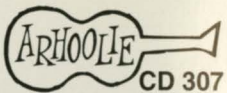


ZYDECO

Volume 1: The Early Years 1949-62



1. Allons A Lafayette—McZiel & Gernger
2. Tap Dance—McZiel & Gernger
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18. Louisiana Stomp—Clifton Chenier
19. Bon Ton Roulet—Clarence Garlow

#1, 2, & 3: Paul McZiel—accordion; Wallace Gernger—vocals & washboard. Recorded at house party Lafayette, La., July 23, 1961.

#4: Sidney Babineaux—accordion; with unidentified relative on washboard. Recorded in Rayne, La., 1962.

#5 & 6: Albert Chevalier—accordion & vocals; Robert Clemon—2nd accordion; Clifton Edmond—washboard. Recorded Houston, Tx., August 6, 1961.

#7 & #8: Albert Chevalier—accordion & vocals; Clifton Edmond—washboard. Recorded at Dow McGowan Lounge in Houston, Tx., July 16, 1961.

#9: George Alberts—vocal; Albert Chevalier—accordion; Clifton Edmond—washboard; Jack Fountleroy—drums. Recorded same as #7 & 8.

#10 & 11: Peter King—accordion; Lester Herbert—vocals and washboard. Recorded in Lake Charles, La., 1962.

#12, 13, 14, & 15: Willie Green's Zydeco Band: Willie Green—vocals & accordion; Joe Savoy—second accordion; Edmond Savoy—washboard. Recorded at Irene's, Houston, Tx., July 15, 1961.

#16: Herbert "Good Rockin'" Sam—vocal and accordion; Harold Joseph—drums. Recorded at Dow McGowan Lounge, Houston, Tx., July 16, 1961.

#17 & 18: Clifton Chenier—vocals and accordion; Big Chenier—guitar; Robert Pete—drums; Lake Charles, La., 1954.

#19: Clarence Garlow—vocal & guitar; Johnnie Mae Brown—piano; Johnny Marshall—drums; unknown bass, Houston, Tx., 1949.

Cover photo of Willie Green (Joe Savoy on the left) at Irene's © by Chris Strachwitz

Cover design by Elizabeth Weil

All songs composed or arranged by the first listed performer composer and © by Tradition Music Co (BMI)

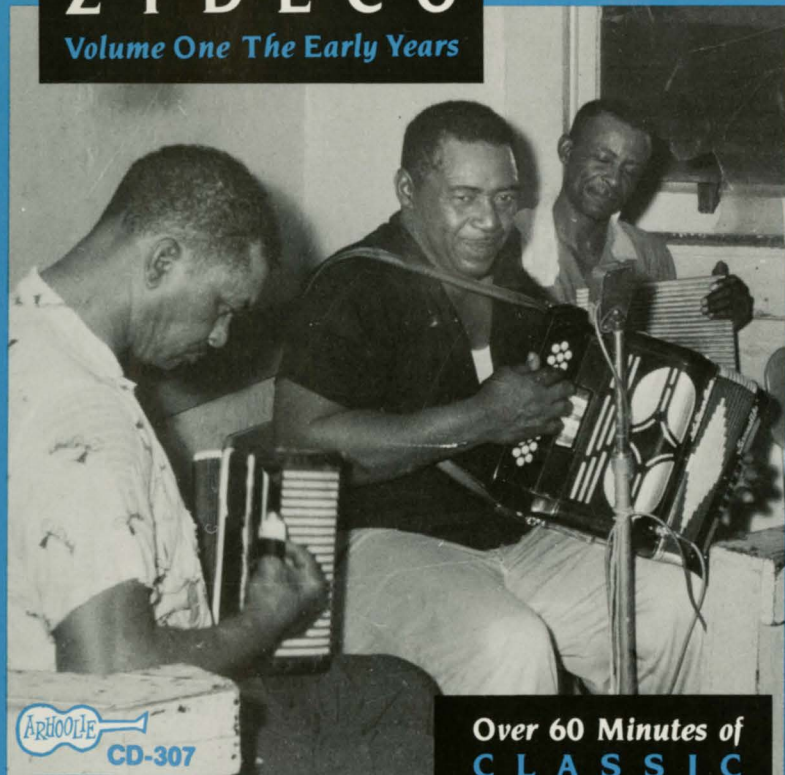
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ZYDECO

Volume One The Early Years



Over 60 Minutes of
CLASSIC
ZYDECO



Zydeco

“**Haricots** (pronounced: “Zydeco”) **Sont Pas Sale**” (“snap beans are not salty”) is not only the title of one of the oldest African-American Creole tunes from Acadiana but, as recorded by Clifton Chenier in the 1960s, it defines what we today know as **Zydeco Music**. *Zydeco* (accent is on the *o*) not only refers to the song, but is also a term generally applied to a unique musical and social gumbo found mainly along the Gulf Coast where Creoles have blended rural Louisiana African American French Creole traditions with Cajun music, Rhythm and Blues, a shot of Rock n’ Roll and a bunch of other juicy ingredients! Along with the music, Zydeco means out-in-the-country style dancing and celebrating with food, drink and enjoyment for old and young. In cities like Houston, Galveston, and Port Arthur in the 1960s, the term Zydeco referred to what went on

at the many neighborhood juke joints, taverns and house dances which catered to recent immigrants from rural southwest Louisiana.

At the time these recordings were made, most Zydeco bands consisted of accordion and drums or accordion and rubboard or maybe two or even three accordions. When I asked the musicians what they called the music they were playing, the answer was far from uniform. Some of the replies were: French Music, Push & Pull, French La La, Accordion Dance, Zydeco, or just Rock & Roll.

The Cajuns, a colloquial shortening for Acadians, who for the most part operated small subsistence family farms, seldom if ever had slaves. However, they mingled with Native Americans, other groups of European background, and Creoles. African Americans had moved into the region

Opposite: Wallace Gernger—rubboard; Paul Mc Zeil—accordion. Photo by Chris Strachwitz

before the Civil War and some even became land owners. Some were of French speaking background, others who were not, soon acquired the culture, language, religion, and music. According to Nick Spitzer, folklorist, now with the Smithsonian Institution, today's French Creoles of Acadiana may include in their ancestry free people of color (*gens libres de couleur*), slaves from the Caribbean and the American South, as well as Spanish, French, and German settlers and merchants, Native Americans, Anglo Americans, and Cajuns.

The music of the wealthier Creoles, like that of the upper class white Acadians, has just about died out but was apparently quite sophisticated with an emphasis on string and brass ensembles which were still popular as late as the 1920s. What has survived until today and become popular under the name of Zydeco, is basically the music of rural Creole farm workers with good seasoning from various urban and other African American influences. Many

African Americans, like most people who moved to Acadiana, adopted many of the ways and traditions of the Cajuns including their music and Roman Catholic religion, and the result is a marvelous regional mix.

The accordion was perhaps first introduced into the area by African Americans, missionaries or by German traders or representatives of the Hohner Co. of Germany in the second half of the 19th century. By the 1920s the popularity of the accordion was revolutionizing both Cajun and Creole music. Until then, fiddlers and small orchestras had been supplying the music in Acadiana. With the arrival of the accordion they were just about put out of business. Caribbean rhythms made themselves felt and so did the beat, tunes and syncopation of the jazz bands from New Orleans that often performed throughout Acadiana at both white and black social events.

The recordings on this disc are not the first made by Creole accordion players. That honor goes to Amédé Ardoin who

made his first sides with Cajun fiddler Dennis McGee in 1929 (available on Arhoolie CD/Cass/ 7007). It wasn't until Clifton Chenier told me that "Amédé Ardoin was the first colored to make French records" that I realized Amédé was of African American background. To my ears, the recordings by Amédé Ardoin did not sound all that different from Angelas LeJeune or Amédé Breaux who were Cajun accordianists I had heard on records. Two related but parallel black and white traditions evolved in southwest Louisiana. Today, within the French Creole tradition, we hear a wide variety of styles from the almost Cajun sounding music of Alphonse "Bois-Sec" Ardoin (a first cousin of Amédé Ardoin's), Danny Poullard or Preston Frank to the heavy African American Zydeco sounds of John Delafosse or Boozoo Chavis. Just as much of today's younger generation leans towards Rap, Soul music, or Rhythm & Blues with less and less Creole content, a similar range was already evident in the early 1960s as these recordings

clearly slow.

The accordion used in the 1920s, and still favored by many traditionalists today, is a single row diatonic instrument which gives the player different notes pushing and pulling. The triple row diatonic accordion used by most Zydeco musicians since the 1950s, is more flexible, can play in several keys and is, I am told, much better for playing blues. The piano accordion, as played by Clifton Chenier on this disc, can be played in all keys, is not diatonic and will play the same note whether you push or pull! Some groups, like Willie Green's, would use a lead accordion while one or even two others, would "bass" or "second" behind him, much in the tradition of early Creole and Cajun fiddlers. The harmonica, much cheaper than any accordion, was also widely used as you can hear on several selections. A concertina, smaller than any of the accordions, was sometimes heard in Willie Green's band when I heard them on other occasions at Irene's.

The old type washboard heard on al-



most all of these recordings, has today turned into a rather sophisticated “rubboard” made of corrugated steel and cut like a vest so as to fit in front of the player’s chest who then scrapes it with beer can openers, spoons, or whatever is handy to create a very loud rasping sound. The amount of air the player leaves in back of the instrument (by either standing up straight or bending forward) determines the brightness of the sound. Cleveland Chenier, who must rate as one of the very best rubboard players with an extraordinary sense for dynamics and syncopation, was not playing Zydeco when I made these recordings, but was backing blues singer Lightning Hopkins. By the mid-1960s however, when Clifton Chenier was getting more popular, Cleveland rejoined his brother’s band and most players today have taken their inspiration from and honor the master, Cleveland Chenier.

The violin has all but vanished from

Black Creole music today because it was perhaps not loud enough alongside the high volume accordion. Perhaps it just lost its appeal among African Americans, or the fiddlers gave up playing in the few keys the accordionists could handle. Other instruments used in Zydeco were jaw bone, tub bass, triangle, and broom handle scraped over a wooden floor to create a bassy rasping sound.

The Musicians:

Albert Chevalier was born March 20, 1909 in Lafayette, La. His father played accordion often accompanied by someone beating on a piece of tin, someone scraping a broom handle on the wooden plank floor, and accompanied by fiddle and triangle. Mr. Chevalier left Louisiana in 1943 for Port Arthur, Tx. When he came to Houston in 1952 people made fun of him and his music when he auditioned at Johnson’s Lounge—which at the time fea-

Lester Herbert – rubboard; Peter King – accordion. Photo by Chris Strachwitz

tured an orchestra and a floor show. By the early 1960s however, as more and more people from the Louisiana countryside moved to town, Zydeco music became so popular that Johnson's (which today is the Continental Ballroom), became a full-time showcase for Zydeco. Lonnie Mitchell was hired as the regular performer because, according to Mr. Chevalier, he would play for less money. Chevalier worked mostly house parties, casuals, and for special occasions. Robert Clemon and Clifton Edmond were also from Louisiana, both originally from Opelousas. Albert Chevalier died in Houston in 1965.

Sidney Babineaux was in his 80s when I met him in 1962 and was the oldest Zydeco musician I encountered. He had known French music all his life but did not hear blues until Ma Rainey came out with records in the 1920s. Sidney Babineaux talked about playing French music, polkas, what he called "glides," fiddle music, one-steps, quadrilles, two-steps, square dances, and he knew what his generation

referred to as "pop" songs like "It Ain't Gonna Rain No More" and "Jim Crow." He heard jazz in the 1920s when Louis Armstrong and Bunk Johnson came through Acadiana from New Orleans and he considered himself a professional musician who took pride in letting me know that his family played in bands with accordion, bass, drums, guitar, fiddle, and banjo, along with brass, alto, clarinet or bass horn. This man obviously harked back to an era when orchestras performed music for all classes and all occasions. When I inquired about titles of songs he simply replied: "I just learn 'em— don't know names."

Peter King, from near Opelousas, La., was a great uncle of Clifton Chenier. Born September 3, 1896, he grew up with the Chenier brothers. These recordings were made at a studio in Lake Charles, owned by Eddie Shuler, who had introduced me to the two. I wish I had spent more time with this fine accordionist but at the time I had no idea if I could ever sell this music. The recording level on the original tape was

very low and I include these selections only now because I found that upon hearing this material again after almost 30 years the music Peter King played was rather special and unusual. I had to title the selections since Peter King seemed to have no names for the tunes either.

Willie Green was a popular accordionist and was playing house parties in the Houston area even before World War II. You can hear Willie Green announce the fact that he was the man who started Zydeco music in Houston on Christmas Eve, 1949. I made the recordings at Irene's Cafe, located at 533 Wichman Street (off Washington), where on other occasions I heard wonderful blues by Lightning Hopkins and Hop Wilson. According to Anderson Moss, another Houston Zydeco accordionist who was interviewed by John Minton, folklorist at the Institute of Texan Culture, Willie Green played at Irene's for 20 years until his death in the late 1960s. Accordionist L.C. Donatto also played regularly with Green until the Green's death

and then formed his own group. His voice, according to Minton, can be heard on these recordings and he may well be playing one of the accordions! Until a recent stroke slowed him down, L.C. Donatto had one of the most popular Zydeco bands in Houston.

Herbert Sam was born near Opelousas, La., in 1924 into a musical Creole family. His father played accordion and so did his mother and two brothers, including Ambrose Sam who in the 1950s went to Los Angeles, Ca, and played for the Creole community in that area. Herbert Sam, however, went to Houston, played there for many years, and happened to be at the Zydeco contest on McGowan street just off Dowling when I recorded the proceedings that day with Mack McCormick as my guide. Since then Herbert Sam has become the proud father of the Sam Brothers Five who are carrying on the tradition and are one of the leading Zydeco bands in Acadiana today.

The two selections by **Clifton Chenier**

are his very first recordings from the early 1950s. Clifton was already the big name in Zydeco in 1961. He had toured on the Rhythm & Blues circuit across the US behind the success of his national hit "Ay Tete Fee" which he had recorded in the then popular R & B style for Specialty Records in 1955. Clifton's success gave all the other Zydeco musicians the impetus to put more blues or rock and roll (as they called it) into Creole Zydeco music, especially in the Houston area. When I finally met and recorded Clifton Chenier a few years later through Lightning Hopkins, he was looking for another hit, because without a new record on the radio and juke boxes, the public would quickly lose interest and dance to someone else's music. Over the years Clifton Chenier became the undisputed king of Zydeco as well as Arhoolie's best selling artist. Every recording session however would be a compro-

mise between what Clifton wanted to record, which was mainly rock and roll, and what I wanted which was the "French numbers." The success and popularity of Clifton Chenier made Zydeco respectable among the Creole population along the Gulf Coast and West Coast and gave them a sense of pride in their own heritage and traditions. When the churches began to hire Clifton Chenier in the mid-1960s for their Zydeco dances, entire families would attend and the Zydeco once again became a communal celebration having come full circle from the old community "house dances." (*Chris Strachwitz-1989*)

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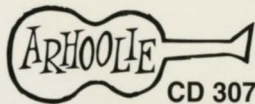
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Photo left to right: Robert Clemon – accordion; Clifton Edmond – rubboard; Albert Chevalier – accordion. Photo by Chris Strachwitz

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These are the first historic live recordings of Zydeco music as it evolved in Texas and southwest Louisiana from the rural French Creole tradition of Acadiana. A totally unique, vibrant, emotional, rhythmic dance music played with accordions and sung mostly in Creole French patois, but with blues, Cajun, and early rock & roll influences. The recordings (except the last three) were made at taverns and house dances in Houston, Tx., and southwest Louisiana in 1961 & 1962 by Chris Strachwitz.

Cover photo of Willie Green (Joe Savoy on the left) at Irene's
© by Chris Strachwitz

Cover design by Elizabeth Weil

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Recordings, except last three,
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Total playing time: 64:33

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