art critics who analyzed the folk paintings featured in Janis's text emphasized the coherence between folk art and folk music forms. Writing about the work of "Horace Pippin, Disabled War Veteran (Negro)," Alfred C. Barnes, an early collector of the work of Picasso and Cézanne, describes Pippin's oil painting of a regiment of World War I African American soldiers capturing enemy German soldiers as "distinctly American" in the fact that its "picturesqueness, and accentuated rhythms, have their musical counterparts in the spirituals of the American Negro."⁴ Janis refers to folk painters as "The Innocents," a revealing and fantastical compliment in the aftermath of the horrors and devastation of World War II. Driven more by a "craft sense" than a love of beauty, "each creates in his own world," Janis wrote of the painters. "They are unafraid."⁵ Janis admired the awkwardness and humility of the work, work that could only be discovered by crossing to "the wrong side of

⁴ Albert C. Barnes in They Taught Themselves, American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century, Sidney Janis (New York: The Dial Press, 1942), 187.

⁵ Sidney Janis, They Taught Themselves, 7-8.

the tracks”: “Here were poverty, obscurity, and the creative impulse,”⁶ Janis wrote, romanticizing the Pittsburgh house painter John Kane as a man who had “felt the Whitmanesque epic of [the city’s] industrial growth” as a laborer working on its buildings and bridges.⁷

The encounter with folk art forms inspired some lovers of avant-garde art to find correspondences between “high art” and folk forms, pointing out the primitive topical and stylistic elements in modern art as if the infusion of folk energy could restore art to innocence in the consumer age. The most eccentric of the avant-garde artists of the time, Harry Smith was also the age’s most avid and prolific collector of folk music and folk crafts, obsessively gathering, documenting and arranging – although then losing or abandoning – his collection of folk music, carved wooden crafts, tarot cards, and an assortment of paper airplanes he had found on the streets of New York, paper planes he wanted because they had been made “made by white American children, made by black children, made by Puerto Rican children...”⁸ For Smith, folk music, like the paper airplanes, was touching and potent evidence of the ingenuity and the resourcefulness of ordinary people, of the aspiration to a momentary transcendence.

Smith was both a bohemian itinerant and a hoarder. He roamed the United States in the World War II years hunting for American folksong records, begging and borrowing his way through used record stores, the Salvation Army,

⁶ Sidney Janis, *They Taught Themselves*, 232-233.

⁷ Sidney Janis, *They Taught Themselves*, 76-77.

⁸ Jonas Mekas in *American Magus*, Harry Smith, *A Modern Alchemis*, ed. Paola Igliori (New York: Inanout Press, 1996), 83.

and the record collections of friends and strangers. Smith believed that American political life could be changed by a confrontation with the experiences of the impoverished, the homeless, and minorities, experiences that were documented in old-time music.⁹ In the merging of his mission and his person, the intensity of his democratic sensibilities and his artistic appetites, Smith was a Whitmanesque character, one whose sympathetic engagement with all that seemed foreign and outcast in art, music, and social culture drove his work.

Allen Ginsberg remembered Smith, late in his life, as “a high, broke genius”¹⁰ who haunted the corridors of the Chelsea Hotel, working on ‘Materials for the Study of Religion and Culture in the Lower East Side,’ which included recordings of “murderers babbling on amphetamines in the streets, jump rope rhymes, bawdy songs.”¹¹ No Creole accordionist or Cajun fiddler would have believed that Smith was part of the story of their old-time music’s journey from the front porches and dance halls of Southwest Louisiana to the concert halls of New York and the festival stages of Newport, Rhode Island and Washington, D.C. And Smith, who cherished mysteries and riddles, would have appreciated that no one believed it.

Smith started collecting as a teenager growing up in South Bellingham, Washington, where in 1940 he bought a Mississippi blues album in a record shop. “[It] had somehow gotten into this town by mistake,” Smith concluded, and, his

⁹ Harry Smith, *Anthology*, liner notes, 10.

¹⁰ Allen Ginsberg, “Allen Ginsberg on Harry Smith,” *Harry Smith Anthology*, liner notes, 55.

¹¹ Ginsberg, *Anthology* liner notes, 56.

curiosity piqued, he began to seek out folk and roots music albums, rummaging around in the Seattle Salvation Army and discovering Tennessee banjo music, jug bands, bluegrass, Southern gospel and Francis Child's collection of English and Scottish popular ballads. Smith struck gold when record company warehouses had to be cleared out to make way for military supplies, and stockpiles of traditional albums from the 1920s and 1930s were sold by the labels for almost nothing. Smith, whose common appearance was "that of a derelict," was used to paying nothing, or almost nothing.¹²

The 1920s and 1930s had been boom years for commercial recording as labels like Columbia, Victor and Okeh sought to compete with the new technology of radio by diversifying into the "old-time music" genres of "hillbilly" and blues. These were the genres that appealed to those working-class people who, living in rural areas without electricity, couldn't listen to radio. Label executives, knowing that consumers would be more likely to buy phonographs if they could play music indigenous to their region, sent out talent scouts into the South to ask phonograph retailers where to find marketable talent. Record company scouts would hold auditions,¹³ recording many musicians only once; only those musicians whose records sold well were invited to record again. Some of the records had original pressings of only 500. Some of those who bought records didn't even own the phonographs on which to play them, but bought the

¹² Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 9.

¹³ Neil V. Rosenberg, "Notes on Harry Smith's *Anthology*," *Anthology* liner notes, 35.

discs anyway in a curious reversal of the antiquarian's love of vinyl albums: rather than being objects that were interesting because they were component parts of an outdated technology, as albums are now, the albums then were objects that might someday be useful, if only the possessor could one day buy a phonograph. They were component parts of a future coming-into-being through visions of a better rice crop, a higher price for sweet potatoes. In the act of buying an album, people discovered "the thrill of mechanical reproduction. Something that survived orally for a very long time suddenly turned into something that Sears Roebuck sold," and the same songs that had been played on the neighbor's porch or at a Saturday night dance hall came into the living room, the sound emanating from a box.¹⁴

Labels distributed their folk and roots albums to nationwide retailers, contractually requiring a Columbia record retailer in New York City, for example, to take a certain number of blues and country albums.¹⁵ This meant that traditional music recordings were dispersed in shops and warehouses throughout the country. Then, when the federal government needed storage space for military materiel, the labels dumped their holdings at fire sale prices, selling records as wartime scrap for eighteen to twenty cents a lot.¹⁶ Smith, with his mastery of machinery and technology, made money during the war by mounting guns in the fuselages of airplanes, and with his pay, bought up all the records he

¹⁴ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 21.

¹⁵ Moses Asch, "The Birth and Growth of the Anthology of American Folk Music," *Anthology* liner notes, 33.

¹⁶ Asch, *Anthology* liner notes, 32.

could find. Many of the recordings he collected were already rare at the time he acquired them, as the recording companies had either lost or damaged the master recordings.¹⁷ He would advertise for old records in small rural newspapers in North Carolina,¹⁸ or borrow “for a week,” and keep forever, some rare album he spotted in an acquaintance’s collection.

Smith was meticulous and visionary in curating his collection, developing a definition of “American folk music” that excluded all of Lomax’s field recordings, all Library of Congress holdings, and anything “validated only by scholarship or carrying the must of the museum.” In collecting obscure commercial records, he was learning about music “to which people really had responded; records put on sale that at least somebody had thought were worth paying for,”¹⁹ songs that seemed “exotic” in relation to what people in the war years thought of as “the world culture of high class music.”²⁰ But he was hardly fascinated with the records as sheer music. He thought of them as documentary texts of the traumas and injustices of American culture, analyzing the lyrics to see how many times the words “food” and “railroad” were used during the Depression.²¹ Smith believed that his collection constituted an argument against the homogenizing culture of the war and the post-war years, an era in which “the lonely crowd” of Americans understood their past through the distorting medium

¹⁷ Asch, *Anthology* liner notes, 37.

¹⁸ Chuck Pirtle, *Anthology* liner notes, 52.

¹⁹ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 10-11.

²⁰ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 10.

²¹ Harry Smith in “A Rare Interview with Harry Smith,” John Cohen, in *Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine*, Volume 18/Number 1, April/May 1969, 40.

of television and the thin slogans of patriotic rhetoric, a time in which the image of a more diverse, radical and creative America already seemed to be a myth or a fable.

Smith had grown up hearing stories of that fabled America from his parents, and invented more fables on his own: his mother's family, he said, were Romantics who escaped from the industrialization of Sioux City, Iowa in the 1880s to found a school which was supported by the Czarina of Russia; his mother told him that she was Anastasia, the last of the Romanovs. His parents were devoted to philosophy and to the occult, and his father was a cowboy, or perhaps a fisherman, or a British Satanist – for Smith was a masterful storyteller, and so his true upbringing remains “a garden of confusions” and mysteries. His great-grandfather had been Ulysses Grant's aide-de-camp during the Civil War, he claimed, and had been involved in the re-founding of the Knights Templar, a group of medieval monks who were said to have possessed the Holy Grail.²²

Smith's own Holy Grail, his massive collection of early 20th-century jazz, blues, folk and gospel records, consisted of thousands of albums he collected while he was living in Berkeley, California and then in the Fillmore District of San Francisco in the late 1940s. He would bribe, chide and hustle people to turn over their vintage albums to him, promising that they would mean something much more in his collection. Smith was driven by political, aesthetic and sociological interests to recover these forgotten and ignored early folk albums, and to study

²² Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 7.

and understand them as historical texts that opened onto an earlier world. As a high school student immersed in his parents' "fantasies, their poverty and delusions of grandeur," Smith had become infatuated with the music and dancing of Washington's Lummi Indian tribe and had gotten permission from the tribe to record Lummi drumming and chanting rituals at their winter festival. This marked the beginning of a lifelong obsession with the unusual, the marginal, and the experimental, an obsession that Smith tried unsuccessfully to channel into the academic study of anthropology at the University of Washington. Restless and curious, Smith left Washington and set out for Berkeley, where he felt at home with the painters, poets and folk singers who hung out in North Beach coffeehouses talking art and communism.²³

For it was no coincidence that Smith's *Anthology* was issued during the anxious and fearful first years of the Cold War, at the height of Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist crusade. In 1952, in a middle-class America fueled by the bombastic patriotic rhetoric of dichotomies and absolutes, Smith "made his own country."²⁴ Smith's country was that "old, weird America" of fiddle music and acoustic guitar, railroad hobos and coal mine workers, farm hands and John Hardy, and the laborers and cowboys who had animated the American landscape before the fears and anxieties of the post-war era had chilled Americans' sympathetic identification with the other, the stranger, and the outcast. Without permission from Columbia, Paramount, Brunswick and Victor, the copyright

²³ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 8.

²⁴ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 5.

holders, Smith compiled an eighty-four song, three-album set (by his reasoning, the public good that would come from the anthology outweighed the labels' legal claims), and in 1947, approached Moses Asch, who had just founded the Folkways label, about issuing the anthology.²⁵

Asch's family had fled World War I Europe and settled in the Bronx, where they lived next door to Leon Trotsky. After the war, Asch studied electronics at a German university, and while on vacation in Paris, happened to come across the 1913 version of John Lomax's Cowboy Songs and Frontier Ballads in a bookstore on the Seine. Asch was deeply influenced by Teddy Roosevelt's introduction to Lomax's ballad collection, in which Roosevelt described folklore as the "real expression of a people's culture." This stayed on Asch's mind in the years after his return to New York, where he worked as a sound engineer and designed amplifiers, including one for Franklin Roosevelt's truck so that FDR could amplify his voice when addressing crowds. He got his start as a record producer when, working as a sound technician on Broadway in 1939, he heard Leadbelly sing and was shocked to realize that only Alan Lomax had ever bothered to record the blues guitarist. Asch quickly set up a recording studio in his office, and three hours later, had recordings of eight Leadbelly songs, which he pressed and sold under the label "Asch Records." Asch's father told him that he should use his sound engineering skills to preserve elements of culture and "show what life is like." Albert Einstein, who was a friend of Asch's father, likewise encouraged Asch

²⁵Asch, *Anthology* liner notes, 32.

in his goal to document the important events and of his time and to capture the music of immigrant and disenfranchised populations in America, to have a record company through which he could “describe the human race, the sound it makes, what it creates” at a time when entire populations and their culture were being destroyed in Hitler’s Germany.²⁶

Asch Records, a one-man label run by Asch and his secretary, Marian Distler, then recorded Woody Guthrie, who, at Asch’s urging, traveled to Massachusetts to visit the North End neighborhood of Boston where Sacco and Vanzetti had lived in the 1920s; Guthrie wrote an entire album of songs about the ill-fated radicals. In 1948, Asch and Distler founded Folkways Records. “The GIs were coming back from the war bringing songs,”²⁷ Asch said. His new Folkways label, which produced folk albums by Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Bob Dylan, went on to become one of the most successful independent labels in the world.

Intrigued by Smith’s collection of long-lost folk songs, Asch agreed to issue the *Anthology* along with the twenty-eight page book Smith had written about the songs. Smith’s goal in getting the *Anthology* released by a commercial label was grandiose: he felt that “social changes would result” if Americans were confronted with the music of the impoverished and marginalized people of Appalachia and the Deep South, black and white, that hearing their powerful voices would awaken something in the hearts and consciences of complacent

²⁶ Gene Bluestein, *Poplore* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 109-118.

²⁷ Asch, *Anthology* liner notes, 32.

northern urban Americans who, in the “scared and satisfied reactionary freeze of the postwar period,” were cut off from the hardships and injustices experienced generation after generation by people in the Mississippi Delta, rural Georgia, the mountains of Tennessee, and the prairies of Southwest Louisiana. The *Anthology*, Smith said, was “meant to distinguish those who responded from those who didn’t”;²⁸ it was a declaration “of a weird but clearly recognizable America within the America of the exercise of institutional majoritarian power” at a time when, in Norman Mailer’s words, the fear of “instant death by atomic war” coexisted with the fear of “a slow death by conformity with every instinct stifled.”²⁹ Smith wanted to reveal the older, admirable, complicated America. That older America had been characterized by the creativity and quirkiness of its folklore and the hardships and exiles of ordinary people, and Smith believed that “the folk,” long excluded from representation in national cultural life, had, finally, to have their say, not as the hardscrabble recipients of Depression-era aid and sympathy but as artists and as bearers of ideas developed through the course of long experience and hard-earned sentiment.

Deeply troubled by the way labels segregated the music of African-Americans on “race records,” and by manufacturers’ insistence on using terms like “Negro” to identify performers, Smith never, in his biography of any musician on the *Anthology*, identified a performer by race. “There isn’t that much

²⁸ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 10.

²⁹ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 25.

difference between one person and another,” Smith said.³⁰ He delighted in “sowing a confusion” about whether a musician was black or white, and looked back with satisfaction on the fact that “It took years before anybody discovered that Mississippi John Hurt wasn’t a hillbilly.”³¹ In Smith’s version of America, citizens were not categorizable by race, and this is part of the message he hoped the *Anthology* would make dramatic, relevant and affecting. And indeed, for the young urban folk music lovers of the fifties and sixties, Smith’s mixing of “hillbilly, race, and Cajun” performers exposed a “hidden republic” of music, an integration and mixing of black and white performances that had started out as separate events in a segregated series,³² recorded in an America that was “simultaneously a seamless web of connections and an anarchy of separations.”³³

Despite the gravity of this political and social agenda, Smith’s liner notes, decorated with drawings of down-home musical instruments like the banjo and autoharp, are comic in tone. In his telegraphic headline-style song descriptions, he summarized the plot of each song with a wry humor that illuminated the historical and social contexts of folk music: for a song recounting the sinking of the RMS Titanic, “When That Great Ship Went Down,” performed by William and Versey Smith in 1927 for Paramount, Smith wrote: “Manufacturers Proud Dream Destroyed at Shipwreck. Segregated Poor Die First.” Smith adds the remark “Wish we could the news this way now,” through song. The Carolina Tar

³⁰ Smith, *Anthology* liner notes, 22-24.

³¹ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 11.

³² Rosenberg, *Anthology* liner notes, 37.

³³ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 11.

Heels' 1932 "Got the Farm Land Blues," played on harmonica, banjo, and guitar, is summarized as "Discouraging Acts of God and Man Convince Farmer of Positive Benefits in Urban Life," and the story told in "Drunkards Special" is annotated by Smith, "Wife's Logic Fails to Explain Strange Bedfellow to Drunkard."

Woven in between songs by The Carter Family, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Mississippi John Hurt, are six songs from Southwest Louisiana divided across albums titled "Ballads," "Social Music" and "Songs": the 1928 recording of Cleoma Breaux and Joseph Falcon's "*Le vieux soûlard et sa femme*," [The Old Drunkard and His Wife], the couple's 1929 "*Ce'st si triste sans lui*," [It's Sad Without Him], Columbus Fruge's 1929 "*Saut Crapaud*," [Jump, Toad!] music by The Breaux Freres, and Blind Uncle Gaspard's "*La Danseuse*." Smith describes Cleoma Breaux Falcon and Joe Falcon as "Pioneer French Recording Artists" and explains that "the arcadian violin," with a melody rather foreign to the Anglo-American pattern, is very typical of Louisiana, though seldom heard in the states north of Louisiana. But this music belonged, Smith's inclusion of it insisted upon, in the category of national folk music, along with the music of the Cincinnati Jug Band and The Sacred Harp Singers. These were a more exotic, but also an entirely American folk. As Asch remarked in his liner notes, "These are the songs people listen to, the tunes and songs heard on these records, although they listen to radio, watch movies and television, [these songs] are listened to in the privacy of their homes, at gatherings, or for themselves, and are still the intimate part of

their lives rather than the commercial or classical music heard and accepted by us urbanites.”³⁴

Many of the musicians have names that make them seem as if they aren’t strangers but long-lost neighbors from an earlier American rural world – Mr. & Mrs. Stoneman, The Carter Family, Uncle Dave Macon, Rev. F.W. McGee, The Bently Boys – although most of them would have made unsettling neighbors and relatives, with their stories of train wrecks, gun fights, the tragedies of thwarted courtship, and visions of Judgment Day.

In the Cajun song “*Le vieux soûlard et sa femme*,” a woman wonders what the meaning of love could possibly be if her husband keeps leaving her to go off on a drinking spree. “*C’est Triste Sans Lui*” has heartwrenching lyrics, but Cleoma Breaux’s vocal delivery, along with the up-tempo accordion music, would convince any non-French-speaking listener that the story is a happy one:

*Le seul homme j’aimais
Il m’a quitté moi toute seule
Pour s’en aller avec une autre que moi.
Oh, moi j’prends ça si dur.
Moi j’prie jour et nuit pour il s’en revienne avec moi.*

*Mois j’vais pas quoi j’ai fait
Pour qu’il me quitte dans tous les chagrins.
Il m’a dit que j’avais perdu, ont jamais oublier.
J’ai tant prié jour et nuit pour lui s’en revienne avec moi.*

*Quand il a quitté la maison
Il m’a dit que j’avais perdue, ont jamais oublier
J’ai tans prié jour et nuit pour lui s’en revienne avec moi*

Quand il a quitte la maison

³⁴ Asch, “General Notes on this Series,” *Anthology* liner notes.

*Il m'a dit de l'observer.
 Pourtant moi j'avais fait, pouvais donc jamais l'oublier
 Il m'a dit d'attacher le crêpe noir sur la porte
 Parce que lui il aurait jamais revenu.³⁵*

[The only man I've ever loved
 Has left me all alone
 To go off with someone else
 Oh, I'm taking it hard
 I pray day and night he'll come back

I don't know what I did
 To make him leave me here in sorrow
 He told me I'd lost him and I shouldn't forget him
 Yet I pray day and night that he'll come back to me

When he left the house
 He told me to take a good look at him
 And I did, even though I could never forget him
 He told me hang black crepe on the door
 Because he was never coming back.]

“*Saute, Crapaud*” is a whimsical song with nonsensical lyrics, described by Smith as “possibly the most widely known of any arcadian dance tune”:

*Saute crapaud ta queue va bruler
 Prends courage, a'va repousser
 C'est Jacques Pétrin, pas rien su la tête
 En r'venant du Lac Charles en mangeant des bananes³⁶.*

[Jump, toad! You're going to burn your tail.
 Take heart – it'll grow back.
 There's Jacques Petrin, bareheaded,
 Coming back from Lake Charles, eating bananas.]

³⁵ Cleoma Breaux, “*C'est Triste Sans Lui*,” *Anthology*.

³⁶ Francois, *Yé Yaille*, 273.

Taken as a whole, the six Southwest Louisiana songs that appear on the *Anthology* represent the same cohabitation of hard times storyline and playful dance tune that characterized the music of the Cajun-Creole tradition.

The Smith collection had a life-changing effect on a cohort of Greenwich Village musicians who first heard the *Anthology* in the 1950s and early 1960s. John Cohen of the string band New Lost City Ramblers said the albums “gave us contact with musicians and cultures we wouldn’t have known existed...artists who became like mystical gods to us...”³⁷ Cohen, whose photography documented the lives of traditional musicians in Appalachia and the congregations of African-American churches, found in Smith a kindred spirit. The *Anthology* was “our bible,” said folk-blues guitarist Dave Von Ronk. “We knew every word of every song on it, including the ones we hated.”³⁸ Folklorist Ralph Rinzler was “profoundly influenced by the *Anthology* when it was first released,”³⁹ and called the *Anthology* the “motherlode” of the “strange, idiosyncratic, often exotic, sometimes...bizarre repertoire”⁴⁰ of old-time American music. The experience of listening to, and studying, Smith’s collection, was the central formative musical experience of many in Rinzler’s cohort: “As with Ishmael, whose whale ship was his Harvard and Yale, that first generation of the Folk Song Revival made the *Anthology* their Indiana and UCLA: an education and initiation into the study

³⁷ John Cohen, *Anthology* liner notes, 5.

³⁸ Van Ronk, *Anthology* liner notes, 5.

³⁹ Anthony Seeger and Amy Horowitz, “Introduction,” *Anthology* liner notes, 3.

⁴⁰ Cantwell, “Smith’s Memory Theater,” 365.

and performance of traditional musical forms.”⁴¹ The newly-canonical music seemed to be a message from an older America, one in which folk musicians “were cut off....by a national narrative that never included their kind...they appeared now like visitors from another world, like passengers on a ship that had drifted into the sea of the unwritten.”⁴²

What was true of the French-language Louisiana music on the *Anthology* was also true of the whole of the selections: Listeners found the music “emotionally shattering yet culturally incomprehensible,” for it wasn’t anything like the music that had been sold by the recording industry as “folk” – that is, not the Kingston Trio.⁴³ Although many of the musicians, young when they’d recorded in the 1920s and 1930s, were still living in the same small communities in the South, Cohen, Seeger, and Van Ronk concluded that “All those guys on that Harry Smith anthology are dead. *Had* to be,”⁴⁴ because the unamplified singing and playing and generations-old lyrics seemed to be coming from another century: “For this music sounded like it came right out of the ground. Songs like the clods of rich dark earth, fecund, timeless.” Banjo player Clarence Ashley, who at the time he recorded in 1929 was in his mid-thirties, sounded, on the *Anthology*, “seventeen, or one-hundred and seventeen, as if he’d died seventeen or one hundred and seventeen years before,” but he clearly “wasn’t as old as the

⁴¹ John Pankake, “The Brotherhood of the Anthology,” *Anthology*, liner notes, 26.

⁴² Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 6.

⁴³ John Pankake, *Anthology* liner notes, 27.

⁴⁴ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 6.

song.”⁴⁵

Smith’s *Anthology* became “the founding document” of the American folk revival,⁴⁶ its “musical Constitution,”⁴⁷ partly because by studying and imitating the playing of old-time musicians, contemporary folk musicians could revive traditional playing styles rather than simply combining traditional lyrics with a modern folk-pop style: “Hearing all these people for the very first time, it was as if a veil was lifted, and I was finally aware of what seemed to me to be the heart of American music. That’s what I was born to do, I thought. Play and sing like those guys.”⁴⁸ “Those guys” were conceived of as “premodern, unrestrainedly emotive, and noncommercial,” revered for their “Otherness” and admired for their ability to be “independent, proud in the face of hardship, straightforward, beholden to no special interests.”⁴⁹ In other words, they were, in the imaginations of the young college students who avidly sought out their albums, exactly what many in the folk revival generation – those who came of age between the end of World War II and the end of the Vietnam War⁵⁰ – wanted to be themselves.

The music of the *Anthology* became the music against which folk would forever after be measured. It documented the fact that the “old, weird America”

⁴⁵ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 17.

⁴⁶ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 5.

⁴⁷ Robert Cantwell, “Smith’s Memory Theater: The Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music,” *New England Review*, Vol. 13, No.3/4 (Spring-Summer 1991): 364.

⁴⁸ Pete Stampel, *Anthology* liner notes, 22-23.

⁴⁹ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 63-65.

⁵⁰ Jeff Todd Titon, “Authenticity and Authentication: Mike Seeger, the New Lost City Ramblers and the Old-Time Music Revival,” *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol 49, No, 2. (May-August, 2012): 228.

was the real America, its music sounding “like field recordings, from the Amazon, or Africa, but it’s here, in the United States. It’s not conspicuous, but it’s *there*.”⁵¹ And the *Anthology*, taken as a “Rosetta Stone, a treasure map of an ancient and now-hidden America,”⁵² became the canon in large part because key members of the folk movement, including Pete Seeger’s half-brother Mike Seeger, wanted to reincorporate that “weirdness” into American music by tracking down and bringing into the national spotlight the *Anthology* musicians themselves.

Seeger played in The New Lost City Ramblers, a traditional music revival band whose members had studied recordings of 1920s and 1930s string band music in order to recreate, or reinterpret, old-time music on period instruments for new young audiences. But when Seeger, bandmate John Cohen and their friend Ralph Rinzler realized that many of the *Anthology* musicians were likely still alive and well and residing in the same states listed in Smith’s liner notes, they set out to locate the originals, traveling South, pilgrims on the route. Because the recording technology of the 1920s and 1930s had been so rudimentary, the *Anthology* recordings sounded ancient, the voices tinny and far-off, and deciding to hunt for the musicians on backwoods farms and in mountain cabins must have seemed like proposing to bring alive characters from a beloved classic novel – like finding Ishmael, retired from his old occupation of working on a whaling ship.

⁵¹ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 6.

⁵² Luis Kemnitzer, “West Coast Record Collector,” *Anthology* liner notes, 30.

This was how the blind guitarist Arthel “Doc” Watson, Virginia banjo player Dock Boggs, Tennessee-born banjoist Clarence Ashley, and blues guitarist Mississippi John Hurt ended up playing in Greenwich Village coffeehouses, at national folk music festivals in Chicago and Newport, and at Carnegie Hall – Harry Smith, “a polymath and an autodidact, a dope fiend and an alcoholic, a legendary experimental filmmaker and a more legendary sponger... most notorious as a fabulist,”⁵³ had unscrolled the treasure map, and the folk revival generation, *Anthology* in hand, were converted from being documentary archivists who collected, documented and imitated traditional songs to being cultural interventionists determined to create new audiences for old-time music both in its home regions and nationally.

Rinzler, playing banjo with the Greenbriar Boys at the Union Grove Fiddlers Convention in North Carolina in 1960, was “stunned” to come across Clarence Ashley, and, returning to North Carolina four months later to record Ashley for Folkways, he developed a plan for helping old-time musicians earn a living playing traditional music. Rinzler considered it “a travesty” that “these people should be overlooked and forgotten, and that someone like Doc Watson should be playing in a VFW hall on an electric guitar, who had this potential.”⁵⁴ Ashley had introduced Rinzler to Watson, who as a young man had played bluegrass and blues on an acoustic guitar and had sung mountain ballads he’d

⁵³ Marcus, *Anthology* liner notes, 7.

⁵⁴ Richard Gagné, Ralph Rinzler, Folklorist: Professional Biography,” *Folklore Forum* 27:1 (Bloomington: Folklore and Ethnomusicology Department, Indiana University, 1996): 26.

learned as a boy, but had switched to playing commercial standards on an electric guitar when the sounds of amplified country music became popular. Rinzler convinced Watson that he could make a better living playing acoustic guitar and singing traditional music, and to demonstrate his point, invited Ashley and Watson to perform in concert at P.S. 41 in Greenwich Village at one of the first concerts staged by Friends of Old-Time Music (the non-profit organization The Society for Traditional Music, Inc.), a folk revival concert organization Rinzler founded with John Cohen and Izzy Young, who had opened the Folklore Center bookstore on MacDougal Street in 1957. Cohen's New Lost City Ramblers was dedicated to "fidelity of instrumental and vocal styles in the performance of folk music by non-folk,"⁵⁵ and The Friends of Old-Time Music was a response to a growing concern among Rinzler and his cohort that what was being promoted on the New York folk music scene was a commercial, contemporary popular folk sound, with bands like The Kingston Trio⁵⁶ defining the public understanding of "folk." He wanted to "take more meaningful music – or what I felt was the real stuff – and have it slowly replace the more sophisticated," meaning commercial, music.⁵⁷

The organization invited Dock Boggs, Mother Maybelle Carter, Mississippi John Hurt and other *Anthology* musicians to perform in New York to

⁵⁵ Joseph C. Hickerson, review of Friends of Old Time Music, *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 10, No. 3, Sep., 1966: 371.

⁵⁶ Alan Lomax, *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings: 1934-1937* (London: Routledge, 2005), 155.

⁵⁷ Alan Lomax, *Selected Writings*, 173.

appreciative crowds, and seeing Watson go, in a year and a half, from living on state aid for the blind to “supporting his family and wowing audiences all over the country” was convincing enough to make Rinzler believe almost anything was possible. Rinzler functioned as an Artist & Repertoire man to Watson, advising him on which songs to play and getting him gigs at colleges and in coffeehouses.⁵⁸ Working with traditional musicians prompted Rinzler to abandon his career as a revival musician and devote himself to working with the musicians themselves, including Bill Monroe, whose bluegrass music Rinzler had been playing with the Greenbriar Boys: “It didn't have any meaning for me to get on a stage and play imitation Bill Monroe when I was booking him. It seemed like a travesty...”⁵⁹ Rinzler wanted to be an intermediary between artists and audiences,⁶⁰ and, as a musician, just get out of the way.

If the folklore revivalists have been accused of being obsessed with notions of authenticity, Rinzler had the virtue of declaring himself, relative to the living, breathing *Anthology* singers, inauthentic. Unlike Harry Oster, and indeed Lomax, who themselves performed the folk songs they admired, Rinzler gave up playing music professionally in order to better serve old-time music. He was sensitive to the fact that he didn't really belong inside the venues where he did fieldwork. In his graduate school years, he had recorded in London taverns, and in his Camden Town Irish pub session liner notes, he explained how important it

⁵⁸ Gagné, “Ralph Rinzler,” 26.

⁵⁹ Gagné, “Ralph Rinzler,” 28.

⁶⁰ Gagné, “Ralph Rinzler,” 39.

was to him to reproduce on the album the aural atmosphere of a pub filled with great Irish musicians, to preserve “text within context” rather than record in a “sterile studio”: “When it [folk music] is removed from its habitual framework and [experienced or] exhibited apart from the whole, it loses that sense of urgency and direct communication which, along with style, improvisation and other characteristics, sets it happily apart from the world of art music.”⁶¹

Rinzler’s understanding of context, and his appreciation for a traditional music that was set apart from “the world of art music” were formed at the earliest age. Lomax’s Library of Congress recordings, first released when Rinzler was seven, put the hook in him for traditional music: “I had...firmly emblazoned on my mind the beauty of alternative esthetics...And the sense that folklore was connected to something that was thousands of years old.”⁶² Rinzler grew up talking music with his uncle, who had studied with folklorist George Lyman Kittredge, Francis Child’s successor at Harvard. As a music major, then a French major, at Swarthmore, Rinzler worked at the college’s radio station, which organized the Swarthmore Folk Festival, and developed a friendship with Roger Abrahams, who would become a well-known academic folklorist of African-American and Afro-Caribbean cultures.⁶³

Rinzler spent college summers in Greenwich Village watching Woody Guthrie play in Washington Square and teaching himself to play banjo. He

⁶¹ Gagné, “Ralph Rinzler,” 40.

⁶² Gagné, “Ralph Rinzler,” 21.

⁶³ William S. Walker, “A Living Exhibition: The Smithsonian, Folklife, and the Making of the Modern Museum” (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 2007): 125.

became friends with Mike and Peggy Seeger, whose father, ethnomusicologist Charles Seeger, had been an administrator for the WPA's Federal Music Project. As a field worker, Charles Seeger had insisted that the relevant question for any folk song collector was not "What is good music?" but rather "What is music good for?"⁶⁴ Like Charles Seeger, Rinzler wanted to know how a particular song functioned in the social environment, whether there was historical information and moral reckoning embedded in its narrative, whether it was a song to call out the dancers or comfort the mourning. From Mike Seeger, Rinzler learned both the philosophy and techniques of ethnomusicology fieldwork and the practical, technical skill of how to record old-time music.

Rinzler's friendship with the Seeger family was deeply important. After Swarthmore, Rinzler left for Paris in 1957 to pursue a graduate degree in French, but moved to England a year later to study with British folklorist A.L. Lloyd, a devoted collector and researcher of British occupational folk songs. Lloyd, whose parents and two sisters had died in a tuberculosis epidemic in 1925, had been shipped off as a boy to Australia by the British Legion, in which his father had served, to work as a migrant laborer in the Australian bush lands, along with a host of other orphaned children sponsored by the Salvation Army and other charities. Sent by the Labor Exchange to work as a farm worker, Lloyd listened closely to the work songs sung by the merino sheep shearers he worked among,

⁶⁴ Robert R. Grimes, "Form, Content and Value: Seeger and Criticism to 1940," in Understanding Charles Seeger, Pioneer in Musicology, ed. Bell Yung and Helen Rees (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 80.

and began to transcribe the tunes and lyrics, some for their “poetic vividness,” or “some special quality of melody,” ⁶⁵ and others because, given his own exile, he could feel as though he had directly experienced some part of the narrative:

Come all you weary travellers that's out of work just mind,
You take a trip to Bungaree and plenty there you'll find.
Have a trial with the cockies, you can take it straight from me,
I'm very sure you'll rue the day you first saw Bungaree.

Well how I come this weary way I mean to let you know,
eing out of employment I didn't know where to go.
So I went to the registry office and there I did agree
To take a job of clearing for a cocky in Bungaree.⁶⁶

Lloyd developed, as a lonesome young migrant worker, the motive that would inform his lifetime of folksong collecting, a motive that would inform his student Rinzler's work as well: “I was concerned mainly to take the songs into my own cultural baggage.”⁶⁷ Lloyd wanted to experience the songs not as a stranger in a strange land making an explorer's discovery, but as artful expressions that had familiar and universal resonance, not as if he were eavesdropping on the music of the “other.” He wanted the songs to feel congruent with some element of his own experience.

While Rinzler was studying with Lloyd in London, Peggy Seeger introduced Rinzler to Alan Lomax, who had expatriated himself in 1950 to escape

⁶⁵ Andrew Lloyd, Interview with Mark Gregory, published in *Overland Literary Journal*, 1970. <http://folkstream.com/reviews/lloyd/>.

⁶⁶ “Mainly Norfolk: English Folk and Other Good Music.” (<http://mainlynorfolk.info/lloyd/songs/cockiesofbungaree.html>)

⁶⁷ Lloyd interview with Gregory.

McCarthy's anti-Communist campaign.⁶⁸ Lomax had been named as an alleged Communist in the list compiled by Martin Dies's Committee Investigating Un-American Activities, and an FBI investigation concluded that Lomax was a "Bohemian" who was "single-mindedly devoted to folk music," that he was "known to associate with a Negro by the name of 'Lead Belly' who was released from a southern penitentiary," that he was "always singing peculiar songs of a Western or Negro type," and that on three or four nights a week, there was "a great amount of singing and music emanating from his apartment."⁶⁹ In the spring of 1950, Lomax's name appeared in an article identifying members of Communist front groups because he had been one of the sponsors of a dinner given by the Civil Rights Congress to honor lawyers who had defended people accused of being Communists.⁷⁰ A group of former FBI agents issued a pamphlet, "Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television," accusing Pete Seeger, Civil Rights activist and blues guitarist Josh White, and Alan Lomax, along with one hundred forty-eight other musicians and entertainers, of being communists. However, Lomax's declared purpose for moving to England was to develop a library of recordings of world folk music for Columbia Records, the eighteen-volume Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music;⁷¹ he didn't return to the United States for eight years.

⁶⁸ Gagné, "Ralph Rinzler," 22-24.

⁶⁹ John Szwed, Alan Lomax, The Man Who Recorded the World (New York: Viking, 2010): 203-204.

⁷⁰ Szwed, Alan Lomax, 249.

⁷¹ Szwed, Alan Lomax, 251.

Suspensions about Lomax's motives in championing old-time music were especially outrageous because Lomax saw folk music as a democratic cultural form that constituted its own argument against totalitarianism of any stripe. The fact that Louisiana "speaks and sings with a heavy French accent" was by itself a piece of evidence for the argument that folklore was a strong current in American life that ran counter to any authoritarian, Fascist tendency, Lomax said,⁷² and he saw the post-World War II national interest in folklore as a sign that Americans, psychologically cut off from the heritage of the Western European tradition through the trauma of war, were beginning to appreciate and value their own "national cultural resources." "In folklore, you get a kind of rudimentary humanistic approach to life, a deep sense of values and something that deserves to have its place in the sun,"⁷³ he said.

Folk music had certainly found a place in the sun during Lomax's years abroad, and he was troubled, when he returned to New York, to see the extent to which folk music had become a commodity, with "city singers polishing their country personae" to present songs full of "home-spun imagery" on string instruments ⁷⁴ at expensive festivals, more commerce than art, characterized by commercial production values that made it unlikely that any listener would experience a true engagement with the music of regional America. So when Boston entrepreneur George Wein, creator of the Newport Jazz Festival, decided

⁷² Lomax, Selected Writings, 90.

⁷³ Lomax, Selected Writings, 114-116.

⁷⁴ Szwed, Alan Lomax, 315-316.

to add a folk festival in 1959, Lomax was initially critical of the project, voicing his concerns at the Newport Folk Foundation's 1959 symposium on American Folk Music that the festival was a "publicity stunt" that presented folk music as "merely a type of entertainment,"⁷⁵ enriching promoters and commercializers and, in the process, "imposing a new sound" on regional cultures, ultimately destroying whatever was ostensibly being promoted. Lomax protested that the festival's board of directors were not folklorists or musicians, and that no money made from the folk revival was being directed back to the grassroots from whence it came.⁷⁶ But in the years ahead, he came to see the festival as an opportunity to steer the folk movement back to the roots of traditional music.

In 1964, newly appointed, along with Pete Seeger, to the board of the Newport Folk Festival, Lomax wrote a letter to the members of the board urging them to focus less on showcasing young urban "smooth entertainers" who had learned to perform folk music, and more on finding those lonely performers, ignored by their own people, who were abandoning their traditional music in order to make a living, unappreciated by local audiences who had begun tuning in to hear pop music on commercial radio.⁷⁷ Previous Newport performers had included Joan Baez, daughter of an MIT professor and veteran of the Cambridge folk music scene, the former rock and roll-loving Bob Dylan, who worked the music clubs in Greenwich Village, and Tom Paxton, another Village habitué, who

⁷⁵ Brauner, "The Newport Folk Festival," 61.

⁷⁶ Brauner, "The Newport Folk Festival," 59.

⁷⁷ Szwed, Alan Lomax, 348-349.

had a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in theater. These weren't the "folk" Lomax had in mind when he thought about "tribal" and "regional" music, and he argued that it was high time the Newport organizers made a strenuous effort to find forgotten and struggling musicians whose work truly needed saving.

In "An Appeal for Cultural Equity," Lomax summarized the philosophy and strategies that had always driven his fieldwork and that he hoped would be influential on other music folklorists. He accused the music industry of putting local musicians out of work, silencing folk song and tribal ritual and imposing "a few standardized, mass-produced and cheapened cultures everywhere," replacing the "cultural constellations" of the American landscape with the "phony" uniformity sold by a centralized music industry whose only goal was to promote industry "stars" over blaring top-40 radio broadcasts. In losing regional music, the national culture lost not only "a way of viewing, thinking, and feeling" but a means of adaptation to a regional habitat, since music taught people how to live within a particular landscape and social system. In allowing a musical language to disappear, we "throw away a system of interaction," Lomax said, and he came to see the necessary equality of musical genres – of different systems of interaction—as a logical extension of the commitment to "the principles of political, social and economic justice" to which liberal, progressive society must be dedicated.

The goal of genre equality could be defeated by economic superiority as modern technological and commercial systems "blanketed the world" with

standardized music and literature, like so many manufactured goods, Lomax warned, and the solution was to bring a counterbalancing outside interest – he considered himself to be that counterbalancing interest – to support local music communities. Local languages and local music deserved their fair share of radio airtime. If “country folk” heard their own music on the radio, they would develop a determination to preserve that music. Lomax held up the example of black orchestral music in New Orleans, which “flowered” because black musicians found steady work in New Orleans clubs, and their ability to make a living as professional musicians then gave them the leisure time to record and export their music. “Nations do not generate music,” Lomax argued. “They can only consume it. Indeed our new system of national consumption of music via national communications systems is depriving the musical creator of the thing he needs most next to money – a local, tribal or regional audience that he can sing directly for.”⁷⁸

Lomax urged the board to hire Rinzler to do fieldwork in the South to find the older traditional musicians whose music the young middle-class folk movement was imitating and commercializing. Then, money would be directed to those communities in which Newport-sponsored local festivals might help sustain and revitalize traditional cultures. Music would be broadcast from the festivals over local radio, allowing traditional music to successfully compete with

⁷⁸ Alan Lomax, “An Appeal for Cultural Equity,” 1972, reprinted in 1985 Festival of American Folklife Program Guide, Smithsonian Institution.
http://www.culturalequity.org/ace/ce_ace_appeal.php.

national pop music.⁷⁹ Lomax insisted that he would only be involved if the foundation agreed to invest in the musicians themselves and in their communities, and to showcase urban, commercial folk singers only to the extent that it would benefit musicians who had learned their folk songs in “folk communities.”⁸⁰

Rinzler collaborated with Lomax and with Mike Seeger, also on the board, to develop the bulk of his fieldwork strategy. As Rinzler recalled, Lomax went back over his 1930s trips: “He sat down with me in his living room and rambled over the continent in his mind and said, ‘Back in the ‘30s I went here and I went there and the best stuff was in this town’ and he just came up with an incredible number of things. ‘Go see this person here and that person there.’ I started with what Alan knew and went on to what I knew, and called all kinds of people on the phone and laid out a map, a route, and went out and found it.”⁸¹

Lomax and Seeger recommended that Rinzler visit the Maritime Provinces in Canada, French Québec, the “foreign minority neighborhoods” of Detroit, Chicago and Pittsburgh, backwoods Alabama, and Cajun Louisiana. Traveling across the American South, Rinzler had a chance to unlock some of the mysteries of the *Anthology*, meeting Kentucky fiddlers, Sacred Harp Singers in northern Alabama, and Cajun-Creole musicians in Southwest Louisiana, whose race, unstated by Smith in his liner notes, was unknown to the albums’ listeners. In

⁷⁹ Brauner, “The Newport Folk Festival,” 180a.

⁸⁰ William S. Walker, *The Smithsonian and the Transformation of the Universal Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 124.

⁸¹ Brauner, “The Newport Folk Festival,” 183.

the Civil Rights years of Southwest Louisiana, words that denoted ethnicity and race were in any case confounding to outsiders: Creole guitarist Clarence Garlow, known as a zydeco and r&b musician during his recording career, recalled how in his childhood near Lake Charles, because he used to play his father's old fiddle, "I was a black Cajun."⁸² Clifton Chenier was affectionately referred to as "the blackest [Cajun],"⁸³ and New Orleans recording studio owner Cosimo Matassa noted that when young Cajun and Creole musicians sang in English, it was impossible to know whether the singer was black or white, since they both sounded the same.⁸⁴

When Rinzler, who was of Russian-Jewish descent, died in July, 1994, The *New York Times* obituary read: "Mr. Rinzler, who was black, was widely credited with nudging the Smithsonian toward expanding its activities beyond a focus on white American culture."⁸⁵

"Mr. Rinzler, who was black": Harry Smith would have loved that.

⁸² Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 105.

⁸³ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 113.

⁸⁴ Brauner, "The Newport Folk Festival," 179.

⁸⁵ *The New York Times*, "Ralph Rinzler, 59, Smithsonian Official and Folk-Life Expert," July 8, 1994.

5.

Newport Waltz

A processional throng of...fortunate folk, fortunate above all in their untouched good faith....Those good people all could make discoveries...as they fondly fancied. They danced and they drove and they rode, they dined and wined.... Do I grossly exaggerate to say that this company, candidly, quite excitedly self-conscious...formed...a collection...of the socially orthodox: a handful of mild, oh delightfully mild, cosmopolites.¹

Henry James, The American Scene

Ralph Rinzler's work for The Newport Folk Festival was evidence both of how deeply committed Rinzler, like Lomax and Smith before him, was to the ideals of racial egalitarianism and cultural equity, and of how difficult it was to neatly package and promote these cultural politics. The folk revival movement itself was predicated on the existence of an elite urban privileged class who could, Rinzler said, idealize "the peasantry" and their roots in "the romance of the pastoral" only because they were separated from "the folk" by "education, social position, and economic resources."² Rinzler was interested in both the

¹ Henry James, "The Sense of Newport," in The American Scene (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907), 212-214.

² Ralph Rinzler quoted in "From the 30s to the 60s: The folk music revival in the United States," Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (August, 1996): 501.

instrumental composition of traditional bands, with their old-fashioned folk banjos and fiddles, and in the lyrical content of the songs, which told the stories of the grievances and triumphs of the socially marginalized, and he thought there was an important, and progressive, message in the music about the value of old-fashioned community life.

But Rinzler had to contend with the same fact that Lomax had grappled with, which was that, in spite of Lomax's deeply felt conviction that musicians could be "provided with a socio-political rationale for their musical activity,"³ traditional old-time musicians were nothing like their revival counterparts. They didn't have, or need, or want to be given, a socio-political rationale for their performance. They were musicians by avocation or by profession, community entertainers. The first American folk music festivals, including North Carolina's Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in 1928 and the National Folk Festival held in St. Louis in 1934, had been completely non-political events organized in a tourist and recreational framework,⁴ and Rinzler became frustrated at how difficult it was to achieve his goal of popularizing traditional music, making it marketable in the service of progressive political ideals, and still protecting old-time musicians from the innovations and pressures of the contemporary urban music scene –in fact persuading certain old-time musicians that they shouldn't find those innovations or opportunities appealing.

The fieldwork that Rinzler did to locate those musicians in the first place

³ Alan Lomax quoted in "From the 30s to the 60s," Eyerman and Barretta, 513.

⁴ Eyerman and Barretta, "From the 30s to the 60s," 538.

brought him back to the same communities, and some of the same houses, that Lomax and Oster had visited. Harry Oster provided Rinzler with information about the communities in which he'd done research and introduced him to local singers and musicians. Ultimately, Rinzler's field work in Louisiana, across several Southern states and into French-speaking Canada, transformed the nature of the Newport Folk Festival, as well as folklorists' assumptions about the possibilities of fieldwork, Rinzler explained: "People had sort of coasted on the assumption that the Library of Congress had really covered the field in the '30s and '40s and that there really wasn't that much left – it was slim pickings. Individuals like Mike Seeger had all looked into different regional traditions wherever they happened to be, or in areas that they happened to be interested in. They'd come back with a wealth of material, just really good musicians and good instrumentalists. And it was evident that if you looked, you could find materials anywhere."⁵

In April 1964, Rinzler traveled to Diamond in Plaquemines Parish on the banks of the Mississippi, where he recorded Creole singer Alma Barthelemy, whose voice had been recorded by Oster in 1957, singing "*En me promenant*" [While Out Walking] and "*Beau Cavalier*," [Handsome Cavalier] songs that were characteristic of the a capella "home music" wives and mothers performed on their front porches and at family gatherings.⁶ Also in Barthelemy's repertoire

⁵ Ralph Rinzler, quoted in Brauner, "The Newport Folk Festival," 182.

⁶ Lisa Richardson, "Women and Home Music in South Louisiana," in *La Musique de la Maison*, Origin Jazz Library, 2008, compact disc, liner notes, p. 4.

were the songs “*Par derrière chez mon père*” [Out In Back of my Father’s House], a song sung by Cajuns to commemorate their ancestors’ experience of exile from French Canada, along with “*C’est la Sainte Margarite*,” a ballad commemorating the martyred Christian Saint Margaret, persecuted for her religious faith by her pagan father, and “*Un jour dedans Paris*” [A Day in Paris] and “*Il y a-t-une Allemande*,” [There is a German Lady]. Barthelemy was a Creole singer, and the songs, rooted in the Cajun historical experience, provided explicit evidence of the shared Cajun-Creole musical tradition.

Many in the Barthelemy extended family were rice farmers or fishermen, and many of the songs her father used to sing came from a songbook of the music of Pierre-Jean de Béranger, an early nineteenth-century French songwriter who composed poetic songs about French history, the monarchy and the Catholic church, including songs critical of Napoleon and supportive of the revolutionary and democratic movements of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century France.⁷ That was exactly what Rinzler was looking for: songs from the French continental tradition sung by Cajun and Creole singers in their homes, not because those songs were peculiar artifacts of an incomprehensible past, but because even though they had their origin in the generational or cultural past, they still did a kind of work – storytelling, entertaining – that a contemporary song could not do as precisely or beautifully, like the grandfather clock whose

⁷ Arthur Arnould, *Béranger, Ses Amis, Ses Ennemies et Ses Critiques*: Volume 1 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2009), 148.

weights and pendulum lyre make the passage of time visible, and through whose grinding gears and bells the arrival of a new hour is dramatized. Modern-day society did not preclude folk expression any more so than it precluded the heirloom watch or the mortar and pestle; folk expressions about needles in haystacks have endured in contemporary spoken English.

Rinzler and Barthelemy discussed the origins and narratives of some of the twenty-nine songs Barthelemy performed, with Rinzler keen on identifying songs that had been least altered over time or were always sung the same way by everyone in the community and by people of different generations. “*Toujours la meme chose*,” she said [“Always the same thing”]. This reveals Rinzler’s definition of the folk tradition as constituted by the ritual performance of a piece of ancestral or community music. Indeed, throughout his fieldwork in Southwest Louisiana, Rinzler was keen on identifying those songs that performers had learned from their parents and grandparents rather than from public performances, radio or records. Forty years after radio had come to some Southwest Louisiana homes, Rinzler saw these third-generation radio audiences as the bearers of the music traditions of their grandparents, and this view seemed to be borne out whenever informants said that they had learned a certain song from grandparents or elderly neighbors.⁸ But the oral tradition is both conservative and innovative, certain melodies and lyrics preserved while others

⁸ Edium Nacquín, for example, told Rinzler she had learned one song from her grandmother, whose brother had been a soldier in the Confederate Army, and who lived to the age of 99, and another from Ulyses Picrottie, an eighty-year-old resident of Mamou.

are revised and adapted, not only from generation to generation but from one singer to the next. The folk tradition is also constituted by the creative acting upon of ancestral or community music by an individual performer who embellishes and particularizes the song, or who borrows a storyline from one song to create another entirely different song. Columbus Fruge's "*Valse de Bayou Teche*" has an entirely different melody as Nathan Abshire's "*Valse de Bayou Teche*," while in both Fruge's song and Abshire's song, a man laments that his lover's family has interfered in their courtship:

*Si t'au-rais vo-lu m'écouter, chère,
Toi tu s'rais au Bayou Teche avec ton nèg' chérie!
T'as é-couté ton pa-pa et ta ma-man, chère
Les em-bar-ras de ton papa et ta maman, chère. (Frugé)*

[If only you'd listened to me, darling
You'd be in Bayou Teche with your sweetheart, my dear
But you listened to your mother and father, dear
And they are keeping us apart, dear]

*J'ai roulé, j'ai prié, pour t'a-voir, chère;
Pour t'a-voir a-vec moi dans ma chambre.
Mon beau frère, mon beau frère, viens donc m'voir, cher
Viens donc m'voir à-près mourir au Bayou Teche (Abshire)⁹*

[I wandered, I prayed to see you, my darling
To have you here in my room.
Dear brother-in-law come to Bayou Teche and see
Come and see how it's killing me]

Thus there are themes and characters, lyrical fragments and melodic lines that

⁹ Francois, *Yé Yaille*, 39-42.

form a core vocabulary in the music, but “*Toujours la meme chose*” has to be understood as Barthelemy’s conclusion, which oughtn’t to have become Rinzler’s. Barthelemey was a singer of the “home music” songs sung only by women in their own homes¹⁰; she likely wouldn’t have traveled far beyond her community and heard other versions of the songs. What Rinzler was after was those songs in the folk tradition that had been sung the same way across generations and communities, figuring that songs that were important enough to have been sung often were transmitted nearly whole cloth, that their form had been fixed. But a song that was important enough to have been performed and adapted and interpreted over time by many people in neighboring communities into their own versions was evidence that the song had been well used over time, that each community had made it its own, that each singer had made it their own. Adaptations and revisions happen naturally and improvisationally. Only the publishing of sheet music and the recording and broadcast of a single version of a song arrest this process. The recorded version of a song takes on an authority that makes the individual performer who has heard that same version repeatedly broadcast or played on a jukebox less likely to alter the musical or lyrical phrasing. This happens across all folk genres, just as it did with the blues: “Before the jukebox, and way before blues radio, the way a person played a particular song could reveal the town or plantation where they’d learned it.....Recordings...etched a permanence to lyrics that had previously been

¹⁰ Lisa Richardson, “Women and Home Music,” 4.

mutable.”¹¹

As is clear from Rinzler’s transcriptions of the lyrics of “*Cadet Rousell*,” as sung by Barthelemy – who says she knew it from childhood –this is not the same song, despite the title, as the “*Cadet Rousell*” that appears on Harry Oster’s *Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians*, sung by Mamou carpenter Isom J. Fontenot. In Fontenot’s song, a young man outdoes even the king because he has finer possessions than the king has:

*C’est un bon jeune homme
C’est un vaillant beau
Il a des chiens que la roi n’a pas si bons....
Il a un habit que la roi n’a pas de si bel*

[Cadet Rousell] is a good young man
He’s a a brave and handsome lad
The dogs he has are even better than the king’s
And he has an outfit more beautiful than the king’s.]

Barthelemey’s version, which she told Rinzler her family sang on Christmas, is comical and bawdy:

*Oh Cadet Rousel avait trois souliers
Deux qu’il met dans les deux pieds
Et le troisième n’a pas de semelle
C’est pour lui chausser sa belle*

*Cadet Roussel avait trois bon chiens
Qui n’y voient goutte et qui japons bien
Oh quand tu les appelles ça fout le camp*

¹¹ Robert Gordon, Can’t Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters (New York: Back Bay Books, 2003), 62.

*Mais que dites-vous de Cadet Roussel?*¹²

[Cadet Roussel had three shoes
Two that he put on his two feet
And the third didn't have a sole
But it fit his girlfriend well

Cadet Roussel had three good dogs
Who were blind and loudly barked
Oh when you called them to come they always ran away
What do you think about Cadet Roussel?]

Cajun-Creole music was traditional folk music in the sense that musicians were self-taught, having learned by imitating other musicians in the family or immediate community, and in the sense that the music was valued for its social, not its commercial, attributes. But “remaking” the songs was a rite of passage for accomplished musicians, who made the changes that best suited the purposes of their immediate communities. It isn’t sufficient to define Louisiana French folk music the way Irish folk music, for example, has been defined, as “a body of tunes held in common by members of a national group,”¹³ since in the case of Cajun-Creole music, it’s the fact that the instrumentation and language are common to all the songs, and that the French language was uncommon in the larger culture, that is more consequential than the fact that there is a “body of tunes.”

Why does it matter that Rinzler was looking for songs that had been transmitted whole cloth, in which melodies and storylines had been preserved,

¹² Alma Barthelemy, lyrics transcribed by Ralph Rinzler. Library of Congress, Louisiana Collections in the Archive of Folk Culture, Ralph Rinzler Louisiana Recordings, AFC1972/026.

¹³ Sally K. Sommers Smith, “Irish Traditional Music in a Modern World,” *New Hibernia Review* 5.2 (2001): 111.

pieces that were passed as finished and unchanging artifacts from parent to child and neighbor to neighbor, when in fact, no such songs truly existed? It matters because the real nature of folk music transmission in Southwest Louisiana – participatory, collective, improvisational – was a more compelling model of democracy and racial and cultural politics than any other, and certainly a more compelling model than the presentation of folk music as a relic from the lives of a traditional population that had simply memorized received forms, and taught their children to do the same. The dynamic social engagement that created Cajun-Creole music, with white and black musicians working together from common texts, was more novel and radical to most Americans than any of the protest music Columbia Records proudly advertised as the soundtrack of “all the revolutionaries.”¹⁴

The Southwest Louisiana promoters of Cajun-Creole music were hardly motivated by a progressive political sensibility. Rather, the French language, and French Louisiana cultural traditions, were what Paul Tate championed in a speech at the Opelousas Yambilee Performance in October 1964 when he told an audience that included Rinzler and Mike Seeger that Southwest Louisianans should be proud that the Newport Folk Foundation had taken an interest in their “French music.”¹⁵ Tate sometimes represented local recording artists (some of whom, unable to read English, had relied on handshakes) in their contracts with

¹⁴ Eyerman and Barretta, “From the 30s to the 60s,” 534.

¹⁵ Paul Tate, 10/17/64. The Archives of Cajun and Creole Folklore, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, CRI1.004. Audio recording.

labels and studios,¹⁶ so was a trustworthy spokesman among musicians, and his allegiance was to the language and the community. Revon Reed had begun broadcasting an old-time French-language music program over KEUN from Fred's Lounge in 1962. Now Tate and Reed would have a chance to shape the Newport Folk Foundation's understanding of Cajun-Creole music and its rightful place in the folk revival.

Reed introduced Rinzler to local musicians, bringing in Nathan Abshire and Edward and Elby "Bee" DesHotels, whose father was a violinist, accordionist and storyteller of French folk tales,¹⁷ setting up auditions for his friends Cyprien and Adam Landreneau and their neighbor Edius Naquin, whose repertoire consisted exclusively of folk songs that had originated in Normandy, Brittany and Gascony,¹⁸ and arranging recording sessions, including one in which Reed played triangle accompanying the Landreneaus and Dewey Balfa. Tate traveled throughout Southwest Louisiana with Rinzler and Seeger, introducing them to local musicians and arranging their performances at local festivals, including the Ville Platte Cotton Festival, which had been established in 1953 by World War II veterans, and the Crowley Rice Festival.

Tate was a talented organizer with a gift for seeing how local cultural issues connected to the larger political and social picture. In 1959, Tate, by then a Democratic state senator and the president of the United Democrats of

¹⁶ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 240.

¹⁷ Reed, *Lâche Pas*, 77.

¹⁸ Reed, *Lâche Pas*, 80.

Louisiana, had arranged the appearance of Senator John F. Kennedy at the 1959 Crowley Rice Festival. Kennedy was looking to generate Southern support leading up to his announcement of his presidential candidacy. The alliance between Massachusetts and Louisiana Democrats had been formed during the 1956 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, when Louisiana's delegates, including Crowley native Judge Edmund M. Reggie, was seated across the aisle from the Massachusetts delegates throughout the week-long convention. Reggie, who had persuaded his fellow Louisiana delegates to support Kennedy as Adlai Stevenson's vice presidential candidate,¹⁹ hosted JFK's visit to Crowley, where he met with Democratic State Senator Edwin Edwards, who made much of his Cajun heritage in his many campaigns for public office, from Crowley City Council to the governorship. The French-speaking Catholic crowd of 135,000 at the International Rice Festival was completely won over when the Catholic Senator's French-speaking wife, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, addressed them in French: "So she gets up there and, in French, she recounts a story about how when she was a little girl, her father had told her that Louisiana was way down south, but it ... was a little part of France, and she had been in love with it ever since. Well, what do you think? I mean, the house comes down."²⁰ Democratic political organizer Philip Desmarais recalled in a 1966 interview that the enthusiastic crowds that came out to see the Kennedys prompted Louisiana Supreme Court

¹⁹ Philip H. Des Marais, interviewed by Charles T. Morrissey, March 9, 1966, Washington, D.C., John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, JFK #1, 3/9/1966.

²⁰ *Times-Picayune*, November 18, 1953.

Judge John Judge Fournet to remark to him, “My God; Huey [Huey P. Long] never got anything like this.”²¹

Kennedy’s pre-campaign stops in Louisiana were savvy political theater, as Catholics, who comprised one third of the state’s population, were disproportionately represented in the ranks of active voters. Kennedy’s Louisiana supporters also organized stops at the Opelousas Yambilee Festival – another festival that was organized in the immediate post-war period (1946), and another one of the festivals Rinzler and Seeger attended – and in Lake Charles, then in New Orleans, where Kennedy met with NAACP leader Alexander Pierre Tureaud. In the 1956 election, seventy-five percent of black Louisianans had voted for Eisenhower, but Kennedy appealed so strongly to Catholic, Creole and African-American voters in Louisiana that in the 1960 election, seventy percent voted for Kennedy. Judge Reggie, who had been a longtime friend of Joseph Kennedy, Sr.,²² managed Kennedy’s campaign in Louisiana in 1960, and maintained close bonds with the Kennedy family for decades (his daughter, Victoria, married Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts); Philip Desmarais was appointed by Kennedy to serve as Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1961. The festivals that were such important stops for Kennedy were also key stops for Rinzler and Seeger.

Rinzler and Seeger compiled forty-eight reels of tape of Southwest Louisiana music during their trips in 1964, 1965 and 1966, recording musicians

²¹ Philip H. Desmarais, Oral History transcript, 31.

²² Philip H. Desmarais, Oral History transcript, 28-31.

in their homes, at Fred's Lounge, where Revon Reed's KEUN broadcasts of old-time music featured news and advertisements in French, at a jam session in Mamou's Hotel Cazan, and at festivals, where the Newport Folk Foundation offered prize money to the winners of traditional music competitions. The Foundation sponsored contests at the Louisiana Folk Festival in Ville Platte, the Yambilee Festival in Opelousas (where Revon Reed gave out the prizes), the Dairy Festival in Abbeville, and the Cotton Festival in Ville Platte, where Mrs. Charlton Guillory sang "*La Marseillaise*" in the singing contest.

The tunes Rinzler recorded during the Louisiana sessions constitute a perfect set list from the Cajun-Creole repertoire, from adaptations of Old World songs composed in seventeenth and eighteenth century France ("*Auprès de ma Blonde*," "*Chanson de Bonaparte*," "*La fille du roi*"), to songs that emerged from the New World experiences of white and black settlers in the Acadian parishes ("*J'ai Passe Devant Ta Porte*," "*Jolie Blonde*," "*Allons à Lafayette*," "*Allons danser, Colinda*," "*J'étais au Bal Hier Soir*"). Rinzler found one of the old-time recording artists still performing (Preston Manuel, who had recorded in 1937),²³ while the younger generation was experimenting with "a little electric music."

Rinzler's work in Southwest Louisiana differed significantly from his projects in other parts of the South, where he saw the Newport Folk Foundation in a revivalist role, persuading blues and bluegrass musicians to perform again and creating local audiences for roots music. In Cajun-Creole country, however,

²³ Rinzler, UL archives, field notes to Reel 2B 10/65/3, 4.

old-time musicians were still performing every weekend at dance halls throughout Southwest Louisiana. In 1960, there were a dozen radio stations that played French-language music and a number of local record labels recorded traditional music, including the *La Louisiane* label, founded in Lafayette in 1959.²⁴ What Rinzler wanted for Southwest Louisiana was a national audience that would allow old-time musicians' work to continue to be vitally important at a time when the younger generation was less interested in apprenticing themselves to traditional musicians than they were in experimenting with the sounds of New Orleans and Memphis rhythm and blues. Younger musicians were putting aside the fiddle and accordion in favor of using new instrumentation, including piano, saxophone, electric guitar and full percussion kits to play swamp pop music.

Swamp pop had developed in the nightclubs of Lafayette, Ville Platte, Opelousas and Lawtell where both young Cajun and Creole musicians performed, and these musicians collaborated in recording studios, including Eddie Schuler's studio, and J.D. Miller's Crowley studio, whose session band included both black and white musicians. The young generation reworked songs from the traditional canon and popularized them with younger listeners, although "*Colinda*," "*Jolie Blonde*," and "*Hip et Taïaut*" were mostly in English ("an attempt to appeal to a wider, non-francophone audience").²⁵ The "golden age of swamp pop" was short-lived –1958 to 1963– and largely generational, with young musicians looking to New Orleans musician Fats Domino's 1956 "Blueberry Hill" as a model for how to

²⁴ Brauner, "Newport Folk Festival," 287.

²⁵ Bernard, *Swamp Pop*, 85.

combine Creole-French vocal phrasings with the rhythms of the new rock.²⁶

When old-time musicians concluded that there wasn't any longer a big demand for their music, they were responding to the popularity of rhythm and blues and rock with teenagers, ("I had to put my accordion on the armoire because they all wanted rock and roll," Creole musician Bois Sec Ardoin said),²⁷ not to the fact that their own generation had abandoned old-time music ("People want to hear the old style, they don't like the new music too much," Cajun performer Aldus Roger insisted.)²⁸

The most important facts about swamp pop in the context of the discussion of traditional French-language music in Louisiana is that some of the local labels that had been recording old-time music began investing instead in swamp pop. Swamp pop provides yet another example of the cooperation, collaboration and mutual respect that prevailed among Creole and Cajun musicians in Louisiana post-war culture: "The musical integration in swamp-pop was facilitated by a racial climate that was more relaxed in Southwest Louisiana than in much of the South," swamp pop guitarist Earl King remembered. "I used to hear a few bands had racial problems...I think it was in certain areas of the South, but South Louisiana, no. They're just fine, these people are just so interwoven into one another." Swamp pop performer Ron Bernard had similar memories: "We never thought of it as being a black-white thing," Bernard

²⁶ Bernard, *Swamp Pop*, 180.

²⁷ Tisserand, *Kingdom of Zydeco*, 83.

²⁸ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 196.

explained. “ There was just good music that everybody played.”²⁹

Alan Lomax made a similar observation about race relations after visiting a horse racing track on a summer day: “The thing that surprises most people about this scene is the fact that black people and white people meet on these horse race tracks and have fun and there's no problems and everybody hollers and everybody jumps up and down and they call each other names. I'm a Southerner and I never saw anything like that in my whole life until I went to Carencro on weekends. This is the one place where the whole race stuff just never did work,” Lomax said.³⁰

Rinzler had a strong liberal commitment to progress in the Civil Rights movement, and his interest in race relations in Southwest Louisiana is reflected in the kinds of questions he asks in his fieldwork interviews. One of the first questions he poses to Joe Falcon is whether he remembered many black musicians playing music during his childhood, and after Falcon explains that Creole musicians played “the same thing we was playing,” with the same kind of rhythm, Rinzler pursues the same line of questioning with Cajun fiddler Leo Soileau:

Rinzler: Did you ever hear any colored people play French music?
 Soileau: I played for years with Amédé Ardoin.
 Rinzler: Did they call the music the Negros played the same name?
 Soileau: They didn't talk about it differently....

²⁹ Earl King and Ron Bernard quoted in Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 181-182.

³⁰ Alan Lomax, “Cajun Country,” DVD.

Rinzler: In one band of musicians, they'd have white and colored musicians together.
 Soileau: Yeah.
 Rinzler: That's something you don't see nowadays.
 Soileau: Now they [in this country] want to kill [blacks].
 Rinzler: Do you believe [this music] is kind of dying out or this kind of music will stay around for a while.
 Soileau: Oh, I believe it'll stick. There's more people recording now.
 Rinzler: What did they call music in those days? Did they call it Cajun music? Creole music?
 Soileau: French music.³¹

This racial diversity is part of what Rinzler wished to put on stage at Newport. For the 1964-1967 festivals, he arranged for both Cajun and Creole musicians to perform, including Canray Fontenot and Alphonse "Bois Sec" Ardoin, Clifton Chenier, Isom Fontenot, and Adam and Cyprien Landreneau. Rinzler's goal was to generate a sincere and enduring interest in old-time music on a national scale so that regional music could reap the benefits, with a proportion of the proceeds of the Newport Folk Festival to be directed back into field work, local festivals, and grants to organizations and projects that supported folk music. He believed that national exposure would get people "back in the swing of the music which they loved for years but abandoned for poor reasons."³²

But the first-time ever national presentation of an ages-old American folk music created by black and white musicians who had lived together and worked together quietly for centuries was also a powerful symbol, in the weeks just after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, of the kind of

³¹ Leo Soileau, interviewed by Ralph Rinzler, USL archives, R12. Audio recording.

³² Brauner, "Newport Folk Festival," 189.

nation Rinzler imagined was finally possible during a year that the nation was, in historian Terry Anderson's words, at "the pinnacle of liberalism."³³ Harry Smith may have made his point about race by omitting biographical information in his liner notes, but Rinzler would make it through the very visible medium of the festival stage. Expressed through the polished songs of Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary, the appeal to a sense of the common humanity and equality of all Americans seemed to be the brand-new message of the young generation; delivered through the music of Cajun and Creole accordionists, fiddlers, harmonica players and vocalists, it was the sage and rugged common sense wisdom of an older generation who grew up in the American past. The theme of racial equality was, in some sense, a kind of festival motif, as *New York Times* journalist Robert Shelton noted in his coverage of the festival: "There was a democratizing spirit about this fusion of white and Negro musical forms and about the people who are the conveyor belts of these traditions that was little short of utopian."³⁴

Mike Seeger brought a different liberal politics to his vision of the festival lineup, suggesting in a letter to the board of directors of the Newport Folk Foundation the following year that subsequent festivals include more female performers³⁵ and more songs in foreign languages. Seeger had, from his first

³³ Terry H. Anderson, *The Sixties*, 4th edition (Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2012), 41.

³⁴ Robert Shelton, "Symbolic Finale: Folk Festival Winds up with Songs of the Negro Integration Movement," *New York Times*, August 2, 1964, Sec. 2, 9.

³⁵ Brauner, "Newport Folk Festival," 123.

involvement with Newport, advocated that a broader range of American musical forms be featured, including American Indian, Hawaiian, Eskimo, Dutch, German, Jewish, Italian, and Polish.³⁶ The festival, for the musicologists who organized it, was never simply about music.

In 1964 and 1965, when Alan Lomax, Ralph Rinzler, Mike Seeger and Pete Seeger were all on the board of the Newport Folk Foundation together, Pete Seeger argued that the foundation should direct funds back to local communities to support young musicians' playing of old-time music: "I'm very concerned with the slow dying-out of some very wonderful musicians who are not being replaced, so I'd like to cast my vote for any project however humble, by which some one or another tradition can be kept alive in its home grounds."³⁷ At the 1964 festival, Lomax was unhappy that the festival still featured many urban folk performers. Although one of the financial strategies of the festival was that well-known folk musicians would draw the crowds who would then be introduced to grassroots musicians – "the good unknown performer"³⁸ – Lomax found it impossible to bite his tongue when confronted with the "inauthenticity" of the polished commercial bands. He compared the Chicago electric Paul Butterfield Blues Band unfavorably to "the old-time farmer who played blues for himself and his friends on a box with an ax handle glued to it, and homemade strings."³⁹

Lomax's exhortation to a workshop audience to go beyond the music and

³⁶ Brauner, "Newport Folk Festival," 75.

³⁷ Brauner, "Newport Folk Festival," 161.

³⁸ Brauner, "Newport Folk Festival," 66.

³⁹ Brauner, "Newport Folk Festival," 102.

“collect the people and learn about their lives and needs”⁴⁰ has the ring of P.T. Barnum. Old-time fiddler Clayton “Pappy” McMichen made it clear to a workshop audience that he didn’t wish to be collected: “What are you people doing here? You don’t know anything about the music,” an angry McMichen told the audience. “You’re the easiest audience in the world to play for, because you don’t want anything from us. I could play the worst fiddle in the world, and you’d still applaud. You just like us because we’re old.”⁴¹ The question “What are you people doing here?” was a cultural and a sociological question, and McMichen didn’t want anything to do with the audience’s desire to experience the strange, “authentic” rural South – that haunted world of field-work poverty and racial violence and despair - in the controlled environment of a New England seacoast music festival.

For the 1964 festival, Rinzler invited Revon Reed’s friends Cajun accordionists Gladius Thibodeaux and Louis “Vinesse” Lejeune (a cousin of Iry Lejeune). Reed accompanied the group to Newport, playing triangle in the ensemble, which included the last-minute addition of fiddler Dewey Balfa, substituting for a guitarist who wasn’t able to travel. The band opened with “Grand Mamou” and received a standing ovation. Balfa, who was used to playing for an audience of one or two hundred, was shocked by the roaring applause of

⁴⁰ Brauner, “Newport Folk Festival,” 107.

⁴¹ Brauner, “Newport Folk Festival,” 122.

the crowd of 17,000 at Newport.⁴² Not long after, Balfa would pen “Newport Waltz,” whose lyrics told other Cajun musicians about the welcome reception the Louisianans had received at the festival:

*C'est là bas à Newport on a été
On s'a fais un tas de bon amis.
J'aimerais dire a tout les Cadiens
Si tu veux un bon temps, va au festival, yaie.*⁴³

[We went to Newport
We made a lot of good friends
I'd like to tell all the Cajuns
If you want to have a good time, go to the festival (loud yell)]

Balfa's presence at Newport turned out to be consequential for the future of traditional music in Louisiana, and if, as the Newport Folk Foundation directors concluded, the revival of interest in traditional Cajun music in southwest Louisiana was the most successful of the Foundation's many revival projects in small communities in North Carolina, Arkansas, Mississippi and Georgia,⁴⁴ then that success also flows from Balfa's response to the standing ovation and his determination to bring “the echo of that applause” back to Southwest Louisiana.⁴⁵

Balfa had learned to play fiddle from his father accordionist Charles Balfa, a sharecropper in Bayou Grand Louis near Mamou whose songs had come from

⁴² Ron Yule, *Louisiana Fiddlers* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 6.

⁴³ Dewey Balfa, “The Balfa Brothers Play Traditional Cajun Music,” Swallow Records, 1965, compact disc, liner notes, 3.

⁴⁴ Brauner, “Newport Folk Festival,” 159.

⁴⁵ Blanc and Strachwitz, “*J’Ai Eté au Bal*.”

Normandy and Nova Scotia.⁴⁶ During the 1940s, Balfa and his brothers Will and Rodney were playing eight shows a week in dance halls,⁴⁷ though music was still a pastime and not a living for Balfa, who drove a school bus, raised cattle, and worked as a salesman for a New Orleans-based insurance company. Balfa and his generation of old-time musicians had been waiting in dismay for heirs to the tradition to come forward, but younger musicians in Southwest Louisiana had directed their talents to swamp pop and rock, dismissing old-time music as the outdated music of the older generation at the same time that the nation's youth as a whole began to embrace the new sound of The Beatles and the British Invasion. Balfa had no idea what a festival was before going to Newport, and the invitation for Southwest Louisiana musicians to perform nationally had been met with skepticism and even derision in local newspapers, with an Opelousas journalist dismissing old-time music as an anachronistic, and unappealing, genre. "Everybody knows that it sounds like a bunch of cats fighting in an alley," the article read.⁴⁸ But surprisingly for these naysaying locals, the appearance of Cajun musicians at Newport "brought the young back into the fold,"⁴⁹ providing a cohort of role models outside of rock music.

Rinzler had worked with other Newport performers to be sure that the traditional musicians would play traditional songs at Newport. Finding himself

⁴⁶ Will Spires, "The Balfa Brothers: They Carried Cajun Music to the World," *Frets Magazine* (May 1982): 30-33.

⁴⁷ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 243.

⁴⁸ Barry Jean Ancelet interview with Dewey Balfa, USL archives, AN1.

⁴⁹ Cajun guitarist D.L. Menard in "*J'ai été au bal*," Les Blank, Chris Strachwitz, DVD (1998).

on a national stage for the first time, Doc Watson wanted to play Eddie Arnold and Chet Atkins songs, believing that popular Nashville tunes were what the audience wanted.⁵⁰ This was a “classic problem” for folklorists working with traditional musicians, Rinzler said: “A craftsperson can make something that looks like something he’s just seen in a newspaper, thinking that that’s what’s the latest thing. So he’ll copy a crockpot that’s mass produced and sold at K-Mart because that’s what he sees in the paper....”⁵¹ Rinzler had to convince Watson and some other old-time musicians that the way to become popular was to “take the deepest cut of tradition that they were in contact with through their family or community” and play “those songs...the grassroots stuff that was unique and distinctive regionally and familially.”⁵²

LeJeune, Thibodeaux, Reed and Balfa were committed traditionalists who, rather than changing their music to suit the times, wanted the new times to embrace old-time music. As Paul Tate wrote in a letter to the board of directors of the Newport Folk Foundation, “The invitation of the Cajun band to Newport had the desired effect of giving stature to traditional Acadian music played on traditional instruments.”⁵³ Balfa returned to Louisiana determined to use the success of Cajun music at Newport as an argument to the younger generation that their cultural heritage was an asset rather than a liability. Rinzler encouraged Balfa’s activist approach, and The Newport Folk Foundation, on Rinzler’s

⁵⁰ Brauner, “Newport Folk Festival,” 186.

⁵¹ Brauner, “Newport Folk Festival,” 185.

⁵² Brauner, “Newport Folk Festival,” 186.

⁵³ Brauner, “Newport Folk Festival,” 194.

initiative, designed and funded the Louisiana Folk Foundation to fund the culture preservation work of Balfa and other local musicians, academics, and state and local politicians devoted to raising the stature of local culture.

Reed, Tate and a core group of local activists organized traditional music contests and concerts at local agricultural fairs in Crowley, Abbeville and Opelousas, giving people the chance to hear old-time music outside a dance hall setting.⁵⁴ When Rinzler returned in October 1965, he found that the Louisiana Folk Foundation's interest had expanded to include a focus on the preservation of the Cajun French language. On that trip, Rinzler and Seeger recorded forty more reels of tape of French language music sung by Cajuns, Creoles and the Houma Indians, and invited Canray Fontenot, "Bois Sec" Ardoin, Adam Landreneau, Cyprien Landreneau and Isom Fontenot to play at the Newport festival in 1966.⁵⁵ Balfa would return to the Newport festival in 1967 with his brothers Will, Rodney, and Harry on fiddles, guitars and triangle and Hadley Fontenot on accordion in the Balfa Brothers Band, the group Dewey Balfa had formed after returning from his first Newport festival.

The Newport experience motivated Balfa to approach Floyd Soileau of Swallow Records in Ville Platte to record the music of the Balfa Brothers and to use his label to promote old-time music. Soileau, skeptical about the commercial potential of the Balfas' traditional sound, with the fiddlers dominating and the

⁵⁴ Barry Jean Ancelet, Cajun Music: Its Origins and Development (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwest Louisiana, 1989), 38.

⁵⁵ Brauner, "Newport Folk Festival," 195.

accordion in the background, hesitated, thinking the fiddle was outdated and that only an accordion-heavy sound would sell. Balfa explained that while his family band had several offers of recording contracts from out-of-state companies, he preferred to record the band's first sessions at home. "Floyd, we're going to be on somebody's label for sure, and the first song we're going to record is "*La Valse de Bambocheur*" [The Drunkard's Sorrowful Waltz]," Balfa explained. Floyd had been looking, without any luck, for a band to record that very song.⁵⁶

Encouraged by the response to the Balfa Brothers' first single and album, Soileau began to record more old-time Cajun musicians, including Dennis McGhee, Ed and Bee DesHotels, and the Landreneaus. Balfa wasn't surprised that Soileau and other local labels had lost faith in traditional music, since many locals had predicted that the Louisiana musicians would be rejected at Newport. Balfa summarized expectations back home as "They're going out there to get laughed at."⁵⁷ Soileau acknowledged that it took the interest of outsiders to reignite his own interest in traditional music: "There were a lot of people away from here who were learning about Cajun music, they wanted that root sound. They would come in and inquire about some of the musicians and then later – I could still kick myself about this – it took fellows like Chris Strachwitz who came out of California to discover Joe Falcon, who was still alive at the time and living in Jennings – I didn't know about this – and some other talented musicians that they dug up and recorded." Most of the older musicians weren't playing dances

⁵⁶ Spires, "The Balfa Brothers," 30-33.

⁵⁷ Brauner, "Newport Folk Festival," 195.

anymore, and weren't approaching local labels to record, but national labels had taken note of what happened at Newport: "Fortunately somebody had the foresight to come and dig around and find these people and record them," Soileau said, "And now they've got a good representation of some of the early Cajun things...We've got a good spread now for future generations to be able to know what Cajun music was all about."⁵⁸

Eddie Shuler of Goldband Records in Lake Charles was still recording traditional Cajun music because he knew it would always sell in that part of the country, if nowhere else, but he hadn't tried to promote it because he assumed the language barrier would be too great for a national audience to tolerate. "You couldn't understand what they were saying," he explained. But Soileau was respectful of the genre as a part of Louisiana's cultural heritage: "Here I was in the richest country in the world, you know, technologically speaking, monetary, ...and we have right here in our midst this truly authentic, truly undiscovered music....Nobody knew it was here....But I said, 'Well, I can preserve the music, supposing the world changes tomorrow and there won't be any Cajuns around to play this music.'"⁵⁹

Fiddler Canray Fontenot and accordionist Alphonse "Bois Sec" Ardoin were indeed the last of their generation of old-time Creole musicians. Rinzler invited them to perform at the 1966 Newport festival, with Revon Reed as their guide. They were so afraid of losing him amid the throngs of people that they

⁵⁸ Floyd Soileau, quoted in Broven, South to Louisiana, 245.

⁵⁹ Soileau, quoted in Broven, South to Louisiana, 260.

walked closely behind him through the crowds, Ardoin said: “*On marchait si près qu'on a tout écorché ses talons de souliers.*”⁶⁰ [We walked so close we wore down the backs of his shoes.] Ultimately, Rinzler’s mission to educate middle class urban listeners about the virtues of old music was out of step with younger listeners’ understanding of the festival as a purely social event. By 1967, Rinzler had become disenchanted with the spectacle and hedonism of the festival. “There was something about bringing the best of tradition into the midst of an entertainment-oriented scene with a lot of kids drinking beer or smoking pot that was just really offensive to me,”⁶¹ he said.

1964 festival attendance was over 70,000, and the traffic and noise were overwhelming for local residents and business owners. College students without tickets congregated on the streets of Newport, and city officials posted signs on major roadways leading into town asking that the unticketed “Keep Out of Newport.”⁶² This was hardly an environment in which the public could develop a sympathetic understanding of the integrity of regional music, and Rinzler worried that the young middle-class college students were coming to the festival in the same spirit as the society rich had come to Newport in the Gilded Age, “passing fanciers” in a place of summer leisure.⁶³ Rinzler was frustrated that the festival compartmentalized and showcased only one aspect – music – of complex cultural traditions, presenting the music divorced from material culture and from

⁶⁰ Canray Fontenot, in Cajun and Creole Music Makers, Ancelet, 86.

⁶¹ Gagné, “Ralph Rinzler,” 28.

⁶² Brauner, “Newport Folk Foundation,” 86.

⁶³ James, American Scene, 211.

the other creative activities within the culture that made the music expressive of an entire way of life.

Rinzler was caught in the contradictions of trying to sustain and preserve a traditional culture, which is a conservative objective, while working from a set of liberal, progressive principles within the boundaries of a commercial event. He wanted the music culture of Southwest Louisiana to benefit from outside funding, marketing and appreciation, while protecting the culture of Southwest Louisiana from change. "Life there is like nowhere else," he said, "and in some ways, it should remain that way."⁶⁴ Thus, even if younger and commercially-oriented musicians wanted to experiment with new genres, Rinzler did not want them to want that. His goal was not to help regional musicians become what they wanted, but to help them remain what they had been.

In 1967, Rinzler accepted a job organizing the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, eager to combine music with the presentation of craftwork – harness makers, wheelwrights, weavers – and to provide opportunities for the public to talk with festival participants. Rinzler invited Dewey Balfa, "Vinesse" Lejeune's band, and two dozen other Southwest Louisiana musicians to perform; Balfa and fiddler Lionel LeLeux hadn't played together since 1932. Balfa told the audience that he was amazed that the music of an isolated region had gained a broad audience, and in between songs he explained Cajun culture and history. The music of the Old World was presented alongside the music of the New

⁶⁴ Ralph Rinzler, Forward to Cajun and Creole Music Makers, Ancelet, 9.

World: Lulu Landry, like Alma Barthelemy a “home music” ballad singer from Louisiana, performed her version of “*La Chanson de la Mariée*” [The Bride’s Song], immediately followed by Louise Reichert, from Auvergne, France, singing a version of the same song.⁶⁵

Alma Barthelemy appeared at the festival in 1968, along with Doc Watson and Lightnin’ Hopkins. The festival program guide included an explanation of folk tradition quite at odds with Rinzler’s view of folk arts as playing a still-vital role in contemporary culture: “Folklife in America is essentially a condition of the past; even where it still exists it belongs to the past,” the program read. In a modern world where geographical distances were less important and popular culture was a homogenizing influence, folklife was “a vanishing anachronism which no amount of artifice can cause to endure.” Even when folk traditions were still practiced, the stimulus for their temporary survival was “an urban, sophisticated market” that appreciated folk traditions as a popular trend, but modern technology, communication and social attitudes would soon make the preservation of folk forms impossible: “While today’s city-bred customers thus help to prolong traditional skills, the motivation changes and the product becomes a different one. Today, true folklife and folk expressions, fragile and flickering in a few belated cultural pockets, are like stubs of candles guttering in the breeze....In the brief, dying interval in which they still exist, however, we are

⁶⁵ Walker, Transformation of the Universal Museum, 192-193.

making haste to observe them and see, as it were, the past still living,”⁶⁶ the text concluded.

Rinzler’s success in organizing the Festival of American Folklife on the National Mall would inspire the passage of the American Folklife Preservation Act. The folklife bill, introduced by Texas Senator Ralph Yarborough (D) stated that each American participated in the distinctive “ways” of his family, ethnic group, region and occupation, all of which comprised “his traditional or folk culture,” which had been learned orally and “maintained without institutional direction.” In addition, each American shared with all Americans the customs and traditions of the national culture. The federal government had a legitimate interest in studying and supporting American folk life, including music, language, “wisdom” and lore, because the nation’s constituent cultures fostered “a sense of identity and individuality” within that national culture. The bill proposed to fund the presentation of folklife programs which met “standards of authenticity” and were of such “significant merit” that they could encourage a greater public awareness of American cultural diversity.⁶⁷

Rinzler subscribed to folklorist Benjamin Botkin’s belief in folklore as “germinal rather than vestigial,”⁶⁸ that the foundational tradition of Cajun-Creole music could be nurtured, praised, funded and promoted as a way of generating and regenerating, and not as a way of merely memorializing, Southwest

⁶⁶ C. Malcolm Watkins, “The Historic Roots of American Folklife,” 1968 Festival of American Folklife, The Smithsonian Institution, Program Guide, 10-11.

⁶⁷ American Folklife Preservation Bill, March 20, 1969, S. 1591.

⁶⁸ Benjamin Botkin, quoted in *Romancing the Folk*, Filene, 139.

Louisiana French culture. And Rinzler found the rapport between Cajun and Creole musicians instructive at a moment when Americans were grappling with the politics of race: for the 1969 festival, Rinzler introduced the Balfa and Ardoin families by saying, "There's a large body of French language music....and both white and black musicians play a lot of the same tunes and then in each family or community there's a lot of material that is distinctive with only the family or the community." Mike Seeger hosted an evening concert by the Ardoins and Canray Fontenot, which was listed as "Louisiana-French Black Music" in the program. But the relaxed and egalitarian rapport between Cajun and Creole musicians couldn't be understood or appreciated by some festival attendees: an audience member criticized Rinzler for putting the Balfas on stage first, before the Ardoins. "Now, let's not make a preposterous issue out of this," Rinzler said. "We would have started with the blacks if there had been amplifiers for them here. They weren't here. That's the only reason we didn't start with them."⁶⁹

The easier and more peaceful character of racial politics in Southwest Louisiana was as unfamiliar to the Washington festivalgoers as the old-time music was. The Civil Rights movement in Southwest Louisiana was a relatively quiet and orderly affair. The region experienced relatively little racial conflict over voting and desegregation. By 1956, twice as many blacks were registered to vote and in Louisiana's French Catholic parishes as in its Anglo-Protestant ones. Catholicism tended to "mollify racial tensions," and it automatically precluded

⁶⁹ Walker, *Transformation*, 104-105.

Klan activity since the Klan was both anti-Catholic and anti-black.⁷⁰ In St. Mary Parish, black candidates garnered white support and even ran on integrated tickets, and in an area around Opelousas, one Congress of Racial Equality worker organized a farmers' market cooperative whose two hundred members included thirty-five whites. Some NAACP branches in southern Louisiana began to attract a significant number of white members by the mid-1960s.⁷¹ What was true of Louisiana in general was true of Southwest Louisiana a dozen times over: among blacks and whites there was always, said NAACP field secretary Harvey Britton, "an underlying feeling of comradeship."⁷² The Balfas and the Ardoins were cultural evidence of this comradeship.

But that sense of comradeship would be challenged by a new focus by state and local activists on the French language and French-American ethnicity. In October 1964, Rinzler had sat in on a meeting at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette) organized by French professor Hosea Phillips, at which state education administrators, state politicians, members of the Louisiana Folk Foundation and representatives from the *Société de France Amérique* discussed a long-term strategy for strengthening Louisiana French culture: bringing the French language, which had been banished from the schools and government offices in the 1920s, back into

⁷⁰ Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy, The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1913-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 58.

⁷¹ Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 383.

⁷² Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, xx.

education and civic life.⁷³ In 1934, Alan Lomax had recorded Phillips and two other Louisiana State University students, Erastre Vidrine and Hart Perrodin, singing traditional songs they had learned in their native Evangeline Parish, including “*Grand Basile*,” and “*J’ai passé devant ta porte*.”⁷⁴ Phillips developed a life-long scholarly interest in the history of colonial French Louisiana, publishing a book on Cajun French in 1945. Encouraged by the attention of federal folklorists and national festival organizers, Phillips and other local activists launched a French language movement that, with the support of state politicians, funding from the federal government, and the personnel resources of the French and Canadian governments, would greatly contribute to the endurance and acclaim of Cajun-Creole traditional music. But the story of the common history of blacks and whites in Southwest Louisiana, and the inspiring vision of their creative collaborations in the music tradition of their Francophone region, would get lost along the way, drowned out by the rhetoric of the ethnic revival and the exigencies of politics and marketing.

⁷³ Brauner, “Newport Folk Festival,” 195-196.

⁷⁴ Joshua Clegg Caffery, Traditional Music in Coastal Louisiana: The 1934 Lomax Recordings (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 50-53.

6.

Utter Strangers

Cajuns, carefully put through a sieve separating white from black, are reworked in the image of Longfellow's poems into many pristine Evangelines and Gabriels...speaking contemporary standard French.¹

Dorice Tentchoff

While the movement to preserve traditional culture had begun as a series of local efforts in rural communities, and the project of sustaining traditional music had been part of a national program directed by the Library of Congress, the Newport Folk Foundation, and the Smithsonian Institute, the French language preservation movement was largely an international one, initiated in France and promoted in Louisiana through French and French Canadian organizations.

In the decades after World War II, as France lost its former colonies, including Indochina, Algeria and Tunisia, Senegal and the Ivory Coast, the French government of Charles de Gaulle, seeking to restore French "cultural

¹ Dorice Tentchoff, "Ethnic Survival under Anglo-American Hegemony: The Louisiana Cajuns," *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Oct., 1980): 238.

grandeur”² and anxious that the French language would not survive decolonization, sought to reunite its former colonies under the concept of a French-speaking “Commonwealth of Nations”³ in which European, African and North American peoples would be psychologically and sentimentally connected to France as well as economically connected through favorable trade agreements. Ideas for this global “Francophone community,” in which a former political community – the global French empire – would be transformed into a cultural community of shared language and historical and cultural affinity, began to be widely and seriously discussed in France in 1965, and a range of governmental and private organizations were quickly established to facilitate cultural, technological, and educational exchanges within the francophone community.⁴ The members of this community included not only the continental francophone populations of Belgium and Switzerland and the ex-colonial French populations of Africa and Indochina, but, however historically distant the colonial relationship, Haiti, the Canadian provinces of Québec and New Brunswick, New Orleans and the Acadian parishes of Southwest Louisiana.

The global Francophone movement reached into Louisiana at a moment when the attention of activists like Paul Tate and Revon Reed had long been focused on language and culture preservation, but the philosophical and resource

² Jeffery Robert Rosner, ‘Francophonie’ as a Pan-Movement: The Politics of Cultural Affinity (Ph.D. diss., The John Hopkins University, 1969), 46.

³ Aonghas St-Hilaire, “North America and the Francophonie: Local and Transnational Movements for the Survival of French-Speaking North America,” *Language Sciences*, Volume 19, Issue 4 (October 1997): 372.

⁴ Rosner, ‘Francophonie,’ 46.

support of the French and Canadian governments gave the grassroots movement a traction and allure it would otherwise have lacked, until finally, the state itself began to recognize the significance and potential economic benefits of francophone culture in Louisiana.

It was the French Canadian plan to observe the bicentennial of the *Grand Dérangement* that prompted Louisiana to organize and fund its own Acadian Bicentennial Celebration. The state calculated that the bicentennial commemoration would bring in an additional fifty-five to seventy-five million dollars in tourism revenue in 1955.⁵ Cajun singers and dancers from St. Martinville performed during half-time ceremonies at that year's Sugar Bowl in New Orleans. One hundred thirty-five delegates from French-Canadian cultural organizations, including *Le Conseil de la Vie Française en Amérique* [The Council on French Life in America] and *Le Comité Permanent de la Survivance du Français en Amérique* [The Permanent Committee for the Survival of French in America] attended the inaugural festivities in January,⁶ and a bicentennial delegation left New Orleans by train in February headed for Montreal, Québec City, and New Brunswick. A Lafayette journalist predicted that the state would benefit a hundred-fold in advertising and promotion from the delegation's pilgrimage to Canada. Folklorist Sarah Gertrude Knott organized St. Martinville's celebration of the music and folktales of Acadia. Accordionist Cyprien

⁵ Shane K. Bernard, "Acadian Pride, Anglo Conformism: The Acadian Bicentennial Celebration of 1955," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Spring 2000): 163.

⁶ Bernard, "Acadian Pride," 165-166.

Landreneaux played traditional Cajun dance hall music, and Revon Reed and Paul Tate brought from Mamou a contingent of over forty costumed horseback riders to demonstrate the traditional *courir de Mardi Gras*.

The success of the bicentennial inspired the state Department of Education to publish a guide for teachers titled “Our Acadian Heritage: Let’s Keep It!” One of the assumptions of the global French language and culture movement was that language and culture are inextricably linked, and that the French language is more than a mere means of communication; rather the language inevitably leads to a special way of thinking, even a way of life.”⁷ Southwest Louisiana’s French-language movement was premised on this conception of language as promoting and sustaining a way of life, but political battles were fought over exactly which French – standard Parisian French, Cajun French or Creole French -- needed to be preserved, and which “way of life” was at stake. The textbook continental French of “genteel Acadians” who “thought like Anglo-Saxons” and saw the *Grand Dérangement* as an interesting “migration” was opposed to the “authentic” French of rural Cajuns who considered the expulsion from Canada a tragic crime.⁸ The controversies over who was running the bicentennial, and which parishes would most benefit from the profits, generated a kind of rhetoric in which Louisianans of French-Canadian descent existed in an oppositional category to the majority culture, a category that encompassed social class (the not-genteel) ethnicity (those who “think like”

⁷ Rosner, “Francophonie,” 73.

⁸ Bernard, “Acadian Pride,” 162.

French-descended Catholics rather than like Anglo-Saxon Protestants) and education (those who don't speak textbook continental French). This was the beginning of a public rhetoric in which Cajuns were a distinct cultural group separate from French-speaking Creoles. Likewise, the French language movement in Louisiana divided the word "French" into subcategories of standard, proper textbook French, Cajun French and Creole French. Standard continental French won the day, with Cajun and Creole French increasingly spoken only in stores, in family homes, and in the music.

The connection between French Canada and Southwest Louisiana, reanimated by the bicentennial, was crucial to the French language movement in Louisiana. Support for a global French linguistic and cultural movement had been building throughout the 1960s in Canada. In 1961, Quebec established a delegation in Paris that functioned as an embassy for French-speaking Canada.⁹ In July 1967, French President Charles de Gaulle thrilled Quebecois nationalists when, on a visit to Montreal, he proclaimed "*Vive le Québec libre.*"

Just as France had made agreements with the new African republics at the time of independence committing France (which sought above all else priority in purchasing natural resources and in tariff rates) to "aid in education, while French was recognized as the official language of the African states," similar agreements were made with the Quebec government in 1965, 1967 and 1969 to

⁹ St-Hilaire, "North America and the Francophonie," 374.

support francophone culture in the province.¹⁰ The *Francophonie* movement led to the creation of a variety of governmental and private agencies and organizations dedicated to the preservation of the French language and global French culture: The *Association des Universités Partiellement ou Entièrement de Langue Française* (AUPELF) was founded in September 1961 and based in Montreal; the Paris-based *Association de Solidarité Francophone* (ASF) was founded in November 1966; the *Association Internationale des Parlementaires de Langue Française*, headquartered in Paris, was founded in May 1967; the *Conseil International de la Langue Française* was organized in September 1967; the *Association des Communautés de Langue Française* was founded in 1959 as the *Association Européenne de l'Ethnie Française*.¹¹

When the *Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique* [Agency for Cultural and Technological Cooperation], established in February 1969 at a conference in Niamey, Niger, sought the participation of Louisiana at the 1970 conference, Paul Tate was chosen to attend. The *Times-Picayune* covered Tate's visit to the Republic of Niger in a March 6, 1970 story headlined "Tate Will Visit in West Africa." Tate, who had brought his early activism in Mamou to the Louisiana Historical Society, went to Paris to meet with other delegates, then on to Niger as the representative of the state's new Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, in the hopes that Francophone Louisiana could gain "additional contacts throughout the world and...additional help and assistance

¹⁰ Rosner, 'Francophonie,' 65-66.

¹¹ Rosner, 'Francophonie,' 71.

for the movement in its early stage of development.”¹²

In Niamey, participants established the Francophone Agency, with a provisional secretariat based in Paris, to organize common action in cultural, economic, technical and even political spheres, including “multilateral cooperation in French education...arts and letters.” The cost of the agency’s programs was not disclosed, but was estimated by French journalists at *Le Devoir* to be \$1,300,000 and by *Le Monde* at \$6,000,000, with France contributing forty-five percent of the budget, Canada thirty percent, and other countries, including Belgium, twenty-five percent.¹³ Thus, the French language preservation movement in Louisiana was part of a larger global movement, incited from without. But the fear that the French language was disappearing was an old fear in Louisiana, with stories of the decline of French appearing regularly in Louisiana newspapers from the time of Reconstruction.

The status of the French language in Louisiana has been a subject of debate since Louisiana's admission as a state into the federal Union. As a new state, Louisiana had retained its civil law system rather than adopting the common law system of the U.S. state and federal governments, but in order to interact with other state legal systems and the federal courts, Louisiana’s courts were compelled to conduct judicial proceedings in English. This introduction of English into official proceedings of state government was the *coup de grâce* to the legal status of French in Louisiana, which had previously enjoyed “equal, if

¹² *Times-Picayune*, March 6, 1970, 49.

¹³ Rosner, ‘Francophonie,’ 94.

not favored status” with English.¹⁴ The fight to regain that equal status would go on throughout the Civil War years and into the early twentieth century. Every generation sounded the alarm that French was dying and that young people couldn’t communicate with their grandparents, that French wasn’t being taught in the schools, and that French Louisiana was losing to the forces of Anglophone commercialism.

In a July, 1879 article, “*L’Avenir de la Langue Française en Louisiane*” [The Future of the French Language in Louisiana] in the *Pioneer of Assumption* newspaper in Napoleonville, the author lamented the decline of French, which, although it was the mother tongue of one third of the population of the state and the language of a mother country celebrated for its accomplishments in the sciences, arts and politics, was being “exiled by its enemies from the public schools of the state” so that the poor, “with their wallets emptied by the Civil War and its disastrous consequences,” were not able to learn French. The children, educated in English in the schools, brought the language back into the family home, becoming so alienated from their elders that they would not even know how to read the French inscriptions engraved on the tombstones of their ancestors. Yet French was still an essential tool in commerce, industry and intellectual culture, the writer said, essential not only for ambitious young people aspiring to become lawyers and judges – the source of public law was the

¹⁴ Roger K. Ward, “The French Language in Louisiana Law and Legal Education: A Requiem,” *Louisiana Law Review*, Volume 57, Number 4 (Summer 1997): 1284-1285.

Napoleonic Code – but also for revolutionaries, who could arm themselves with all weapons “*pour la lutte des prolétaires*” – the struggle of the working classes, which apparently this author considered best fought in French. The writer imagined the shame young Louisianans would feel if they traveled to Paris and, despite having a French last name and having been brought up in a former French colony, didn’t speak a word of French.¹⁵

A May 1893 article in the *Opelousas Courier* encouraged readers to support new tax policies that would fund French-language education in the Acadian parishes: “Why this neglect, this abandoning of the language our ancestors spoke...this language that has become precious to us and has given us a great advantage over Americans who speak only English...”¹⁶ But of the thirty-three French language newspapers published in 1860, only seven remained in 1900, and of the twenty-six bilingual English-French newspapers in 1860, only five survived the end of the century, all of them in the Acadian parishes and New Orleans.¹⁷

For each move toward the preservation of French, there was a subsequent move in the opposite direction. Louisiana’s Reconstruction constitutions stridently required that English would be the only language used in Louisiana public school instruction, but the state Constitution of 1879 stated that although

¹⁵ “*L’Avenir de la Langue Française en Louisiane*,” *Pioneer of Assumption Newspaper*, July, 1879. Accessed through chroniclingamerica.loc.gov

¹⁶ The *Opelousas Corrier*, May 6, 1893. Accessed through chroniclingamerica.loc.gov

¹⁷ Lawrence E. Estaville, Jr., “The Louisiana French,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, 14, 4 (1998): 353.

elementary school instruction was to be in English, grade schools could teach in French in those parishes where the French language predominated.¹⁸ In any case, because there were not yet compulsory education laws, Cajuns and Creoles were able to avoid assimilation into English, and despite the new laws, in 1900, Lafayette (51%) and Thibodaux (60%) had French-speaking majorities.¹⁹ Then, in 1915, the State Education Committee adopted an English-only education policy, fearing that Louisiana's low English literacy rates would hurt the state economy.²⁰ Louisiana's Compulsory Education Act of 1916, combined with 1918 congressional hearings on a proposed federal Americanization Bill, would change French language culture in Southwest Louisiana.

The premise of the Americanization Bill, introduced by Georgia Senator Hoke Smith and Iowa Representative Horace Mann Towner,²¹ was that up until 1885, immigrants to the United States were of "Teutonic and Celtic origin, possessing ideals, customs, standards of living, modes of thought, and religion the same general tenor as those of the early (Anglo-Saxon) settlers," but that the new Southern and Eastern European immigrants, who had different religious beliefs, customs, habits and ideals, manifested "no desire of becoming Americans," and were unable to "speak, read or write the English language."²²

¹⁸ Ward, "The French Language in Louisiana," 1298.

¹⁹ Estaville, "Louisiana French," 347.

²⁰ Natsis, "Legislation and Language," 326.

²¹ Dewey W. Grantham, Hoke Smith and the Politics of the New South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 334.

²² Howard C. Hill, "The Americanization Movement," *The American Journal of Sociology*, Volume XXIV, Number 6 (May 1919): 612.

There was both an increase in immigration and a decrease in the percentage of immigrants who became naturalized citizens. Wartime industries were dependent on immigrant labor, yet many foreign workers and draft-age men could not understand English; foreign-born soldiers arrived at boot camp not comprehending the simple commands “Forward,” “Halt” and “March.”²³

In 1918 the American Council on Education in Washington, D.C. commissioned a report on the Americanization movement and the proposed bill, and the report concluded that the federal government did indeed need to take an active role in assuring that states were teaching English to non-English speaking immigrants and their children. In a somewhat fragile line of legal reasoning, the bill’s sponsors concluded that because immigrants tended to move from one state to the next seeking work, the education of immigrants was a federal matter. Presumably, then, the federal government’s involvement in the state public school curriculum was justified under the Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution, under which the federal government could regulate interstate commerce.

Under the proposed bill, the federal power would provide the states with funding to provide English language and civics education to non-English speakers. Secretary of the Interior Francis K. Lane described the Americanization

²³ Americanization Bill: Hearings Before the Committee on Education and Labor, United States Senate, Sixty-ninth Congress, First session on S.17, September 11, 1919, transcript, 6.
[HTTP://congressional.proquest.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/congressional/docview/t29.d30.hrg-1919-eds-0014?accountid=9676](http://congressional.proquest.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/congressional/docview/t29.d30.hrg-1919-eds-0014?accountid=9676)

project as best accomplished by “teaching American history in the American tongue...by letting American boys and girls know that the history of the United States is not a mere series of fugitive incidents, remote, separate, unrelated, but is a philosophy...”²⁴

Many state and municipal agencies and private organizations, including churches, civic clubs and settlement homes, already had programs designed to promote the Americanization of the laboring immigrant population, who lived in crowded urban enclaves that were “intensely alien,” The *New York World* newspaper reported.²⁵ Some manufacturing interests, including the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, where workers spoke over one hundred different languages and dialects, had established in-house schools to teach workers English²⁶ in an effort to increase occupational productivity, discourage labor unrest, and promote industrial safety, since many immigrant factory workers couldn’t understand simple posted signs warning them about the dangers of operating machinery.²⁷ Herbert Kaufman, Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Interior, in Charge of Americanization, declared that “13 percent of the folk in Lawrence and Fall River, Mass. (two cities with large French Canadian communities) are utter strangers in a strange land.”²⁸

But in congressional hearings on the Americanization Bill, it became clear

²⁴ Hill, “The Americanization Movement,” 631.

²⁵ Americanization Bill, hearings, transcript, 27-28.

²⁶ Hill, “The Americanization Movement,” 633.

²⁷ Americanization hearings, 7.

²⁸ Americanization hearings, 19.

that the Americanization project would be directed not only at these utter strangers but at all persons “unable to understand and use the English language.” The bill’s proponents emphasized that white Southerners were one of the key targets of the legislation, and that finally, the illiterate men of Kentucky, who spoke a “very pure, Shakespearean English” would be able to read the Bible.²⁹ Cotton farmers would be able to read Department of Agriculture bulletins on crop diversification and thereby save themselves from overplanting cotton.³⁰ Illiteracy was not merely the mark of the immigrant, Kaufman said, but was highest in rural communities and “the open country,” where in some places, “books were looked upon as a mysterious curiosity.”³¹

According to the census data presented at the hearings, Louisiana and South Carolina had the highest percentages of illiterates in proportion to population in the entire nation, at more than 25%, and the highest percentage, along with New Mexico, of native whites with native parentage who were illiterate;³² the number of illiterate people in each state was understandably much higher than the census recorded.³³

Under the Americanization bill appropriations scheme, Louisiana, Texas and Georgia were to receive the largest share of federal aid of any Southern

²⁹ Americanization hearings, 8.

³⁰ Americanization hearings, 46.

³¹ Americanization hearings, 66; 68.

³² Americanization hearings, 71-72.

³³ Americanization hearings, 43.

states,³⁴ with money going to teacher training and teacher and administrative salaries. In Georgia, the money was directed to teaching impoverished black and white Southerners – the “native illiterate” – to read and write; in Texas, to teach Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrants – the “foreign illiterate” – to speak, read and write English, and in Louisiana, to teach speakers of Cajun and Creole French, who were not foreign-born but may have seemed to be utter strangers, to speak, read and write English. To the bill’s supporters, the terms “foreign-born” and “non-English speaking” appeared to be synonymous descriptors of northern urban immigrants, just as the word “illiterate” referred to an English-speaking but illiterate black or white Southerner. Louisianans who spoke only French, even if they could read and write in French, were an anomaly in the appropriations scheme: native-born of native parentage, but speakers of a foreign language.

Southern illiteracy was understood as one of the circumstances of poverty: in the 1910 census, Alabama reported 352,710 residents over the age of 10 who were illiterate in English, but only 3,048 of those could not speak English. This was the Southern pattern. But in Louisiana, of the 352,179 illiterate residents, 20,147 could not speak English. These statistics made Louisiana a key target of the English-only policies of the Americanization bill.³⁵ To secure the benefits of this net, each state was required to invest an amount equal its federal appropriation. Louisiana would be required to provide for the education of non-English-speaking minors between the ages of sixteen (the age at which

³⁴ Americanization hearings, 57.

³⁵ Americanization hearings, Exhibit C, 25.

compulsory public schooling ended) and twenty-one.³⁶

Although the Smith-Bankhead Americanization bill did not become law, newspapers from Cadillac, Michigan to Atlanta, Georgia called for “radical state measures” and “remedial legislation” to support Americanization at the state level, and as a direct response to the Americanization Bill, the 1921 Louisiana State Constitution banned French from the public schools: “Article XII, Section 12. The general exercises in the public schools shall be conducted in the English language.”³⁷

Thus Dewey Balfa and other musicians of his generation, who referred to English speakers as “Americans,” attended school at a time when French was forbidden on school grounds and children were severely punished for speaking French, even in casual conversations with classmates. As a result, the percentage of Cajun children who spoke French as their primary language declined from eighty-three percent for those born around 1900 to twenty-one percent for those born between 1956-1960. Of the 13,200 Cajun GIs who served in the Korean War, sixty-seven percent used French as their first language.³⁸ But only thirty-six percent of the 22,700 Cajun GIS who served in Vietnam spoke French as their first language.³⁹

But French was still the only language of many Cajun and Creole

³⁶ Americanization hearings, 64.

³⁷ Constitution of the State of Louisiana Adopted in Convention at the City of Baton Rouge. Louisiana, 1921.

³⁸ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 27.

³⁹ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 34; 66.

grandparents, and some parents. In the 1970 Census, more than a half million Louisianans responded that French was the language spoken at home when they were young.⁴⁰ When the global French movement reached into North America, there were many instant converts to the cause, including among Louisiana business organizations and politicians. The Lafayette Chamber of Commerce established the French Heritage Committee in 1967, whose slogan for small business owners was “Look French, Speak French,”⁴¹ and the following year, several state legislators crafted State Act 409 establishing the Council for the Development of Louisiana-French, an agency whose very name began yet another political controversy over the role of French in Louisiana life.

Folklorists and musicians embraced the idea of preserving all the varieties of French spoken by Cajuns, Creoles and New Orleanians. The Louisiana French spoken in New Orleans was quite similar to standard continental French and was mostly spoken by older people who had been educated in private schools run by the Catholic Church, using catechisms published in France or Québec. The syntax, grammar and vocabulary of Louisiana French were such that a speaker would perhaps be assumed by Parisians to be from a village in northern or western France. The most widespread version of French in Louisiana was Acadian French, which had retained more archaic forms of pronunciation, retained some seventeenth-century French grammatical features, for example,

⁴⁰ St-Hilaire, “North America and the Francophonie,” 377.

⁴¹ Marie Diane Rodgers, “The French Heritage in Acadiana: The Fundamental Course of Action Necessary to Preserve the French Language,” May, 1968, 17. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED022145.pdf>

with possessives, and had more simplified verb conjugations. Acadian French borrowed vocabulary from English, African, Spanish and Indian languages.⁴²

Creole French further simplified phonetic, syntactical and grammatical structures.⁴³ Creole French and Cajun French, both descended from colonial French, either in the Maritime Provinces of Canada or the Caribbean, especially Haiti, and then developing over many decades of coexistence, were mutually intelligible languages to Creoles and Cajuns in Southwest Louisiana, and there were black and white speakers of both Cajun French and Creole French.⁴⁴ Neither was a written language. Neither corresponded syntactically or grammatically to continental or Canadian French, and both contained borrowings from Native American and New World Spanish. Many French-speaking Canadians had left Canada for Saint Domingue and for Martinique, Saint Lucia and Guadeloupe, even before the Seven Years War began, in a “small but constant immigration,” and many of those driven out of Canada in the *Grand Dérangement* sought refuge in Saint Domingue.⁴⁵ This may explain some of the linguistic concurrences between Cajun and Creole French. When Ivory Coast President Félix Houphouët-Boigny’s cabinet chief, Koffi Gervais, visited Lafayette, he was struck by the fact that both black and white Southwest Louisianans spoke essentially the same

⁴² Phillips, “Spoken French,” 174-177.

⁴³ Phillips, “Spoken French,” 174.

⁴⁴ Dorice Tentchoff, “Ethnic Survival under Anglo-American Hegemony: The Louisiana Cajuns,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Oct., 1980): 236-237.

⁴⁵ Gabriel Debien, trans. Glen Conrad, “The Acadians in Santo Domingo: 1764-1789,” in *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture* (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1978), 21.

“Creole French,” as he labeled it.⁴⁶

Despite the variety of French-derived languages in Louisiana, including among the Houma Indians, the new state agency Council for the Development of Louisiana-French quickly changed its name to the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana. The mission of the French government and French and French-Canadian cultural organizations was, of course, to preserve French, not to support the teaching of a variety of non-written forms of colonial French. Thus while CODOFIL’s mission was to “do any and all things necessary to accomplish the development, utilization and preservation of the French language as found in the state of Louisiana for the cultural, economic and tourist benefit of the state,” (Act 209, Louisiana State Legislature, 1968.) the organization had little use for the language “as found in the state,” and much more use for standard continental French. The French language movement in Louisiana wasn’t a preservationist movement that looked at French from the perspective of history and folklore, but a modern, progressive plan to connect Louisiana to global French culture.

The first chairman of CODOFIL, James Domengeux, had, as a member of the Louisiana House of Representatives in 1941, and then as a U.S. representative, argued for French as a second language in the United States,⁴⁷ believing Louisiana’s adoption of French as an official language of government to

⁴⁶ James Domengeaux interview by Barry Ancelet, April 23, 1972. AN1.052. The Archives of Cajun and Creole Folklore, The University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Audio recording.

⁴⁷ Domengeaux interview, AN1.166, archives of the University of Lafayette. Audio recording.

be a necessary political and economic step to boost the state's economy and international visibility. As CODOFIL chair, Domengeaux oversaw the drafting of a formal agreement between Canadian Prime Minister Jean-Jacques Bertrand of Quebec and Louisiana Governor John McKeithen on "cultural co-operation" between the two entities: "Aware of the historic ties which bound them in the past, and of the common ancestry of part of their respective populations...of the role which the Government of Quebec means to play in expanding French culture in America, [the] importance which the Government of the United States of America attaches to the dissemination and teaching of second languages, and the French language in particular, [and] the role which Louisiana can play in expanding French culture in the United States of America, have decided to enter into the present Agreement." Under "Co-operation in Cultural Matters," Louisiana and Canada agreed to arrange artistic and literary exhibitions on each other's territory, to establish media for the expression of French culture on their own territory, and to encourage exchanges of artists, writers, musicians and lecturers."⁴⁸

It was a non-Louisianan, University of Southwestern Louisiana professor Raymond Rodgers, who proposed to the State Superintendent of Schools that Louisiana model its own language programs on the successful programs of New Brunswick. Rodgers had spent most of his adult life in Canada, where he had

⁴⁸ "Agreement Between the Government of Quebec and the State of Louisiana on Cultural Co-operation." University Archives & Manuscript Collections, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

developed an interest in French as a minority-culture language, and he concluded that, given that there were more Acadians in Louisiana than in Canada,⁴⁹ if the language renaissance failed in Louisiana, it would fail in Canada, too, dismantling the emerging separatist movement. Crafting a Cold War domino theory metaphor, Rodgers said that Acadiana was the “South Vietnam of French Canada.”⁵⁰ The Quebec government opened an office in Lafayette in 1969, and Rodgers continued his advocacy of the French language movement in Louisiana after returning to Canada to teach at the University of Winnipeg in Ottawa.

The French language movement could hardly have been sustained in Louisiana without the contribution by the governments of Canada, France and Belgium of French language teachers to work in Louisiana schools. In order to establish bilingual education in Louisiana schools, the state would have to import teachers who would be paid by the federal government through Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act’s Bilingual Education Act signed into law in 1968 by President Lyndon Johnson. Eventually, the federal government would spend millions on French education in Louisiana, not only through the Bilingual Education Act but through Title VII of the Emergency School Aid Act, also known as the Bilingual/Bicultural Act, signed into law in 1972 by President Nixon.⁵¹

⁴⁹ James Domengeaux, Speech to the Louisiana Association of Fairs and Festivals, February 10, 1968, transcript, 4. University Archives & Manuscript Collections, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

⁵⁰ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 89.

⁵¹ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 83.

As part of state's efforts to persuade the U.S. Department of Education that such funding should be allocated, Southwestern Louisiana faculty member Marie Diane Rodgers, a French Canadian, wrote a policy paper titled "The French Heritage in Acadiana: The Fundamental Course of Action Necessary to Preserve the French Language" in which she explained that the renewal of French in Louisiana was "in the domestic and international interest of the U.S." because: "Acadiana could look French and attract tourists from the French-speaking world..." and "Job opportunities abound for people with special language abilities in the foreign service, education and the armed forces."⁵² Rodgers argued that Louisiana could borrow "used" media content from French Canadian radio and television broadcasts, and adopt French Canadian textbooks for the teaching of French in schools, explaining that New Brunswick had preserved its French heritage only with the help of "the French network."⁵³

By the end of the 1950s, tourism had become the state's largest industry,⁵⁴ and Rodgers emphasized the economic boost the Lafayette area would derive from restoring historical buildings to "give a French flavor to downtown."⁵⁵ In fact, Rodgers had a sweeping vision for the "new-old" architectural, design, linguistic and gastronomical character of Lafayette: "The "look French" aspect of the program should be emphasized to attract tourists...Stores, restaurants, hotels and other public buildings should have French names, menus and

⁵² Rodgers, "The French Heritage," 3.

⁵³ Rodgers, "The French Heritage," 21.

⁵⁴ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 48.

⁵⁵ Rodgers, "The French Heritage," 18.

décor....Historical buildings and cities should be restored.” After World War II, Cajun cuisine had become the region's primary cultural export. Cajun cookbooks, first published in the early 1950s, standardized recipes and introduced the cuisine to the rest of America,⁵⁶ much the way recorded music standardized and disseminated the region's complex musical heritage.

Rather than focus on a boost in tourism revenues, Domengeaux's vision was even more grandiose. He explained in an October 1968 speech to the Council board that the French renaissance movement would “outlast General de Gaulle”⁵⁷ as educated bilingual Louisianans went abroad to represent the interests of the United States in the French-speaking world. But most Louisiana advocates of French language education had more circumscribed motives than international diplomacy or restoring the cultural legacy of Louisiana's past. Some wanted to create a bridge between younger and older generations by restoring French as a common social language. Returning World War II veterans brought back home the realization that French was viewed in Europe as a language associated with great cultural pride and prestige.⁵⁸ Veteran Elmo Authement, who was born the year the Louisiana constitution banned French in the schools, remembered: “I was put on my knees in the hallway at school on grains of corn because I spoke

⁵⁶ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 48.

⁵⁷ James Domengeaux, Speech as Council Chairman, October 17, 1968, transcript, 2. University Archives & Manuscript Collections, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

⁵⁸ James J. Natsis, “Legislation and Language: The Politics of Speaking French in Louisiana,” *The French Review*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (Dec., 1999): 326.

French in the playground and got caught.”⁵⁹ Authement, who was co-vice president, along with Paul Tate, of CODOFIL at its founding, became president of the French-language Television-Louisiane,⁶⁰ a non-profit French broadcasting corporation established under new state law. The station broadcast local content as well as France’s TV5 news and entertainment.

Hosea Phillips, the University of Southwestern Louisiana faculty member who had organized the language renaissance meeting Rinzler attended in Lafayette, recalled his punishment for speaking French in grammar school: “I was sent home on the first day at school to write 200 times ‘I must not speak French on the school grounds’.”⁶¹ Revon Reed explained that in Mamou, children went on speaking French in schools despite punishments. He was kept after school with a dozen other children who persisted in speaking French. Yet French remained their preferred language, with no hard feelings against English.⁶² Paul Tate, however, had much sterner views, describing the prohibition against speaking French as a violation of civil rights and personal dignity: “Those egotistical English speakers were the enemy for one reason: because they wanted to completely kill the French language, making them guilty of the crime of culturicide.”⁶³

⁵⁹ Natsis, “Legislation and Language,” 326.

⁶⁰ The Acadian Museum, Erath, Louisiana, exhibit.

⁶¹ Natsis, “Legislation and Language,” 326.

⁶² Reed, *Lache Pas*, 30.

⁶³ Reed, *Lache Pas*, 30.

The movement to restore French in public schools in Louisiana was launched in a remarkably short period of time.⁶⁴ Thirty teachers arrived from France in the program's inaugural year, 1970. The French government had authorized young men to teach in Louisiana's elementary schools as a form of public sector service in lieu of French military service, and within a few years, CODOFIL employed over three hundred French teachers, the vast majority from France, and a small number from Quebec, and administered French programs in more than half the state's parishes,⁶⁵ teaching 40,800 children.⁶⁶ In 1972, Domengeaux traveled to France with a group of students studying in a French program at the Université Catholique d'Angers, and met with French President Georges Pompidou: "M. Pompidou interrogated me about the situation of French in Louisiana. He was openly interested in the drama of a population, having kept its language, its customs, and traditions for two centuries, that was now having more and more difficulties. He declared himself ready to support our action with indispensable credits and exchanges to carry out the task."⁶⁷

The French initiative intersected at a moment in American culture when Americans were newly interested in the intergenerational continuity of ethnic identity and non-English languages, and Louisiana's French revival movement must also be understood in this national context. The number of Americans who indicated on the U.S. Census in 1970 that their native language was a language

⁶⁴ Natsis, "Legislation and Language," 327.

⁶⁵ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 84.

⁶⁶ Natsis, "Legislation and Language," 328.

⁶⁷ Natsis, "Legislation and Language," 328.

other than English increased dramatically between 1960 and 1970, reversing a downward trend that had begun after World War II.⁶⁸ The increase in “mother tongue claiming” was very substantial, independent of immigrational and family growth factors, and was accompanied by an increase in the number of mother-tongue schools in the United States, a boom in foreign language broadcasting, the introduction of ethnic festivals and pageants in local communities, and the establishing of ethnic studies courses at American colleges.⁶⁹ As Americans weathered the traumas of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, the counterculture, and disenchantment with national politics, many sought solace and meaning in a more exclusive sense of community, turning to ideas of ancestral identity, a “sidestream ethnicity” that was evidence of a psychological, emotional drive to identify with the “otherness” of non-White Anglo Saxon Protestant mainstream culture.⁷⁰

Sidestream ethnicity came to play a public role very similar to that of religion in American life, “humanizing and strengthening....a ‘good influence’ that makes for a more interesting, colorful, rooted life”: “The ethnic revival in the United States succeeded in bringing sidestream ethnicity out of the family and neighborhood closet...and made it salon-worthy. It could be revealed (and gratified) in college and in church, in public places rather than merely in private

⁶⁸ Joshua A. Fishman, “Mother-Tongue Claiming in the United States Since 1960: Trends and Correlates,” in The Rise and Fall of the Ethnic Revival: Perspectives on Language and Ethnicity, ed. Joshua Fishman, et al (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1985), 129.

⁶⁹ Fishman, “Epilogue,” The Rise and Fall, 489.

⁷⁰ Fishman, “Epilogue,” The Rise and Fall, 509.

ones. It could present itself as being for the general good (e.g., in the case of bilingual education). Its little personal networks -- restaurants, theaters, churches, radio/television programs, neighborhood clubs and schoolhouses -- came to be viewed as the spice of life without which all would be anglobland, tasteless and inert.”⁷¹ Dewey Balfa confessed this same belief in the “angloblandness” of mainstream culture: “Once you've taken the Cajun language, you've taken the Cajun culture away from me, away from my grandchildren, then who are they? They're an American plastic card with a number on it.”⁷²

International, national, state and local support for French in Louisiana succeeded impressively: Between 1960 and 1970, there was a 120 percent increase in the number of Americans who claimed French as their mother tongue.⁷³ But although French was one of the “big six” languages that accounted for the lion’s share of non-English mother-tongue claiming between 1960 and 1970, along with Spanish, German, Italian, Polish and Yiddish, scholars who write on mother-tongue claiming and ethnicity do not engage on the topic of French in Louisiana, since again, there’s the old anomaly: Louisianans were native-born Americans whose great, great grandparents were also native-born Americans. And the French language movement, with its global context, had a different character and manifested different concerns. The French ethnic press was more fixated than the Spanish, Yiddish and German presses, for example, on

⁷¹ Fishman, “Epilogue,” The Rise and Fall, 510-511.

⁷² Dewey Balfa in Alan Lomax’s Cajun Country, DVD.

⁷³ Fishman, “Mother-Tongue Claiming,” The Rise and Fall, 134.

the extent to which the ethnic mother tongue was spoken in the home, and the French language itself was the second most frequent topic discussed in print.⁷⁴ The Hispanic press included many stories about the political and economic advances made by Spanish-speaking Americans,⁷⁵ but the French ethnic press cast its gaze back to the *Grand Dérangement*,⁷⁶ referring to either France or Canada as the old country.⁷⁷

This is a population whose relationship to language, and perhaps to history, should be compared not with the history of German immigrants but with the history of Amish speakers of German. The precipitous decline of the number of Pennsylvania German speakers between 1900 and the 1950s conjured up “the specter of language death” as Pennsylvania German was increasingly learned only from grandparents; after World War I, “the ultimate extinction of Pennsylvania German” seemed inevitable. Although there was a resurgence of interest in Pennsylvania German in the 1930s, when WPA scholars were eagerly documenting every aspect of American folklife, the 1950s seemed to have marked the final turning away of children and adolescents from the ancestral dialect; in 1957, Pennsylvania German was given another twenty years. Many adults of the day had endured ridicule and for speaking Pennsylvania German as children, and suffered under legal prohibitions against the language, and they embraced

⁷⁴ Michael H. Gertner, et al, “Language and Ethnicity in the Periodical Publications of Four American Ethnic Groups,” in The Rise and Fall of the Ethnic Revival, 309.

⁷⁵ Gertner, et al, “Language and Ethnicity” in The Rise and Fall, 309.

⁷⁶ Gertner, et al, 314.

⁷⁷ Gertner, et al, 312.

English because they thought it offered more advantages to their children. One informant said: “I did not speak anything but Pennsylvania German till I went to school, and I promised myself I would not do that to my children.” By the 1960s, the switch to English seemed complete, and the last vestiges of Pennsylvania German could be found only in the leisure activities domain. Yet it was these activities that inspired language restoration efforts resulted in “a renewed appreciation of Pennsylvania German as an integral part of the Pennsylvania German history and tradition.”⁷⁸

Likewise, the “leisure activities” domain became the essential, and then nearly the only, domain in which Cajun French could survive: in the lyrics of traditional songs. The French that was taught in Louisiana schools was standard French, and if Domengeaux was earnest in his desire to use French to boost Louisiana’s tourism revenues from France and its political status in the Francophone world, it could not have been otherwise. But Louisiana folklorists who study old-time Cajun and Creole music and Louisiana storytelling traditions were baffled by the state’s devotion to standard continental French, arguing that there was no point in teaching an “academic, purist and elitist” form of continental French, since the only form of French that could preserve a continuity with the past was the particular French that had been spoken in Southwest Louisiana: “We can’t just regenerate a generic French, we have to

⁷⁸ Wolfgang W. Moelleken, “Language Maintenance and Language Shift in Pennsylvania German: A Comparative Investigation,” *Monatshefte*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (1983): 172-182.

regenerate this one...There's a whole aural poetics that operates. It's not only the language, but it's the way we see the world, the way we conceive of the way things work, the way we move through the world...all of things are expressed in the language. If that's not what we're trying to preserve, I quit.⁷⁹

The unfortunate outcome of the French language movement is that its rhetoric was so intently premised on Cajun identity as to exclude Creoles altogether. Marie Rodgers' policy paper summarizing efforts to revive French in Southwest Louisiana describes the Acadian as a settler who disappeared "behind a barricade of swamp and distance, to recreate his life as it was in Nova-Scotia, and who lived "happily" until "the intrusion of American life." Absent from her account are any references to French-speaking Creoles in Southwest Louisiana, or the ways in which American life historically "intruded" on that population, until she acknowledges that, of the 400,000 Louisianans said to speak French daily, "This, I think, probably includes the Negroes, since they have a place in the "French" culture."⁸⁰ This is the only time that Rodgers puts the word "French" in quotes.

Domengeaux, too, only briefly acknowledged that both Creoles and Cajuns inhabit Southwest Louisiana and had spent centuries speaking French to one another, despite the fact that some parishes had majority black populations: in St. John the Baptist and Point Coupée parishes, fifty-two percent of residents

⁷⁹ Barry Ancelet has been one of the most activist and highly regarded figures in the language preservation movement in Southwest Louisiana. These remarks appear in in Pat Mire's *Mon Cher Comrade*.

⁸⁰ Rodgers, "The French Heritage," 2-5.

were Creole; in Iberville Parish, forty-nine percent.⁸¹ The black population of Southwest Louisiana in its entirety was twenty-eight percent. In a February 1968 speech to the Louisiana Association of Fairs and Festivals, Domengeaux described Louisiana French culture as having been brought from the French Caribbean as well as from France and Quebec, though it is clear that Cajuns, not Creoles, are the model French-speaking Louisianans: "...and, of course, some degree of the French language and heritage is to be found in our colored population as well."⁸² *Some degree*: shared linguistic, religious, social, culinary and musical traditions. Domengeaux, like Rodgers, was making an appeal to "ethnic feeling" and not to cross-racial solidarity.

The French language movement in Louisiana, predicated on the rhetoric of the shared French-Canadian ancestry of all Southwest Louisianans, even got its own flag for the ten-year anniversary of the bicentennial. The flag, designed by a University of Southwest Louisiana dean who had been inspired by the Acadian flag of New Brunswick, and borrowing from the college's seal and the emblem of *France-Amérique de la Louisiane-Acadienne*, featured three silver *fleurs-de-lis* against a blue background, symbolizing the Cajuns' origins in France, a gold castle on a red field, symbolizing the Acadian exiles' settlement in Spanish colonial Louisiana, and a gold star on a white field symbolizing the patron saint of the Acadian people, Our Lady of Assumption.⁸³ Introduced in 1965, the flag

⁸¹ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 53.

⁸² Domengeaux, Fairs and Festivals speech, transcript, 3.

⁸³ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 81-82.

was ubiquitous in Southwest Louisiana by 1968, where it proclaimed to Creoles that the history and culture of the region belonged exclusively to those whose ancestors claimed descent from eighteenth-century Canadians – and if not, well, never mind. Historically, the Creole population had been more likely than the Cajun population to be monolingual French speakers,⁸⁴ likely because of far more restrictive access to public education and its English-language curriculum, and not a single Creole could trace their ancestry to New Brunswick, but the rhetoric of the French language movement was strenuously predicated on Cajun identity.

The new French language programs in Louisiana were seen by traditionalists as being the final death knell of Cajun and Creole French, which from then on, would only live on in old-time music. Dewey Balfa's daughter Christine told the *Times-Picayune* that a policy to teach standard French was “better than nothing,” but that Cajuns no longer sounded like Cajuns; instead, they sounded like French-speaking Americans.⁸⁵ But old-time music did indeed benefit greatly from Louisiana's French language movement as a new generation of these “French-speaking Americans” grew up speaking French, studied French culture, wrote French-language lyrics, and gained audiences for their music not only in the United States but in France and Canada.

The “French reality” of Southwest Louisiana, so historically complex and interconnected, was, in the years after the language revival movement, imagined

⁸⁴ Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 124.

⁸⁵ Melissa Hartmann, “Le cri du bayou: the status and promotion of the French language and cajun music in Louisiana” (M.A. thesis, Colorado State University, 2012): 6.

romantically and represented categorically as a story of persecuted French Canadian immigrants living out their lives together, developing their art and their folkways as a culturally isolated people. The old-time Creole musical tradition was subject to its own myth-making as well, as its most important musicians were retrospectively labeled zydeco musicians, even though they had played old-time music and sang centuries-old songs. The etymological connection between the word *genre* for a kind of music and the French *gens* for a kind of people is instructive: The rhetoric of ethnic revival and the Civil Rights movement took the traditional musicians of Southwest Louisiana and put them through the sieve, so that when Old-Timey Records released Amédé Ardoin's 1928-1938 recordings in 1983, the label described Ardoin as "the first Black zydeco recording artist,"⁸⁶ while Arhoolie called Ardoin "The First Black Cajun Recording Artist,"⁸⁷ and referred to "Bois Sec" Ardoin and Canray Fontenot as "an African American" band.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Amédé Ardoin, "Louisiana Cajun Music Vol. 6: Amadé Ardoin – The First Black Zydeco Recording Artist (1928-1938)," Old-Timey Records, 1983.

⁸⁷ Mark Mattern, "Let the Good Times Unroll: Music and Race Relations in Southwest Louisiana," *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Autumn, 1997): 164.

⁸⁸ "Bois Sec" Ardoin and Canray Fontenot, "La Musique Creole," Arhoolie Records, 1996.

7.

French Communion: The Baby Boom Generation

How is the imagination to resolve these contraries – the figure of voice that tells the story....and the figure of the voice that sings the song, and plays [the music], a figure of culture and history, touched with the spirit of a particular historical moment, a particular tradition, a particular juncture in the life-cycle to which the singing of the song gives meaning and form? The answer is that it is not to resolve them.¹

Robert Cantwell, "Smith's Memory Theater: The Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music"

In a region bathed in its mythology of itself – Evangeline Parish having been named for the ill-fated romantic heroine of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem² – race and genre were also the stuff of myth making. As the sounds of urban African-American culture drew the younger generation of Creole musicians away from traditional music and Creole accordionists began to imitate, and to identify with, the highly amplified Texas zydeco music sound they heard on records and on the radio, the music culture of Southwest Louisiana fractured

¹ Robert Cantwell, "Smith's Memory Theater: The Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music," *The New England Review*, Vol. 13, ¾ (1991): 388.

² Carl A. Brasseaux, *Acadian to Cajun, Transformation of a People, 1803-1877* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 111.

along generational as well as racial lines. Younger Cajun musicians, drawn to rock much the way Cajun musicians of earlier generation had incorporated country and western instrumentation and styles into their sound, had less interest in old-time music traditions. Ultimately, younger Cajun musicians found their way back to old-time music through the experience of traveling to France and to French-speaking Canada, much as an earlier generation had found its way to cultural pride through their experiences in war-time France, while younger Creole musicians assimilated into the music culture of the urban African-American South.

Music journalists and historians of Louisiana culture struggled to describe and categorize old-time music in light of new ethnic and racial sensibilities, labeling Amédé Ardoin's singing and accordion styles "very much white Cajun,"³ and referring to the Creole Carrière brothers, fiddler Bèbè and accordionist Eraste, whose 1974 Arhoolie album was titled "Cajun Fiddle Styles," as "important practitioners of the early, primitive zydeco sound."⁴ Race and genre were also categories of the imagination. Cajun-Creole music was claimed as Creole music by Creoles and Cajun music by Cajuns, with one musician insisting that he could tell the difference between the music of Amédé Ardoin and the music of Dennis McGee because "I could tell the difference between a black fiddler and a white fiddler."⁵

³ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 102.

⁴ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 104.

⁵ Sara Le Menestral, "The Color of Music, Social Boundaries and Stereotypes in

The record men who recorded Cajun and Creole musicians, the folklorists who studied the culture, and the musicians themselves disagreed over questions of proprietorship, relationships between the old and the new, the desire for authenticity and the demands of the market. Chris Strachwitz became interested in Louisiana-born Houston musician Clifton Chenier in the first place because he thought of Chenier as a Creole musician performing in the tradition of old-time French music, which he knew would appeal to “the tastes of white college-educated blues fans like himself.”⁶ When Lightnin’ Hopkins sent Strachwitz to hear Chenier playing in one of Houston’s Frenchtown neighborhood beer joints in 1962, Strachwitz fell in love with Chenier’s bluesy piano key accordion music and Creole singing, and called Bill Quinn the next day to arrange a recording session with Chenier at Gold Star Studio. But Chenier showed up for the session with a full band, telling Strachwitz, “I gotta have an orchestra.” Chenier thought of his music as rhythm and blues with an accordion, and he wanted the full electric guitar, bass, piano, saxophone and drum sound. Asked to name his early influences, he named blues celebrities B.B. King, Muddy Waters and his cousin Lightnin’ Hopkins, not old-time Creole or Cajun musicians, and told Strachwitz, “All these kids want Ray Charles....I’m going to whip that goddamn Fats Domino.”⁷

Just as Rinzler had intervened and implored Doc Watson to play roots

Southwest Louisiana French Music,” *Southern Cultures* 13.3 (2007): 93.

⁶ Broven, *South to Louisiana*, 132.

⁷ Tisserand, *Kingdom of Zydeco*, 132-133.

music on an acoustic guitar rather than country standards on an electric guitar, Strachwitz had to cajole and negotiate with Chenier to persuade him to play down-home songs and sing in French. Chenier had made his first recordings for the Hollywood, California blues and gospel label Specialty Records in 1955, the same year that label signed Little Richard, and the ambitious Chenier thought of himself as belonging in a cohort of blues and rock stars that included Percy Mayfield, Chuck Berry and T-Bone Walker.⁸ When Strachwitz met him several years later, Chenier was set on recording mostly rock and roll numbers, and he and Strachwitz argued over the fact that Chenier “wasn’t going to do any more of that goddamn French,” despite the fact that the French songs were all Strachwitz wanted to record. “I just thought he sounded so much better singing in Creole,” Strachwitz said.⁹

Despite his insistence to Strachwitz that he was done with French-language music, when Chenier's "*Tous les jours la même chose*," [Every day the same thing] released as “Louisiana Blues,” became Chenier's first Arhoolie hit, and he saw the appeal of French-language music among young African Americans and Creoles, he reversed course and started on the path to becoming a promoter of the Creole French language and the old accordion-rubboard combo. On one Arhoolie recording, his uncle Morris “Big” Chenier accompanied him on an old beat-up fiddle playing Ardoin's “Eunice Two Step,” released as “Sweet

⁸ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 373.

⁹ Tisserand, *Kingdom of Zydeco*, 133.

Little Doll."¹⁰ Asked whether he was pleased to see the French language being promoted through the work of the Center for the Development of French in Louisiana, Chenier replied, "I love that. Cause you see, like I say, there's a lot of people holding back on French, you know, but me, I never was ashamed of French and I never will be."¹¹

But just the presence of an accordion in a multi-instrument blues-and-rock band, with a few French lyrics punctuating the English, didn't make Chenier a classic Creole performer, just as the popularity of this new zydeco sound didn't retroactively transform old-time Creole musicians into old-time zydeco musicians. Canray Fontenot and "Bois Sec" Ardoin were perplexed when people began to talk about zydeco music's early-twentieth century origins in the music of Améd   Ardoin. "Now they're talking about zydeco music," Fontenot said in an interview in the 1980s. "They never had that. I never known that. They don't even know what it means. If you was black, you was playing Creole. If you was white you was playing Cajun." Ardoin agreed: "For me, I don't know much for the zydeco music, I never played that. I was born with Creole music...Creole music is my music."¹² Zydeco was merely the name given to the way Chenier played, Ardoin said, "It's just a word that's been made up," Cajun fiddler Marc Savoy agreed.¹³

But Chenier presented zydeco both as a musical form that he had invented

¹⁰ Tisserand, *Kingdom of Zydeco*, 135.

¹¹ Clifton Chenier, in an interview with Ben Sandmel in *Cajun Music*, Savoy, 381.

¹² Tisserand, *Zydeco Kingdom*, 32.

¹³ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 313.

and one that he had revived: “I’m the one that started zydeco, well the old generation had it a long time ago.”¹⁴ By Chenier’s accounts, the old-time Creole accordionists Sidney Babineaux, who was born in the 1880s, and Claude Faulk, born in 1908, had played “old-timey” zydeco music.¹⁵ Because Chenier adapted some of the songs of Creole accordionist Claude Faulk,¹⁶ and performed some music from the old-time Cajun-Creole repertoire, including “*Jolie Blonde*,” “Louisiana Two-Step” and “Lafayette Waltz,” he was comfortable claiming that all old-time Creole music had been just an earlier form of zydeco, and that traditional Creole accordionists like Améd   Ardoin were zydeco musicians, which is the like saying that since the Rolling Stones covered Muddy Water’s “Can’t Be Satisfied,” Muddy Waters was a rock and roll musician. Not only was zydeco not a musical descendant of old-time Creole music, it wasn’t a South Louisiana music, either. It had been developed in the Creole neighborhoods of Houston when French Louisiana music collided with urban blues, and then, in the 1970s, when rapidly rising oil prices brought new jobs to Southwest Louisiana,¹⁷ bringing Louisiana Texans back across the border, the faster-tempo accordion sound became popular in Lafayette and Lake Charles dance halls and thought of, in time, as a Louisiana music.

The appeal of this essentially imported music, and the promotion of the “invented” tradition of zydeco as an indigenous Southwest Louisiana form, then

¹⁴ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 375.

¹⁵ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 371.

¹⁶ Savoy, *Cajun Music*, 316.

¹⁷ Tisserand, *Zydeco Kingdom*, 143.

threatened the endurance of older Creole music.¹⁸ Ardoin and Fontenot were the last of their generation of old-time Creole musicians. "The French music went down amongst us blacks,"¹⁹ "Bois Sec" Ardoin recalled. Zydeco, which became a symbol of Creole ethnicity for the younger generation, was "neither Cajun, blues, nor necessarily even Creole,"²⁰ but in the same mood of ethnic revivalism in which Cajuns raised their Acadian flag, the term "zydeco" was generically applied to all Creole music, and "anachronistically applied to Creole musical styles antedating zydeco's appearance by decades or more" as a way to invent "a romanticized rural past" for a newly developed urban Texas musical style.²¹

The insistence that zydeco music was a folk style being revived rather than a contemporary form being invented was a large part of its appeal. Zydeco was promoted as having emerged from rural folk culture, and entered popular consciousness as the folk music of Louisiana's rural black Creoles, "a self-sufficient, nonindustrial, geographically isolated collective of kith and kin, cooperatively producing only what they consumed, consuming only what they produced, communicating exclusively through oral/aural conduits," whereas in fact, zydeco style was coherent with urban popular music, and was developed "by urban wage earners, professional musicians, whose technological and musical sophistication...geographic and socioeconomic mobility, and more general

¹⁸ John Minton, "Houston Creoles and Zydeco: The Emergence of an African American Urban Popular Style," *American Music*, Vol. 14, No. 4, New Perspectives on the Blues (Winter, 1996): 515.

¹⁹ Tisserand, *Zydeco Kingdom*, 105.

²⁰ Minton, "Houston Creoles and Zydeco," 517.

²¹ Minton, "Houston Creoles and Zydeco," 477-478.

relations to urban industrial...consumer economies are all more consistent with mass popular music than they are with local folk tradition.”²² The struggles of the Civil Rights movement then informed and intensified the popular appreciation of Chenier’s music, so that the young white college students who saw Chenier at a 1966 University of California-Berkeley blues concert performing on a bill with Muddy Waters were listening not just to a popular musician but to a popular black folk musician, a distinction that was meaningful not only on the Berkeley campus but in the larger national culture.

When zydeco proved to be not really folk enough, Strachwitz continued on his hunt for local folk tradition, recording the Ardoin family in their home performing old style two-steps and waltzes. Like Rinzler, Strachwitz wanted not just to document and preserve, but to intervene at a moment in time when the last generation to have grown up playing old-time Cajun-Creole music still had time to pass the tradition on. Rinzler had pulled Canray Fontenot out of retirement to bring him to Newport. By 1966, Fontenot no longer even owned a fiddle, and hadn’t played for eight years. “A person gets tired of all that, just like anything else,” Fontenot said. The fiddle he used at Newport had been dug out of the trash by a city worker, and Fontenot restrung it and brought it to the festival. Nor had Fontenot only ever played old-time music. He had been in a string band in the 1940s, playing “hillbilly music.”²³ “Bois Sec” Ardoin and Canray Fontenot had no similarly renowned Creole successors, but Fontenot taught generations of

²² Minton, “Houston Creoles and Zydeco,” 505.

²³ Ancelet, Cajun and Creole Music Makers, 79-81.

fiddlers to play. When he died in 1996, *The New York Times* memorialized him in the parlance of the day as “A synthesizer of cultural identities,”²⁴ a phrase that would have baffled him as well as generations of old-time Cajun-Creole musicians. Fontenot and “Bois Sec” Ardoin, who played together for forty years, received the National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1986 for their contribution to traditional arts, and when Ardoin died in 2007, *The New York Times* credited him with having “stalwartly sustained” South Louisiana tradition by performing with “a younger generation of Creole traditionalists, notably Balfa Toujours, led by Dewey’s daughter Christine.”²⁵

That younger generation, brought up to speak standard continental French as taught by French, Canadian and Belgian school teachers, and then, eventually, Louisiana teachers, included accordionist Zachary Richard and fiddler Michael Doucet, founder of the traditionalist band Beausoleil. Richard left Louisiana and moved to New York in the early 1970s to become a folksinger, but was drawn to the radical politics of the separatist movement in Quebec, where his French-language music found an audience. Pondering the history of the Acadians in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and New Orleans, he wrote what he described as

²⁴ Peter Watrous, “Canray Fontenot, 72, a Singer and Violinist in Creole Style,” *The New York Times*, August 2, 1995.
<http://www.nytimes.com/1995/08/02/obituaries/canray-fontenot-72-a-singer-and-violinist-in-creole-style.html>.

²⁵ Jon Pareles, “Bois Sec Ardoin, Musician and Nurturer of Creole Tradition, Dies at 81,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 2007.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/20/arts/music/20ardoin.html>

“militant”²⁶ songs about his newly-discovered Acadian heritage:

Réveille! Réveille!
C'est les goddams qui viennent
Brûler la récolte.
Réveille! Réveille!
Hommes acadiens
Pour sauver le village.
Mon grand, grand, grand grandpère
Est v'nu de la Bretagne,
Le sang de ma famille est mouille l'Acadié.
Et là les maudits viennent
Nous chaser comme des bêtes,
Détruire les saintes familles,
Nous jeter tous au vent.
Réveille! Réveille!
J'ai entendu parler
De monter avec Beausoliel
Pour prendre le fusil battre les sacrés maudits.
D'aller en la Louisiane.
Reveille! Reveille!
Pour trouver de la bonne paix
Là-bas dans la Louisiane.
Réveille! Réveille!
J'ai vu mon pauvre père
Etait fait prisonnier
Pendant que ma mère
Ma belle mère braillait
J'ai vu ma belle maison
Etait mise aux flames,
Et moi, j'su resté orphelin,
Orphelin de l'Acadie.
Réveille! Réveille!
C'est les goddams qui viennent
Voler les enfants.
Réveille! Réveille!
Hommes acadiens
Pour sauver l'héritage.²⁷

²⁶ Ancelet, *Cajun and Creole Music Makers*, 93-97.

²⁷ Ancelet, *Cajun and Creole Music Makers*, 98.

[Rise! Rise!
 The goddamned (British) are coming
 To burn the crops.
 Rise! Rise!
 Acadian men
 To save the village.
 My great, great great-grandfather
 Came from Brittany
 The blood of my ancestors was spilled in Acadia.
 And the cursed British come
 To chase us like cattle,
 To destroy our sacred families,
 To cast us to the wind.
 Rise! Rise!
 I heard them call us
 To join Beausoliel
 To take up arms against the enemy
 I heard them say
 To go to Louisiana
 Rise! Rise! I saw my poor father
 Taken prisoner
 While my mother
 My beautiful mother screamed and wept.
 I saw my beautiful house
 Engulfed in flames
 And me left an orphan,
 An orphan of Acadia.
 Rise! Rise!
 The goddamned (British) are coming
 To steal our children.
 Rise! Rise!
 Acadian men
 To save our heritage.]

Richard's song captured, and perpetuated, the myth of a direct migration from Canada to Louisiana beginning in 1755, although there was no such immediate, overland migration. In fact, many Acadians went to New England and Philadelphia, Maryland and New York, Saint Domingue and other islands in the French West Indies, England and France, returning after the Treaty of 1763 to

Quebec, the Falkland Islands and Louisiana.²⁸ Even the 1906 An Historical Sketch of the Acadians: Their Deportation and Wanderings by George Potter Bible documents the Acadians' experiences in Georgia and the Carolinas, an experience through which the exile "lost his identity as an Acadian": "They (many of them) avoid all reference to Acadians, and would be pleased to be known exclusively as Americans," Judge Joseph A. Breaux of the Supreme Court of Louisiana was quoted as saying.²⁹ Many Cajuns felt estranged from the grand historic tale of the Acadian dispersal from Canada and the distant Acadian past in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, which was "a state-imagined connection with a disjunct past...[that imposed] a 'recollection' of a past that was not truly knowable, ownable, or memorable to these Cajuns. L'Acadie became an ethereal trace of a past with no ground."³⁰

Yet people like to create myths that are larger than themselves, Richard said.³¹ And the stories they told themselves inspired not only sorrow and longing, but anger. Songs about the Acadian experience in French Canada began to fill the Cajun repertoire (Richard's "Dans le nord canadien" [In the Canadian North] describes British soldiers coming to burn the homes of Acadians; in the years ahead, Dewey Balfa would write "1755," one of dozens of songs written by Cajun

²⁸ Carl. A. Brasseaux, Four Hundred Years of Acadian Life in North America," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 23.1 (Summer 1989): 7.

²⁹ George P. Bible, An Historical Sketch of the Acadians: Their Deportation and Wanderings (Philadelphia: Ferris & Leach, 1906), 135.

³⁰ Ron Emoff, "A Cajun Poetics of Loss and Longing," *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Spring – Summer, 1998): 285.

³¹ Ancelet, Cajun and Creole Music Makers, 99.

musicians about *Le Grand Derangement*), and the romanticized, fictionalized account of the Acadian expulsion was given national FM radio play through The Band's "Acadian Driftwood," written by Robbie Robertson, whose wife was French-Canadian. The song described an Acadian population that had experienced a history of forced exile and hard labor: "They signed a treaty and our homes were taken...The government had us walkin' in chains...We worked in the sugar fields up from New Orleans."³²

There were ugly sentiments as well: Senator Allen J. Ellender of Terrebone Parish, lecturing his colleagues on the occasion of the Acadian Bicentennial, introduced his request for a commemorative three-cent postage stamp by saying that the expulsion of the Acadians from Nova Scotia was "a deep scar on the Anglo-Saxon world. Its only counterpart in modern times can be found in the concentration camps of the Gestapo and the Communist secret police."³³

Zachary Richard's cousin, Michael Doucet, came to care about the history and myths of Acadia only after leaving Louisiana. Doucet, who had grown up playing Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger songs on guitar, was struck by seeing, on a trip to France in 1974, that Cajun music had become "the new folk music, something really beautiful," and that there were serious young French musicians who were devoted to the music. "In France, I saw eight fiddlers playing "*Jolie Blonde*" the old way, accompanied by a hurdy-gurdy...I began to understand what

³² The Band, "Northern Lights – Southern Cross," Capitol, compact disc, originally released as LP, 1975.

³³ Bernard, "Acadian Pride, Anglo Conformism," 164.

we had and what we stood for.”³⁴

Doucet returned to Louisiana determined to learn to play fiddle and to play old-time Cajun-Creole songs. He named his new band Beausoleil, after the legendary Joseph Broussard, a leader of the Acadian resistance to the 1755 *Grand Dérangement*. Although Doucet had grown up in Southwest Louisiana, he had never heard of the region’s two most famous Cajun fiddlers until he went to Paris: “I came back to Louisiana...went out and met some of the people I had heard of in France, like Dewey Balfa and Dennis McGee.” Doucet received a National Endowment for the Arts Folk Arts Apprenticeship to learn Cajun fiddle styles. “Dennis McGee really did it for me,” he said. “And his songs were so old. Anything after 1940 was a new song to him.” Doucet abandoned his plans to go to graduate school in New Mexico to study Romantic poetry so that he could immerse himself in Cajun French music and the Cajun French language instead. “I traded Blake for Balfa,” he said.³⁵

Beausoleil, invited to record for the French label Pathé Marconi, was then invited to perform at the Louisiane Bien-Aimée American Bicentennial Celebration in Paris in 1976, playing the same accordion and fiddle music that was played in the dance halls of Montmartre when the American Wallace Fowlie visited Paris in the 1930s while riding in a carriage down the Champs-Élysées. Back in Louisiana, Doucet studied the fieldwork of Lomax and Oster to find “the real songs” and “the black origins of Cajun music...the whole black French scene

³⁴ Ancelet, *Cajun and Creole Music Makers*, 143.

³⁵ Ancelet, *Cajun and Creole Music Makers*, 145-148.

which greatly influenced Cajun music at the turn of the century,”³⁶ and went to work with Dewey Balfa in Balfa’s Schools of Tomorrow program, which was funded by a Folk Artists in the Schools grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and sponsored by the Southern Folk Revival project.³⁷ Balfa worried that if there was nobody to come back from working in the fields to sit on the porch and pick up the fiddle, traditional music would disappear with his generation, along with the understanding of racial solidarity that was at the foundation of Cajun-Creole music. “When you sit at a table and you eat your good gumbo, that’s not from your ancestors...the black people brought this type of culture into our part of the country, and I’m just as proud of eating gumbo as they are. I respect them for who they are,” Balfa said. But he faced resistance from one parish superintendent who objected to Balfa’s description of Cajun-Creole music as having been developed by “a mixture of white and black people.” The superintendent replied, “How in the world are you gonna make a Cajun with a negro?”³⁸

Balfa, who continued to play in local bars and drove an Acadia Parish school bus for twenty years,³⁹ remained an indefatigable cultural activist in Southwest Louisiana and an ambassador of old-time music nationally,

³⁶ Ancelet, *Cajun and Creole Music Makers*, 148.

³⁷ Ancelet, *Cajun and Creole Music Makers*, 124.

³⁸ Dewey Balfa, interview with Ancelet, AN1.94, 1981 Basile, University of Louisiana at Lafayette Archives. Audio recording.

³⁹ Mark A. De Wolf, “A Biographical Sketch, Dewey Balfa,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Autumn, 1994): 474.

performing at the inaugurations of Presidents Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter and carrying on as a musician and activist even after enduring the deaths in 1978 of his brothers Rodney and Will, who, like so many other talented musicians in the Cajun-Creole music story, died in a highway accident.⁴⁰

In 1962, construction had begun on Interstate 10 through the coastal prairie land of Southwest Louisiana, creating the major Gulf Coast transportation corridor linking New Orleans to Houston.⁴¹ By 1973 it was nearly complete, cutting straight through the Acadian parishes, crossing the Atchafalaya River swampland, skirting past Breaux Bridge, cutting through Lafayette, with its small “look French” downtown, transforming the music towns of Rayne and Crowley into names on exit signs off a highway where, day and night, loud trucks barreled past billboards and strip malls towards oil refineries. That year, French ethnographer Claudie Marcel-Dubois of the *Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires* in Paris contacted Rinzler at the Smithsonian about her research on French folk songs in Louisiana, and in November, Rinzler set out with Marcel-Dubois for New Orleans, Basile, Lafayette and Breaux Bridge. In Diamond, the pair visited Alma Barthelemey at her home, where they recorded sixty-six songs, and Marcel-Dubois snapped photos of Barthelemey singing as she

⁴⁰ “Last Chorus,” *Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine*, Vol. 37, No. 2, (Aug/Sept/Oct 92): 56-57.

⁴¹ Jeanne Owens, *Southwest Louisiana: A Treasure Revealed* (San Antonio: Historical Publishing Network, 2011), 212.

served coffee at her kitchen table.⁴² And of course they went to Fred's, which, with its overflowing ashtrays and rickety chairs and dark interior, its walls covered with framed photos of old-time musicians, was an important place in the story.

As in all important American music history stories, the story of French music in Southwest Louisiana from World War II to the early 1970s was driven by unusual characters with vastly different lives who ended up in the same recording studios or the same bars, people whose histories and experiences separated them sharply, but who all cared about the same thing at the same complicated historical moment. Chris Strachwitz believed he could find America in its roots music, just as Ralph Rinzler believed that America's old-time music would help Americans better comprehend their own history, including the troubled, but potentially more peaceful and collaborative dynamic of race relations. Harry Smith, whose three-volume *Anthology* had challenged and transformed the folk revival and fascinated a generation of musicians, had envisioned volumes four and five, but by the time Folkways was ready to issue the rest of Smith's collection, he had sold the albums to the New York Public Library. Harry Smith disappeared. He was the only one who could name the people on the recordings, and the library duplicated some of the albums, but with no

⁴² Claudie Marcel-Dubois, "Reflections sur L'Heritage Musical Francais en Louisiane," *Selected reports in Ethnomusicology*, Volume III No. I, Los Angeles: University of California, 1978): 76, figure 7.

documentation. Many of the boxes were destroyed.⁴³ The year that Harry Smith was nominated for a Grammy for the advancement of American folk music, he was starving in the Bowery.⁴⁴

On her field work trip around Southwest Louisiana with Rinzler, Claudie-Marcel Dubois was intrigued to discover a third version of a song she knew well from recordings made in Vendée, France and in Francophone Guadeloupe called “*Les Métamorphoses*.”⁴⁵ Metamorphosis, which was precisely what Fred’s Lounge in Mamou was not, what it had not done, what it did not represent, and would it would not do. On that dance floor, from which Revon Reed broadcast every Saturday morning over KUEN, the band, not to drown out the pain or sorrow but really just to play all the way through it, no matter what personal calamities, the band – after all those years, still just an accordion and a couple fiddles – played on. For free.

⁴³ Asch, *Harry Smith Anthology*, liner notes, 33.

⁴⁴ Ginsberg, “Allen Ginsberg on Harry Smith,” *Harry Smith Anthology*, liner notes, 59.

⁴⁵ Claudie Marcel-Dubois, “*Reflections sur L’Heritage Musical Francais*,” 31-35.

Conclusion

In 2000, Revenant Records released Volume 4 of Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music, (#211) a compilation of fiddle music, gospel and blues. Two Cajun-Creole groups are included in the collection: the Hackberry Ramblers playing "*Dans le Grand Bois*" [In the Forest], and The Four Aces performing "Aces' Breakdown," both recorded at the St. Charles Hotel in New Orleans in 1938. In the liner notes, guitarist John Fahey, who had been so inspired fifty years earlier by the release of Volumes 1-3, poses the question, "Why did Harry Smith choose to end the set with Cajun? Did Smith sympathize or idealize with the agrarian, Acadian French farmers who refused to move to cities and become urbanized and English and turn their backs on their religion?" Thus the story of Cajun music as having developed from the exile experiences of Acadians, described as principled resisters of empire, is told again. "Did [Smith] want to tell us something," Fahey asks, "like perhaps here and there, hidden from the scrutiny of the intelligentsia and the stock market a folk society still exists, in many ways undisturbed?"¹

That folk society more than found its way into the society of the stock market in the decades after Dewey Balfa first took the stage at Newport.

Acadiana's heritage tourism industry, which once had trouble competing with

¹ John Fahey, "Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music, Volume Four," Revenant Records #211, 2000, compact disc, liner notes, 90.

Louisiana's plantation tours, now draws tourists looking for "the cultural shock of exotic Frenchness"² to the rural Mardi Gras celebrations and music venues of the prairie parishes. A visitor's guide to Acadia Parish explains that the first settlers were "exiled Acadians who were induced by the Spanish government to come to this area with gifts of large tracts of land, cattle and agricultural implements," exchanging the portrait of cast-out exiles for one that depicts Cajuns as highly sought-after recruits who were enticed into settling in Southwest Louisiana.³

Although Creoles still hold the annual *courir* (in only one community, LeBleu Settlement, do blacks and whites hold Mardi Gras together), Mardi Gras is treated in tourist literature as a "uniquely Cajun-French cultural institution" obscuring the fact that for most of the history of Mardi Gras in Southwest Louisiana, Mardi Gras was a cultural activity participated in by a racially mixed population. Many Cajuns are at best "only vaguely aware" that rural Mardi Gras was a longstanding tradition among Creoles as well, and the state and national media that cover rural Mardi Gras describe it as a Cajun event. In the mid-1980s, the organization CREOLE (Cultural Resources Educational Opportunities toward Linguistic Enrichment) dedicated itself to preserving Creole culture and attracting tourists to Creole cultural events in Southwest Louisiana, in an acknowledgement that Creoles had been effectively disinherited from

² Carolyn E. Ware, "Heritage Tourism in Rural Acadiana," *Western Folklore* Volume 62, No. 53 (Summer, 2003): 182.

³ "Louisiana Cajun Prairie, Acadia Parish, A Visitor's Guide" (Crowley: Acadia Parish Tourist Commission, 2010), 28.

propriatorship of Cajun-Creole cultural traditions.⁴ Thus, although it is true that genuine traditions “need neither be revived or invented,” the genuine traditions of Southwest Louisiana were not perpetuated in their original form, as events and ceremonies participated in by the entire community, but reimagined as the traditions of only one cultural group, the Cajuns.

That cultural group even had its day in court. In a 1980 discrimination suit filed by Calvin Roach, a “native born American of Acadian descent,” against his employer, Dresser Industrial Valve and Instrument Division, Dresser was accused of terminating Roach’s employment based on his status as Cajun and his association with other Cajun employees. Dresser argued that had Roach been terminated because his ancestors came from England, Poland, Spain, Germany, Russia, Mexico, or any other country, then Roach had a valid legal claim, but that Acadia was not a country and thus Cajuns did not constitute a national or ethnic group. The judge, citing James Domengeaux’s description of a Cajun as anyone whose ancestry includes someone who once lived in Acadia, pointed out that the seventeenth-century Acadians were a “multi-national group” that included settlers from Scotland and Ireland, and that they considered themselves to be “a new people.” Likewise, in Louisiana, people of many ancestries considered themselves to be Cajun, because in it’s “openness,” Southwest Louisiana had assimilated non-Cajuns into Cajun culture. Agreeing with Roach’s claim that he was a member of an ethnic minority, the judge wrote: “The Louisiana Acadian is

⁴ Sexton, “Cajun Mardi Gras,” 297-311.

alive and well. He is ‘upfront’ and main stream.’”⁵

The Southwest Louisiana heritage tourism industry is premised on this folkstream, this mainstreaming of an old-time “outsider” cultural identity and the folk music, cultural traditions and cuisine associated with that identity. But the idea of folk music in America is no longer tied to the rural origins or self-taught musicianship of the performer. Rather, it has become a presentation style, an indicator of an apparently (though perhaps not actually) modest production budget, a few acoustic numbers, and an attitude towards music that is decidedly not oriented towards commercial pop, even if the music is commercially lucrative and popular. One of the legacies of the folk revival movement was its insistence that the simply-dressed and casual-mannered musician is the truly “authentic” American performer.

If the “authentic” French folk music of Southwest Louisiana entered the mainstream through the legacy of local activists like Revon Reed, the advocacy of national folklorists like Ralph Rinzler, and the work of commercial label owners like Chris Strachwitz, it entered the realm of modern art through Harry Smith’s still-remarkable *Anthology*, which integrated Cajun-Creole music into the canon of folk music, with its narratives of poverty, its confessions of desire and depictions of violence, its humor and melancholy, its stories of the American outsider. Although the cultural and racial politics of the decades that followed

⁵ Calvin J. Roach vs. Dresser Industrial Valve and Instrument Division, 494 F. Supp. 215. United States District Court for the Western District Louisiana, Alexandria Division, 1980.

unhinged Cajun music from Creole music, one slowing down to recapture the old-time sounds of the ancestral rural past, one speeding up to keep up with the fast-tempo pace of modern urban culture, Smith's compilation still has a haunting beauty, juxtaposing as it does the sounds of the black and white rural South, and dramatizing for every listener "what it might be like to live in a town, or a country, where everyone you meet has a point of view and nobody ever shuts up."⁶ In other words: to live in the America we have lived in ever since.

The endurance of old-time music showed to a young generation of Louisianans that despite our necessary orientation in a culture of media technology that accelerates and compresses our sense of time, we also live in a greater sense in historical and ancestral time, and that is the arc of time in which the music is played. It showed French speakers in far-flung parts of the globe that the world was smaller after all, that there were songs that connected the Canadian Maritime provinces to the Caribbean islands and the rice fields of Louisiana. And it showed Americans that, despite the homogenizing drive of national media culture and the constancy of the world's gaze upon our politics, our iconic cities and our mass-produced consumer goods, there were still moments when, hearing the music of some other part of the country whose landscapes we would never see and whose inhabitants we would never know, we could still have the sense that the country was new and unknown, that we could still be mysterious to each other.

⁶ Greil Marcus, "Uncle Dave Macon: Agent of Satan?" in Perchuk, Harry Smith: The Avant-Garde, 184.

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