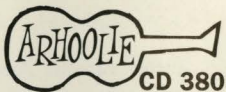


# HARRY CHOATES

## "Fiddle King of Cajun Swing"



1. ALLONS A LAFAYETTE (2) (1319A)
2. BASILE WALTZ (1) (1313A)
3. CAJUN HOP (2) (1326A)
4. PORT ARTHUR WALTZ (2) (1319B)
5. HARRY CHOATES SPECIAL (2) (1330)
6. IT WON'T BE LONG (1388A)
7. WRONG KEYHOLE (2) (1333B)
8. DRAGGIN' THE BOW (4) (1343A)
9. TE PETITE (4) (1343B)
10. RUBBER DOLLY (2) (1331)
11. LOUISIANA (3) (1336A)
12. POOR HOBO (3) (1336B)
13. DEVIL IN THE BAYOU (3) (1340B)
14. RYE WHISKEY (3) (1340A)
15. FAIS DO DO STOMP (2) (1326B)
16. LAWTELL WALTZ (3) (1335B)
17. BAYOU PON PON (3) (1335A)
18. CHERE MEON (1385B)
19. HARRY CHOATES BLUES (1385A)
20. MARI JOLE BLON (1350A)
21. HONKY TONKING DAYS (1350B)
22. GRAND MAMOU (ACA 1507)
23. JE PASE DURVAN TA PORT (1006)
24. HACKBERRY HOP (1005)
25. JOLE BRUN (1009)
26. LOUISIANA BOOGIE (1380A)

**Harry Choates** – fiddle and vocals with:  
 (1) Jimmy Foster & His Swingsters (April 1, 1946); (2) Johnnie Mae Smirle (Manuel) – piano; Joe Manuel – banjo; B.D. Williams – bass; Eddie Pursley – guitar; Late 1946; (3) probably similar but add **Ron Ray "Pee Wee" Lyons** – steel guitar; (4) probably similar but **Julius "Papa Cairo" Lamperez** replaces Lyons on steel guitar; #23, 24, & 25 with **Ron Ray "Pee Wee" Lyons** – steel and **Amos Como** – drums ca. 1950.

All recordings were made in Houston, Texas by Bill Quinn at his Gold Star Studios (except #22) and issued on 78 rpm records. # 23, 24, & 25 were issued on the Cajun Classics label. All 1300 numbers above are the Gold Star master numbers. Various unidentified musicians may be present from time to time, but the above was the basic personnel of Harry's band during the period of these recordings, 1946-1950.

Re-issue edited and produced by Chris Strachwitz  
 Cover by Wayne Pope

Cover photo: left to right: **Harry Choates** – fiddle; **Johnnie Mae Smirle (Manuel)** – piano and vocals, **Joe Manuel** – banjo, **Eddie Pursley** – guitar, B.D. Williams – bass. Photo taken in 1947 at Speedy's Broken Mirror Club in Sulphur, La. Photo courtesy the Choates family.

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# Harry Choates

## THE FIDDLE KING OF CAJUN SWING



## HARRY CHOATES – “Fiddle King of Cajun Swing”

**C**ongratulations! You have just purchased a most unique CD. It contains the fiddle music of a very special American genius — Harry Choates, “Parrain De La Musique Cajun,” the Godfather of Cajun Music. In order to completely immerse yourself in Harry’s music, it would be beneficial to know something of the life and times of this little dynamo from the Cajun country.

Harry Choates was a complete musician and entertainer. All of his life he ate, drank, and slept music. It is sometimes difficult to unravel the facts and myths surrounding the life and times of the man who immortalized *Jole Blon*, a song many Cajuns claim as their national anthem.

Harry was born in Rayne, La., on December 26, 1922. He had no formal education or musical training and he spoke English with a heavy Cajun accent. Harry learned to play the fiddle, guitar, steel guitar, and “an Abbeville air compressor,” as he called it, or as

non-Cajuns would call it — an accordion. Harry Choates never owned a musical instrument. The fiddle music he made famous was played on a borrowed fiddle that he never returned.

During the Depression years of the 1930s Harry moved with his mother, Tave Manard Choates, to Port Arthur, Texas, just across the Sabine Lake from Louisiana. His boyhood was spent wandering around local bars, crawling under tables and listening to the jukebox music. Music was becoming his one burning passion in life. He was a very small boy and would slip into and out of these establishments almost undetected.

With his borrowed fiddle he and a friend who played guitar would visit barber shops, sit on the floor and play for the enjoyment of the shop’s customers. Milton Bellot, a Port Arthur barber, has vivid recollections of the 12 year-old Harry Choates playing in his own very special style. When Harry would hit the high notes he would rise to his toes —

much to the delight of his listeners who would pitch nickels, dimes, and quarters to this budding musical genius.

Harry started playing in French bands and by the late 1930s he had worked for some time with Leo Soileau’s Aces and then with Papa Cairo and Jimmy Foster. Harry Choates apparently made his first recordings as the fiddler with Happy Fats and the Rayne-Bo Ramblers on February 14, 1940 in Dallas. Among the sides recorded were *Lake Charles Shuffle*, *Les Tete Fille Lafayette*, *La Polka a Gilbert*, *O.S.T. Gal*, and *Old Ice Man*. (Several of these are heard on ARH/FL CD 7007 **Cajun Music Classics: The String Bands**.)

French music was confined mostly to family gatherings, honky tonks and small dance halls. During the late 1920s Joe Falcon had recorded his Cajun music, but the distribution of these recordings, along with a handful of other early-day artists, was confined mostly to Southwest Louisiana. By the late 1930s, however, Cajun string band music as played by Leo Soileau and the Hackberry Ramblers was gaining wider popularity and

with the end of World War II Cajun music began to move into Texas and blend with the Western Swing music of Cliff Bruner and Bob Wills.

Harry Choates played a combination of Cajun and Western swing music. In 1946 Harry wanted to get a record out in order to promote his live appearances. The only local independent record man in 1946 was Bill Quinn in Houston who was just starting in the record business. According to Bill Quinn, he heard Choates play at a honky tonk on the Beaumont highway in Houston, and their meeting resulted in the two initial sides for **Gold Star**, *Jole Blon* and *Basile Waltz*. Quinn had trouble getting Harry’s record played until a Houston DJ finally put it on the air. From then on it was an instant success, especially with the Cajun people along the Gulf Coast. Orders for the record started pouring in from all over the country and the small pressing plant could not handle it, so Bill Quinn let other labels press the record for wider distribution (This classic hit record of *Jole Blon* by Harry Choates is available on ARH CD/C

331 - **J'ai Été Au Bal** - the sound track recording from the award winning documentary video on Cajun & Zydeco Music.)

Harry began to receive fan mail, none of which he ever answered. He had a naive innocence about himself and said he was only interested in making people happy. According to his daughter Linda Choates Cable, "My daddy just loved people with an almost childlike trust," and several people told the story that in order to get Harry to come back to the studio to record more tunes, Bill Quinn had to promise him a studio full of people who would be there just to enjoy his music.

With *Jole Blon* a hit (he sold the rights to the recording for \$50 and a fifth of whiskey, which actually was pretty generous by 1946 standards), Harry recorded other popular French songs such as *Allons A Lafayette*, *Big Mamou* and *Poor Hobo* along with fiddle and swing specialties. His music was directed at the dancing audience, it had good rhythm and was just right. Harry even danced as he played fiddle.

During World War II Harry had served briefly in the U.S. Army, but he had been prone to excessive drinking since the age of 12. The problems brought on by his alcoholism plus his high-spirited nature caused the Army to discharge him. He then went to work in a wartime shipyard in Orange, Texas, and there he met his future wife, Helen Daenen. Helen was immediately taken with Harry and considered him to be a very glamorous fellow, especially since he had his own band and was very popular in local dance halls. She knew of his drinking problem, but since she loved him, Helen felt she could help Harry with his alcoholism. Helen and Harry were married in 1945.

In the early part of his career Harry and his band played at such night spots as "Speedy's Broken Mirror" in Sulphur, Louisiana, "The Old Kentucky Inn" and the "Light House," both located in Port Arthur. By 1950 Harry and his band had traveled to San Antonio and played one-night stands in Kerrville, Austin and Bandera. His "Crying Fiddle" became very popular

throughout the Austin Hill Country and Harry appeared on the Red River Dave Country and Western television show over KOAI-TV in San Antonio. There was an attempt to write down Harry's version of *Jole Blon* for sheet music, but to the surprise of the musical writers, they were unable to put his special brand of French music in standard notes.

Harry Choates' drinking continued and in 1950 he and Helen were divorced. The couple had two small children, Edison, born in 1946, and Linda, born the following year. Harry's health began to fail and his aggressive temperament caused him to run afoul of the law. He ended up in jail in Austin, Texas, where he died in 1951.

His family was given no information as to the circumstances of his death, and to add to the tragedy they had no money to bring the little fiddler back to Port Arthur for burial. Gordon Baxter, a Port Arthur radio announcer and master of ceremonies for the Cliff Bruner Band over KPAC radio went on the air and raised enough money from Harry's many

fans to bring him back home for a decent burial in Cavalry Cemetery. A simple U.S. Army grave marker stood over his grave until thirty years later, when a fund was organized by the Cajun folk of Port Arthur and vicinity to erect a fitting memorial to the "Godfather of Cajun Music." Inscribed on the marker is a tribute to Harry written by Karen Smith Lancon, one of the major contributors to the marker. It reads as follows:

*A Tribute To Harry Choates  
A Man Who Passed On  
Long Ago But Left Us  
With His Cajun Music That Will  
Live In Our Hearts Forever*

Harry Choates' tremendous showmanship is now a legend. The pure talent of his Acadian and Western swing music is here on this CD. If you are apt to like this brand of music, and obviously you do, just sit back and listen and let the good times roll.

*(Tim Knight - Groves, Texas 1982)*

The following news story appeared via United Press (Oct. 24, 1946):

## "Jole Blon" Has Day in Texas Court

HOUSTON, Tex., Oct. 24. (UP) "Jole Blon," that plaintive lament of the Louisiana back country, had its day in court yesterday when the recording artist was awarded \$250 in royalties.

District Judge Phil D. Woodruff doubled as music critic when the former song hit was played in 113th district court.

Jimmie Foster and his Swingsters, a hillbilly band, claimed they cut the recording on April 1. The petition alleged that the Quinn Recording Co. did not give the band credit when the recording was put on sale.

Foster alleged that credit was given only to Harry Choates, a vocalist, who sang with the Swingsters last spring. Foster will collect one-half-cent royalty on each of the first 50,000 records.

(UP clipping courtesy Crawford Vincent)

## The Death of Harry Choates

From various Austin, Texas, press accounts, researched by Bob Pinson of the County Music Foundation Library, the following is probably what took place: In July of 1951 Harry Choates was performing at several dance halls in the Austin area. On Saturday, July 14, 1951 he was scheduled to play at Dessau Hall near Austin. However, he was arrested that day and held without bail on a warrant from Jefferson County (Beaumont), where he was charged with contempt of court in a wife and child desertion case. Harry Choates died on Tuesday, July 17, 1951 in a Travis County (Austin) jail cell on the third day of

being held, only 30 minutes before the arrival of Chief Deputy Sheriff T. O. Grant of Jefferson County, who was to return Choates to Beaumont. The Travis County Sheriff's office reported that Choates had been extremely nervous since his arrest, and fellow prisoners reported that he got very ill. By the time an ambulance arrived, however, he was dead. No record has been found of the inquest's verdict. A benefit dance was held at Dessau Hall and a Mr. Kotrola of the hall has given the cause of Harry Choates' death as cirrhosis of the liver and complications due to alcoholism.

*(The press reports on which this summary is based and a discography of Harry Choates' recordings can be found in OLD TIME MUSIC (UK) magazine #6 (Fall '72) & #16 (Spring '75).*

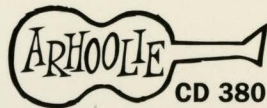
This re-issue CD of the original 78 rpm records was edited by Chris Strachwitz and released by contractual agreement with Bill Quinn and his estate, producer of the original recordings and Linda Choates Cable, daughter of Harry Choates. Sound restoration by George Morrow/Echo Productions using the No Noise system.

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