

# DONALD THIBODEAUX

## & Cajun Fever – “Fred’s Hot Step”



1. FRED’S HOT STEP  
(Donald Thibodeaux-Tradition Music Co.)
2. LA BOUTEILLE (The Bottle)  
(Russell Cormier-Flat Town Music)
3. PINE GROVE BLUES  
(Nathan Abshire-Flat Town Music)
4. CHERE PETITE
5. FIFI PONCHEAUX
6. LA VALSE DE CAJIN
7. LACASSINE SPECIAL (Iry Lefebvre-Tek Music)
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(Austin Pitre & Douglas Bellard-Flat Town Music)

### *Cajun Fever:*

Donald Thibodeaux—accordion & vocals

Allen M. Ardoin—fiddle

Phillip Alleman—steel guitar (and vocals  
on #3, 7, 11, & 14)

Ernest Thibodeaux—guitar

John “J.J.” Dies—drums (and vocal on  
#13)

Cajun Fever stresses the ensemble sound of the traditional Cajun dancehall bands. As in a jazz band, the steel guitar, fiddle, and accordion constantly interweave with solid backing from the rhythm guitar and drums.

Produced by Chris Strachwitz.

Recorded at Acadiana Sounds, Eunice, La.,

Fred Charlie—engineer.

Cover photo & notes by Ann Savoy.

Cover design & photo tinting by Wayne Pope.

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AND

## CAJUN FEVER

### Fred’s Hot Step





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### *"Fred's Hot Step"*

Some Saturday morning, if you happen to be in southwest Louisiana, take Highway 13 to the little town of Mamou and find Fred's Lounge, the tiny funky bar housing an 8 A.M. to 12 noon live radio broadcast. As you enter the dark, smoky room you are greeted with a wall of sound, French advertisements, wailing accordion, and bluesy vocals. It's "Donald Thibodeaux and Cajun Fever," a band made up of dyed-in-the-wool players—important for their roles in formulating the sound of the traditional dancehall music of the 1980s. This band has been rocking at Fred's Lounge "Mamou Cajun Hour" and Snook's dancehall in Ville Platte, all morning and all night, for the past eight years.

This is a Cajun band that comes from where most of the original Cajun bands came from, the school of hard knocks. They

are the ones who worked other people's fields, the ones who quit school because they couldn't speak the language (literally) or because they could help their home life more by working in the fields or playing dances. Most of the band members have had bouts with alcohol abuse, have lost their homes by fires, have married several times. These men have played Cajun music for small change for decades. But to them the small change was a ticket away from oppressive labor and a route to helping their families survive. They play hard and with feeling, surrounded by ashtrays spilling over with cigarette butts and coke bottles half filled with whiskey.

Band leader Donald Thibodeaux, born in Eunice in 1947, is younger than the other band members, but was raised by a corps of French-speaking, accordion-play-

ing family members. His father was the skilled accordionist Glady Thibodeaux, a very popular musician in and around Eunice. In 1964 Glady was the first Cajun accordion player invited to play at the prestigious Smithsonian Institution. He was also, thirty years ago, the accordion player on the original "Mamou Cajun Hour" radio show, which Donald plays on today. Glady learned to play the accordion from his mother, Ineza, and Glady would play around the house when Donald was young. Out of the five boys in the Thibodeaux household, only one didn't learn to play the accordion.

One of Donald's first influences outside of his family was accordion player Marc Savoy. Marc was a friend of Glady Thibodeaux so Donald got to learn some playing techniques from him. Donald's first accordion was built by Marc, an "Acadian" with the words "Made like an organ" hand painted on the side. Other musicians who had an influence on Donald were Belton Richard and Aldus Roger. "They were, to me, more exciting than the other players."

Donald started out supporting his wife,

Henrietta, and children as a car mechanic. At the age of twenty four Donald took over his father's band, the "Cajun All Stars" performing the Eunice circuit, the Blue Goose, the Pteradactyl, Ivy's. Later he met up with Ernest Thibodeaux and fiddler Will Kegley and played with the famed band from 1940s, the Pinegrove Boys. A few other bands came and went and eventually he formed "Cajun Fever," the band he has headed up for eight years. In 1979, under the instruction of Marc Savoy, he began building his "Bayou" brand accordions. This accordion building helped him make ends meet as the expenses of raising his three children increased. Donald feels the pressure of the new influences on Cajun music today and sees a lack of interest in the traditional Cajun music he plays. But in his words, "I'll give up the music before I'll change it. This is the music I was raised with and it's what I love. A man's not gonna' try to change what he loves..."

The guitar player in the band, Ernest Thibodeaux, was born in Jennings in 1925 and has been playing on the dancehall scene since the early '40s. His first playing

experience was in a string band called "Will Kegley and the Lake Charles Playboys," headed up by fiddler Will Kegley. This three piece stringband (Will and Ozaid Kegley and Ernest Thibodeaux) was the house band of the Pinegrove Club, and in 1947, the club owner saw a return of the popularity of the accordion and asked the band to add one to their group. They had heard of the accordionist Nathan Abshire, living in Riceville at the time, and they went in search of him, found him, bought him an accordion, and the "Pinegrove Boys" was formed.

Their band began to work the musician's "steady job" of the '40s, the seven day a week dance circuit masterminded by the late Quincy Davis of Basile, Louisiana. Davis owned several clubs, including the popular Avalon Club in Basile. He would hire his bands for \$125 per man per week to work the dances. This included room and board and sometimes even a car to travel in. Davis had many bands on his payroll, among them Harry Choates and Papa Cairo. This life was a good one compared to the alternative of hard manual la-

bor or field work. Around 1954 Ernest recalls that Nathan changed their band's name to the "Musical Five." The band made recordings under both names and Ernest played guitar on some of the more memorable ones, namely "Pinegrove Blues" and "Belizaire's Waltz." In 1956 Ernest left the "Musical Five," feeling the need to get more involved in the raising of his children. He was replaced in that band by young Dewey and Rodney Balfa of Basile. Ernest moved to Orange, Texas, looking for work. Apparently this didn't materialize because shortly thereafter the rest of the Pinegrove Boys (Will and Ozaide Kegley, Theophile Jagneaux, and Paul LeMaire), minus Nathan Abshire, moved to Texas to join him where they once again started playing music. In 1962 Ernest returned to Louisiana where he started his first "real" job in a cement plant, abandoning the dancehall scene for twenty years. In 1982 Ernest started playing again with various bands and in 1993, at Donald's request, he joined Cajun Fever.

Fiddler Allen Ardoin comes from a slightly different angle in Cajun music.

Born in 1929 in the middle of the stringband era, his first love has always been country music. As a young man he listened on radio KVOL to the talented fiddler Doc Guidry, a master of the string band style and an important figure in the history of the development of Cajun fiddle. Never a fan of the accordion, Allen developed a skilled technique in his lead fiddling. One of his first band experiences was with the string band "J.B. Fusilier and his Merry-makers." Next he replaced fiddler Harry LaFleur in Austin Pitre's band "The Evangeline Playboys." It was Allen who played the haunting second fiddle on Austin Pitre's beautiful recording of "Jolies Joutes Roses." (He is also heard on Arhoolie CD 452 by Austin Pitre.) His next job was as a twin fiddler with Sleepy Hoffpauer in Belton Richard's popular "Musical Aces." Allen played for several years with the Aces then joined up with "Cajun Fever." Though he spent years on the dancehall scene he managed to steer clear of the alcohol problems that plague so many traditional musicians and also has maintained a happy marriage for many years.

Philippe Alleman, the band's steel player, has lived a hard life as a dancehall musician. He was born in Rayne in 1940 to a family of sharecroppers, and as he grew up he saw that music could be a key to relief from the misery of poverty and hard work that surrounded him as a child. As a boy of ten (1950) he would take his Gene Autry guitar to play, with ten year old friends Belton Richard and Gene Cahana, behind the bar at Papa George's Lounge in Rayne. They were each paid \$2.50 for the night and this seemed a fortune to them. At age eleven Philippe would drive to Holly Beach to play in Ray LaVerne's band. The band consisted of Philippe on guitar, twelve year old Tony Thibodeaux on fiddle, Tony's younger brother Leon on drums, Grant Clement on steel, and Ray on accordion. They each were paid \$7.50 a night and would sleep on the beach before returning home. At the age of twelve Philippe got his first big musical break when Aldus Roger asked him to join his band, "Aldus Roger and the Lafayette Playboys." This job involved playing "eight nights a week" (two dances on



Sunday) for \$8.00 each week night and \$13.00 on weekends! For three years Philippe struggled to balance helping his sharecropping father in the fields, going to school, and playing dances every night, but by the age of fifteen he had had enough of this exhausting schedule and quit school. From thereafter his only goal was to get his family out of the oppressive life of sharecropping. All his dance money went toward buying a small piece of land in Duson and building a house for his family. Then he financed the purchase of an abandoned gas station so his father could sell gas and "sno-balls" for a living.

In 1955 (age fifteen) Philippe started picking up steel guitar by watching Aldus' steel player, Rodney Miller. He would put two steel bars beneath his guitar strings, then, with the help of his blind brother, try to guess how to "open tune" the guitar. Finally he learned and became Aldus Roger's new steel player. As steel player and fine vocalist he recorded many beloved Cajun songs, among them "Alida," "Ding a Ding Ding Dong," "Last Waltz," "Not Lonesome Anymore," and "One More Chance." For

twenty three years Philippe played on and off with Aldus' band. After leaving the band he played with various others, battling alcoholism, problems with women, the death of his wife, and his home burning. Today he plays twice a week with "Cajun Fever," working days for the Eunice Street Department. His closing comment was, "Playing music is a hard job...I've settled down now..."

J.J. Dies, on drums, is the youngest member of the group. J.J. is the son of the excellent accordion player Hilbert Dies and he has played on the dancehall circuit for years, beating the drums with driving enthusiasm and energy.

When these five musicians get together they play the music of their lives, the music they've been raised with. This music is the voice of the traditional Cajun dancehall scene, a music born of years of grueling, thankless playing in dark, smoky lounges. As you listen you can almost smell the cigarette smoke and the sour odor of spilt beer and whiskey. Maybe not exactly a "pretty" picture, but powerful and road tested.

*(Ann Allen Savoy, Eunice, Louisiana, December 1996)*



*Cajun Fever: left to right, Allen Ardoin-fiddle; J.J. Dies-drums; Phillippe Alleman-steel guitar; Donald Thibodeaux-accordion; Ernest Thibodeaux-guitar; at the Veteran's Hall in Mamou, La.*

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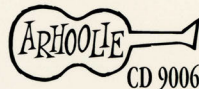
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