

CLIFTON CHENIER

CLASSIC CLIFTON



CLIFTON'S
VERY BEST
12 ROCKIN'
HITS!

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We're not jiving when we call Clifton Chenier the greatest accordion player ever to come out of the zydeco tradition — but even that grandiose statement misses the point. To a remarkable extent, Clifton Chenier invented the modern Zydeco style; to this day there are a whole slew of Louisiana bands making decent money playing Clifton's songs in Clifton's style. He is one-of-a-kind — a genius musician, a unique, remarkable, human being.

For nearly 35 years, Clifton Chenier has been the hottest Zydeco player in all of Louisiana — whether you're talking about his mastery of the accordion, his ability to improvise almost any tune, his songwriting, his astonishing energy, his powerful singing style, his charisma, or simply his ability to make people come out, party, and have a ball.

No one who's been fortunate enough to catch one of Chenier's legendary live performances will ever forget it. Chenier has got a gold tooth, a jeweled crown, a rhinestone-studded accordion. He grins at the crowd while his five-piece band, powered by his brother Cleveland's clattering bottle openers on a corrugated steel "rub-board," strikes a solid, get-up-your-feet groove. Then he steps to the mike and shouts, "Bon ton roulet!" ("Let the good times roll!") Leaning into the beat, he knocks out a hot boogie-woogie riff on his squeeze-box. Within three notes (Can we get a witness?) the floor is jammed with dancers, and it'll stay that way for two or three hours until he takes a break. Or four hours or five. When his band is in full cry, saxophone honking, rub-board clanking, Clifton yelling in French over his driving accordion — you can almost smell the juke joints of postwar Louisiana across 30 years of time. He's the Swamp Boss, the King of the Bayous — Clifton Chenier and his Red Hot Louisiana Band, whose 12 very best rockin' hits you will hear on this LP!

Sometimes he pronounces his name "shen-YEAH" in the gumbo French patois of Cajun Louisiana (listen to "Sa M'Appel Fou"); sometimes it comes out classic French "shen-YAY"; sometimes American "shen-EER." But it hardly matters, because everyone calls him Clifton — often pronounced "cleef-TON." He sings mostly in French patois, and his music is variously called Zydeco, Zodico, French, Creole, La-La or Fais-Do-Do.

By whatever name, Zydeco is good-time, flat-out dance music — traditional party music for the French-speaking Black Creole population of Southwest Louisiana Cajun country — and it's played at roaring dances held just about every week, all along the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast. Apparently, the term "zydeco" itself comes from an old tune, a party favorite, "Les Haricots Sont Pas Sale" (Clifton's version, "Zydeco Sont Pas Sale", is heard on this LP). It means, the snap beans are not salty, and it's pronounced, "zydeco son pah-sah-lay" in patois. Hence, a traditional party tune has given part of its name to a new style of party music. In any case, Zydeco varies from old-time fiddle and accordion duets (exemplified by "Boisec" Ardo and Conray Fontenot, heard on *La Musique Creole*, Arhoolie LP 1070) to the all-inclusive repertoire of the Chenier band — old waltzes, rhythm and blues classics, current soul

favorites, funk, and oldies dished up in Clifton's distinctive style.

What's more, Zydeco seems to be gaining in popularity — not only on its home turf, but in far-ranging communities from East Texas to Los Angeles and the San Francisco area, where French-speaking Black Creoles have settled over the last 40 years in search of better jobs and living conditions. Even far from home, these folks have held onto many of their traditional pleasures — gumbo, hot sauce, and their own, unique, down-home music — Zydeco.

Clifton was born June 25, 1925, on a farm near Opelousas, LA. His father, Joseph, played accordion at dances, but Clifton grew up working in the fields, planting and harvesting cotton, rice, sugar and corn. The music he heard during the early '40s was almost all traditional "French" — tunes like "Colinda," waltzes, two-steps, and records by Amade Ardo, the first Black Creole French musician to record. At the same time, he learned many songs from musicians who never recorded — Jesse and Zoso Reynolds, Izeb Laza and Sidney Babineaux (actually heard on *Zydeco*, Arhoolie LP 1009).

Clifton met his wife, Margaret, in 1945, while he was working as a cane cutter in New Iberia, LA. In '47 they followed Clifton's older brother, Cleveland, to Lake Charles, LA, where Clifton worked at the Gulf Oil refinery until 1954. At that time, during the late '40s and early '50s, Clifton began to hear a different, more modern type of music on juke boxes, radios and records; Joe Liggins was one of his favorites, he recalls, and his uncle Morris "Big" Chenier (heard here on "Black Gal") who played guitar and fiddle, was another strong influence. It wasn't long before the brothers began playing weekend dances and parties in Lake Charles — blending the French music they had grown up with and the new, popular R&B sound off the jukebox.

One day in 1954, J.R. Fulbright, a legendary record scout who operated his own label, Elko, out of Los Angeles, heard Clifton play and told him, "You play too much accordion to be in these woods." He cut Clifton's band at radio station KAO in Lake Charles, and although those first sides didn't sell particularly well, they did give Clifton a "name" along the Gulf Coast. (Some of them can be heard on *Zydeco*, Arhoolie LP 1009). The band went back into the studio the following year, for Art Rupe's Specialty Records, then one of the major R&B labels. "Eh 'Tite Fille" ("Eh Petite Fille") became a top-selling R&B hit coast to coast in '55 and "Boppin' the Rock" did nearly as well. As a result, Clifton's band travelled to the West Coast to play the 5-4 Ballroom in Los Angeles and appeared at New York's famed Apollo Theater with a big R&B show. By 1956, Clifton was playing music full-time, and in 1958 he moved to Houston — one of the major R&B recording centers in the '50s.

The late '50s saw a decline in the popularity of the blues — one that coincided with the rise of soul music. Fortunately for Clifton, there were still a few labels very much interested in recording blues musicians — among them, Arhoolie Records. Owner-operator Chris Strachwitz takes up the story: "I met Clifton through Lightnin' Hopkins, whom I was recording in Houston in the early '60s," recalls Strachwitz. "One night Lightnin' took me to a tiny beer joint down near the ship channels in Houston to hear his cousin — well, his wife's cousin, actually. There was Clifton and his accordion, with just a drummer backing him, and he was wailing Cajun blues like I had never heard before; from his Specialty records I had thought of him as mainly an R&B artist. Anyway, he wasn't recording for anyone at the

time, and he needed a single for the juke boxes around town, so we went over to Bill Quinn's Gold Star studio and cut several numbers, including "Ay Ai Ai" (on *Bon Ton Roulet*, Arhoolie LP 1031). Unfortunately, Clifton's band — bass, guitar and drums — could not appear on the date in its entirety, since both amplifiers blew up! One of them actually started smoking. But we did use the drummer, and the record sold a few thousand copies around Houston."

"That was 1964. The next year I returned to Houston, and we made Clifton's first album, *Louisiana Blues and Zydeco* (Arhoolie LP 1024), including "Louisiana Blues." As soon as he finished the tune, Cliff rushed into the control booth, called his wife on the phone, and told us to play it back so she could hear it. Bill Quinn, who was standing behind me, heard it too, and said "Chris, that's a hit! That'll sell down here!" Sure enough, it was Clifton's first successful single on Arhoolie, and a big regional hit along the Gulf Coast. The next year I was in Houston again, and we did Clifton's second album, *Bon Ton Roulet* (Arhoolie LP 1031). 'Black Gal,' from that session, became the best-selling single ever for Clifton on Arhoolie, despite the fact that his uncle Morris Chenier couldn't keep his instrument in tune. After the session he came up to me sadly, and said, 'Chris, the reason I couldn't keep that thing in tune was 'cause I just found the bridge inside fell down!' In spite of it, his fiddling on that song has a haunting quality, and obviously the public liked it."

In 1966, Clifton appeared at the Berkeley Blues Festival (as recorded on *Berkeley Blues Festival* Arhoolie LP 1030), and since then, for nearly 15 years, hardly a year has gone by without a West Coast tour. He plays festivals, nightclubs, and a series of legendary local dances for transplanted Black Creoles at places like the Verbum Dei Auditorium in Los Angeles, All Hallows Church Hall in San Francisco's Hunter's Point, and St. Mark's Hall in Richmond (where *Clifton Chenier Live*, Arhoolie LP 1059, was recorded). He tours extensively all across the USA and Canada and has made several tours of Europe, where he is immensely popular and appears in Europe's finest halls to sell-out crowds.

In 1975, he recorded his most popular album to date, *Bogalusa Boogie* (Arhoolie LP 1076), in Bogalusa, LA, at the excellent Studio In the Country. Around the same time, documentary filmmaker Les Blank did an excellent film on Clifton, *Hot Pepper* — available from Flower Films, 10341 San Pablo Ave., El Cerrito, CA 94530. Clifton and his band have made many appearances during the late '70s on the widely-seen PBS series, *Austin City Limits*, and they are regular stars-in-residence of the annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. Best of all, despite the years and the big-time, Clifton has lost none of the funky, down-home blues-fire that made him great in the first place.

There is no other zydeco band, no other band period, anywhere along the Gulf Coast that can come close to Clifton Chenier and his Red Hot Louisiana Band. We hope that this collection of his 12 best sides, taken from his eight Arhoolie LPs, will bring pleasure to many people all round the world — to his old fans, who can enjoy his best numbers all on one album, and to his new fans, who may have never bought one of his albums before. Just remember, this is music for dancing; we hope you and your friends will use this record not only for your listening pleasure, but to dance away those blues! May this joyful sound spread around the world. *Bon ton roulet!*

— Chris Strachwitz and Michael Goodwin



ZYDECO SONT PAS SALE (3:10)

LOUISIANA BLUES (4:55)

ZYDECO CHA CHA (4:05)

BLACK GAL (2:30)

I'M A HOG FOR YOU (3:40)

ALONS A GRAND COTEAU (3:10)

TU LE TON SON TON (3:35)

BLACK SNAKE BLUES (4:20)

BIG MAMOU (3:15)

SA M'APPEL FOU (3:00)

I'M ON THE WONDER (4:15)

PARTY DOWN (4:20)

(At The Blue Angel Club)

Clifton Chenier — vocals and accordion

Cleveland Chenier — rubboard

With Robert Peter (St. Judy), Joe Brouchet (Morris), John Hart, Elvin Bishop, Paul Senegal, Morris Chenier, Madison Guidry, Stanley "Buckwheat" Dural, Steve Miller, and James Benoit

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Cover photo: Michael P. Smith

Cover: Wayne Pope

Edited and produced by Chris Strachwitz

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This album presents the best selections from the eight LPs made by Clifton Chenier for Arhoolie Records:

Arhoolie 1024 — Louisiana Blues and Zydeco

Arhoolie 1031 — Bon Ton Roulet

Arhoolie 1038 — Black Snake Blues

Arhoolie 1052 — King Of The Bayous

Arhoolie 1059 — Clifton Chenier Live

Arhoolie 1072 — Out West

Arhoolie 1076 — Bogalusa Boogie

Arhoolie 1078 — Red Hot Louisiana Band

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CLIFTON CHENIER

"Classic Clifton"

Produced By:
Chris Strachwitz

1082-A
STEREO

1. ZYDECO SONT PAS SALE (3:10)
2. LOUISIANA BLUES (4:55)
3. ZYDECO CHA CHA (4:05)
4. BLACK GAL (2:30)
5. I'M A HOG FOR YOU (3:40)
6. ALLONS A GRAND COTEAU (3:10)

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CLIFTON CHENIER

"Classic Clifton"

Produced By:
Chris Strachwitz

1082-B
STEREO

1. TU LE TON SON TON (3:35)
2. BLACK SNAKE BLUES (4:20)
3. BIG MAMOU (3:15)
4. SA M'APPEL FOU (3:00)
5. I'M ON THE WONDER (4:15)
6. PARTY DOWN (At The
Blue Angel Club) (4:20)

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