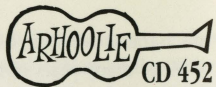


AUSTIN PITRE

"Opelousas Waltz"



1. **Bosco Stomp** (P.D.) (2:39)
2. **Cajun Waltz** (P.D.) (3:04)
3. **Widow of the Gully** (P.D.) (2:30)
4. **La Valse de St. Landry** (3:13)
5. **Evangeline Playboys Special** (2:25)
(Austin Pitre-Flat Town Music)
6. **Opelousas Waltz** (2:40)
(Austin Pitre-Flat Town Music)
7. **Perrodin Two-Step** (P.D.) (2:07)
8. **Grand Basil** (P.D.) (2:39)
9. **Lake Arthur Stomp** (P.D.) (2:30)
10. **Cheres Jouis Rose** (2:48)
(Austin Pitre-Flat Town Music)
11. **Drunkard's Blues** (2:58) (Louis Cormier)
12. **Cajun Breakdown** (2:15)
13. **Criminal Waltz** (P.D.) (3:06)
14. **Church Point Breakdown** (3:09)
15. **Jolie Blonde** (P.D.) (3:57)
16. **Zydeco Sont Pas Sale** (3:39)
(Clifton Chenier - Tradition Music Co. - BMI)
17. **Tou le Soir** (P.D.) (4:02)
18. **Louisiana Aces Special** (3:31)
(Elias Badaux-Flat Town Music)

Austin Pitre – vocals & accordion (fiddle on #9 & 10) accompanied by:
(#1–13) Alan Ardoine – fiddle;
Preston Manuel – guitar; and
James Pitre – drums.
Recorded 5/13/1971 in Austin Pitre's garage.

(#14–18) Will Balfa – fiddle;
J.W. Pelsia – steel guitar;
Preston Manuel – guitar; and
James Pitre – drums.

*Recorded live at a dance at the Silver
Star (between Opelousas and Ville Platte,
La.) on 5/8/1971.*

Produced by Chris Strachwitz
Recorded on portable equipment by Chris
Strachwitz
Cover photo by Les Blank
Cover design & hand tinting by Wayne Pope

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AUSTIN PITRE

AND HIS
Evangeline Playboys

Opelousas Waltz



AUSTIN PITRE

"Opelousas Waltz"



Photo © by Chris Strachwitz

Left to right: Alan Ardoin, Austin Pitre, and Preston Manuel

Austin Pitre was born in 1918 in Ville Platte, Louisiana, a small town on the northern edge of Cajun country. Though not generally known for its great musicians, many landmark players lived there or played dances in the area. In Southwest Louisiana between 1920-1938 the tides were turning in the history of Cajun music. The house parties were fading and the dancehalls were taking root as prime sources for entertainment. The great black fiddler Douglas Bellard was from near Ville Platte, and pioneer Cajun fiddler Leo Soileau was born and raised in nearby Point Blue. Accordionist Amedé Ardoin also spent time in the area, playing in dancehalls with Dennis McGee. Into this changing time of the 1920s Austin Pitre was born, surrounded by house parties and the emerging dancehall scene. All of this area's musicians had a profound influence on Austin's sound, just as his life of hard work added a unique rough edge

to his style. Austin knew both worlds—the old time house parties where he played as a child with his father, Joseph Lezime Pitre, and the Cajun dancehall circuit of the 1940s-1970s.

The Pitre family were hard-working sharecroppers and Austin was raised with the understanding that hard work was the name of the game. As Austin's widow, Dorothy Pitre, explained: "Sharecroppers worked hard for nothing, maybe fifty cents a day. The boss wouldn't pay his workers 'til Monday so they wouldn't waste their money on the weekend. The workers were uneducated and couldn't keep track of the financial arrangements, so the good working families usually came out 'owing the boss money' at the end of the year. That meant the boss could keep his good workers for another year. The Cajuns were taken advantage of by the English. And the women had as many children as they could 'cause it meant more hands to work in the

field and then they might be able to get ahead."

In spite of their sparse lifestyle, Austin's fiddle-playing father gave him an accordion in hopes that his six-year-old son would learn to accompany him at the local house dances. Austin's mother played the accordion too, so, surrounded by a love of music and good tunes the young boy was shortly thereafter playing alongside his father late into the weekend evenings.

The responsibility of caring for and supplying extra cash for his mother and sister fell on young Austin. By day Austin would work in the rice fields and by night he would watch over the rice field water pumps. In his spare time he made himself a fiddle from a cigar box and at the age of ten he won a real child size fiddle by selling flower and vegetable seeds from a catalog. In the night he would sit out under the stars, watching the pump and practicing his fiddle.

In time the young Austin added the responsibility of marriage to the support he still gave his mother and continued his grueling schedule, working in the fields or as a mechanic all day and playing dances at night.

During World War II, when the accordion popularity slacked off, he formed a string band to please the out-of-state soldiers who flooded the area's bars and dancehalls on their "leave" nights from Fort Polk. Austin didn't have to go to war because he was the only son left to help support his family.

Austin Pitre first recorded in 1948 for J.D. Miller in Crowley who issued several records including his theme "Evangeline Playboys Special" on the Feature label—but his name on the label read: "Austin Pete"! Two sides with Austin playing fiddle appeared about a year later on Star Records—including a version of "Chere Joues Rose." In the early 1950s Austin recorded four sides for the French Hits label with the help of the Rhythmaires, a band led by fiddler Chuck Guillory.

In the late 1950s Austin recorded a few sides for Dr. Harry Oster (now available on Arhoolie CD 359: **Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians**) and then extensively for Swallow records. Unfortunately Arhoolie did not release these 1971 recordings until now and a hastily arranged 1979 session for Sam Charters resulted in a mediocre album released by Sonet records—which apparently was

Austin's final recording.

Harry LaFleur recalls working with Austin Pitre in the early 1950s. He would go watch Austin at the Dixie Club in Eunice and liked his playing. Both he and Austin were working at Bordelon's Ford garage and Austin asked Harry if Harry's Band "Harry and the Louisiana Aces" would work with him to cut a record. They cut "Les Flammes d'Enfer," "Opelousas Waltz," and several other songs for the Swallow label. The songs were a smash hit so they started working together on a regular basis. Looking back, Harry remembers Austin as a hard man, not easy to get close to. Also, he was a perfectionist who oversaw every aspect of the band, insisting on a certain sound. In spite of these characteristics, Harry recalls that Austin had a heart of gold and would give a friend the shirt off his back. Dorothy Pitre explains her late husband's personality: "People from hard working families weren't allowed to gripe back then. When they were tired they would come home to more chores. They had to hold in a lot of their feelings. Even saying 'I love you' was almost unheard off. Instead people would show their love by the work they would do for their fami-

lies. They would tell other people how they loved their wives, but not express these feelings within the family. Times were hard and hard times made people hard."

The hard times and the strength it took to deal with everything showed in Austin's music. His vocals were usually made up on the spot and spoke of painful things he was going through. A musician could let out all those pent up feeling on the bandstand. Also, accordionist Marc Savoy remembers his playing style. "Austin was a very muscular man. He would play his accordion standing without a strap to support the accordion. This took great physical strength. He had an unusual sense of timing combined with a very intricate, fast technique. When he would play the fiddle he always tuned it down and used the old playing styles of sliding notes and drones." He is largely responsible for keeping some of the old classics he heard as a child alive, such as Douglas Bellard's "Les Flammes d'Enfer" and Amedé Ardoine's "Prison Blues." Not only did he play many of Ardoine's beautiful old tunes like the "Opelousas Waltz" he also introduced rare old fiddle tunes to the listening public such as "Chères Joues Rose." His fiddle men-

tor, besides his father, was the brilliant Leo Soileau, also of Ville Platte, and Austin's fiddle playing is full of Soileau's arrangements and ornamentations. A box, found in his house, of well-used 78rpm records by the above old artists show his love of the old music.

In 1952 and 1953, Austin was forming a new band and asked a young insurance salesman and his brothers to come play with him. That young man was Dewey Balfa. Dorothy recalls Dewey coming to her, concerned because he played "simple," or single string style, and Austin always played "double," or with drones. Austin showed Dewey his style and Dewey learned "Chères Joues Rose" from Austin and many other beautiful old songs from Joseph Lezime Pitre's repertoire.

In the years that followed, the Evangeline Playboys made the rounds of the large dancehall circuit of the 1950s and '60s. The band played eight dances a week at the Silver Star, Evangeline Club, Hick's Wagon Wheel, Jungle Lounge, Rose Garden Club, Green Wing, Blue Goose, Lakeview Park, Silver Slipper, Lake Hope, Avalon Club, Dixie Club, Rainbow Lounge...an endless list. Many songs were named after popular bars and

dancehalls. In Austin Pitre's repertoire there was "Lakeview Special," "Manuel Bar Waltz," "Midway Two-Step," "Rainbow Waltz," "Chinaball Blues," "Lake Hope Special," and "Triangle Special." A few of these clubs were "fais do do" clubs where Dorothy and Austin would bring their children, blankets and pillows and Dorothy would sit with other mothers, watch her babies and gossip while Austin played his music for the dance. In 1952 a law was passed that children couldn't go in clubs where alcohol was served so Dorothy started staying home with the children. She says, "Back then it was all based around the family, now it's all money and fame..." The end of the "fais do do" dances caused band members' wives to feel isolated and shut out from their husband's lives. "The money was needed, the men enjoyed playing, but the family had a hard time with daddy working night and day."

The second big performance venue for Cajun bands was radio stations. The Evangeline Playboys played for KVPI in Ville Platte's Man Store and for KSLO in Opelousas for many years. These broadcasts were usually on Saturday and Sunday afternoons and served to bring people out to the clubs and stores from

which the shows were broadcast.

After many years of hard work and constant club circuits Austin's health began to fail. Open heart surgery, serious back problems, and the beginning of hardening of the arteries were more than he could handle, and in 1981 he died. But he left behind an example of the powerful, raw dancehall sound that is fast disappearing from the prairies—the sound of hard work, sorrow, and killing good times.

(Ann Allen Savoy, Eunice, La, 1996)

Producer's note:

It was the searing, high, forceful, and emotional voice of Austin Pitre along with his powerful accordion playing which made me search him out on one of my almost annual trips to southwest Louisiana.

Les Blank, who had just completed his film on Cajuns (**Spend It All**) was with me on both occasions when I recorded Austin

on my portable equipment. I recall asking Les about the sound balance after we had recorded the first song. Les had on headphones and said it sounded fine and no, don't bring up the rhythm section any more! Well, I heeded his advice but regretted it when I got home and found that the rhythm section was indeed too low and so the material remained unissued all these years. Now that I'm re-issuing most of my old recordings on CDs, I listened to the tapes again and was struck by how powerful Austin was playing and singing. Thanks to Mike Cogan at Bay Records, we remastered the original two track tapes and boosted the fiddle and rhythm whenever Austin was not singing or playing! I now regret that I did not do this sooner while Austin was still alive because I think these may be some of the best performances Austin ever recorded.

(Chris Strachwitz-11/96)

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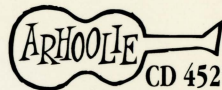
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Total time: 53:39

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File under: CAJUN/ZYDECO

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