

1. ZYDECO ET PAS SALE
2. LAFAYETTE WALTZ
3. LOUISIANA TWO STEP
4. CLIFTON'S WALTZ
5. LOUISIANA BLUES
6. HOT ROD
7. BANANA MAN
8. AY-TETE-FEE
9. IT'S HARD
10. I CAN'T STAND
11. I CAN LOOK DOWN
AT YOUR WOMAN
12. ACCORDION BOOGIE (*)
13. BANANA MAN (take 2) (*)
14. AY, AI AI (*)
15. CLIFTON'S BLUES (Where Can My Baby Be)
16. LET'S ROCK A WHILE
17. ELMORE'S BLUES (*)
18. CLIFTON'S TWO STEP (*)
19. ZYDECO ET PAS SALE (take 1) (*)

(*) = previously unreleased

1 – 11 were issued in mono on the original
Arhoolie LP 1024 & reissued on CD 329,
which has been deleted.
15 & 16 are also available on Arhoolie CD 339

Clifton Chenier – vocals and accor-
dion (harmonica on # 9 & 10)

with on # 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15,
16, & 17:

Elmore Nixon – piano
Cleveland Keyes – guitar
Fulton Antoine – bass
Robert St. Judy - drums

with on # 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 11, 18, & 19:
Cleveland Chenier – rubboard
Madison Guidry – drums

Recorded at Bill Quinn's Gold Star Studio
in Houston, TX on May 11, 1965

Doyle E. Jones – engineer
Produced by Chris Strachwitz
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www.arhoolie.com

CLIFTON CHENIER

LOUISIANA BLUES AND ZYDECO



Clifton Chenier

Louisiana Blues and Zydeco

Now for the first time you can hear Clifton Chenier's original album for Arhoolie Records - in Stereo! All previously issued versions of this session were released in Mono, including the original LP # 1024 album and the subsequent CD releases. When Arhoolie's manager, Tom Diamant suggested that we re-issue this classic session in our mid price 9000 Series, I looked into the "vault" to see what shape the original tapes were in. Luckily I discovered that this session, cut in Houston in 1965, was recorded on three - 1/2 inch reels of tape which I had marked: "4 track recordings" in my ledger book! Mike Cogan at Bay Records, who still has a 4 track machine, checked them out and called me saying they were in fine shape but were actually recorded only on a three track machine! We re-mixed and eq'd the material to stereo and here for the first time you can hear this remarkable session (including almost all the out-takes) with the clarity of multi-track recording!

The music on this record is an interesting mix of pure, authentic Louisiana Creole Blues and Zydeco, originally issued on one side of Arhoolie LP # 1024 album, and Clifton's version of what he called "Rock N' Roll" on the flip side of the album. This mix came about because I was fortunate enough to first hear and meet Clifton Chenier while hanging out with my idol, Lightning Hopkins. That was in February of 1964 when I had gone to Houston to meet with Horst Lippmann who was interested in getting Lightning to be part of his recently initiated annual tour of the "American Folk Blues Festival" which presented for the first time anywhere, the best authentic Blues singers and players to a wide, general audience. Lightning was at first reluctant about such a long flight to a strange and to him unknown world, but he finally agreed to go if I went with him. I hung around Houston for several days and one evening Lightning suggested we

go hear "his cousin"! When I asked for his name, he replied "Cliff - Chenier"! I had of course heard Clifton's mid 1950s radio hit of "Ay Tite Fille" on Specialty Records with "Boppin' The Rock" on the flip side but thought of them as sort of rock n' roll or R&B instead of low down blues which were my main interest. Clifton Chenier was indeed a cousin to Lightning's wife, Antoinette, and I was of course delighted to go anywhere Lightning would take me and off we drove in his Cadillac to the east side of Houston - an area he called "French Town." As we walked into a tiny beer joint I saw and heard the most amazing sounds I had ever encountered. Here was this tall, lanky black man with a huge piano accordion on his chest singing and playing some of the most amazing, low-down blues I'd ever heard accompanied only by a drummer. He was singing in a weird patois which I was soon to learn was still spoken by many blacks from Louisiana! Only a few customers were in the place and soon, during a break, Lightning introduced me to Clifton Chenier as being a "record man from California"! Since I was really not

prepared to play the role of an effective "record man" I told Clifton that I was just a "blues fan." Clifton however wanted none of that and insisted that we cut a record the next day! Although I had very meager funds, I was anxious to capture this remarkable sound and agreed if Clifton would bring just his accordion and the drummer and would record just the kind of sounds I had heard that night. I called Bill Quinn at Gold Star and he agreed to record us right away. When Clifton showed up at the studio he had not only a drummer in tow but a pianist, a bass player and a guitarist! He insisted that he wanted to record what he called "rock n' roll" to make a hit these days and that the old "French music" I heard him play last night would only appeal to a few "country people"! It was my luck that the bass player's amp had the cone torn from its voice coil and therefore produced only a slight thud! As soon as the guitar player plugged in his amp, it went up in smoke and was dead as well! We did manage to record a couple of songs and "Ay, Ai Ai" from that session became Arhoolie's first single 45 by Clifton Chenier. The record

got some air play in Houston as well as landing on many juke boxes in the region. We sold enough to break even and that is all Clifton really wanted: a record on the radio and the juke boxes which in turn would give him opportunities for potentially better jobs at dances and clubs.

The next year I wrote to Clifton and expressed my desire to very soon record an LP album but that I wanted mostly what I had heard that first night – what he called “French music.” At first he protested but since no one else had approached him about recording an “album,” he finally agreed with the proviso that half the record be rock n’ roll and then he would fill the other side with “French” for me! From this album I released several selections on 45s for the radio and juke boxes. Luckily the two items which had the most success along the Gulf Coast were “Zydeco Et Pas Sale” and “Louisiana Blues” – both sung in authentic regional patois and played in the same manner! You may note from the personnel given above that for the “French” portion of the recording session Clifton brought in his brother, Cleveland,

who was working regularly with Lightning Hopkins at that time, to play the “rubboard.” This was not the usual washboard which I had heard on records by Washboard Sam and other “washboard bands” popular in the 1920s and 30s, but one custom made from corrugated solid steel! I later found out from Clifton that he had invented this instrument and you can hear him talk about it in the Arhoolie DVD # 401: Clifton Chenier – The King of Zydeco. He also brought in drummer Madison Guidry, a Creole, since Robert St. Judy was apparently not yet well enough acquainted with this regional music! By producing these at first only locally successful and very authentic recordings, perhaps I helped a little to persuade Clifton that he should not yet turn his back on his rich and totally unique culture. Soon the title “King Of Zydeco” was bestowed on him, a title of which Clifton became very proud and which he retained unchallenged until his death. Successors tried to crown themselves but their attempts never stuck – after all, Clifton Chenier invented the genre and was the unbeatable champ!

The roots of Zydeco reach back into the French origins of Louisiana Creole and Cajun music. Zydeco is a phonetic way of spelling the French word for snap-beans: *les haricots*. Many people told me that they remembered a locally popular song by the name of “Zydeco Et Pas Sale” which Clifton of course made into his own and which meant: Snap-beans not salty – or: no salt in your snap-beans. Whether it meant you were too poor to buy salt for your dish or if the phrase had sexual overtones is for you to decide! It wasn’t really until our record of “Zydeco Et Pas Sale” by Clifton became a regional hit, that people really began to call this music Zydeco. At the time of this recording when I asked Clifton and other people in the beer joints what they called this music, some already said: Zydeco – but others used simply the terms “French” (which was also used to refer to white Cajun music at that time), others called it La-La music and then some just referred to it as Push N’ Pull!

As the blues became an increasingly important element of black popular music

beginning in the 1920s, so did they permeate the Creole music in southwest Louisiana. At about the same time the accordion had become the main instrument in rural Cajun and Creole music. Just as white “French” music from the 1930s to the 50s became more under the influence of American country music with its fiddles and guitars, black “French” music became more and more colored and flavored by blues as well as by black popular music in general with a strong dose of Afro-Caribbean rhythms thrown in. Just as Iry LeJune and some other Cajun musicians brought back the accordion in the 1950s and took some pride in being Cajuns, so did Clifton Chenier with the wider acceptance of his music by the 1960s bring on a sense of pride in being uniquely Louisiana Creoles. Although Clifton Chenier proved to be a powerful and emotional blues singer, I feel his phrasing was often even better when he sang in the patois of his first language. Clifton took the older Creole music he had heard as a child, mixed it with the contemporary black music of his era and in the process virtually invented Zydeco.

He popularized this wonderful musical gumbo like no one had ever done before and took it around the world.

Born on a farm near Opelousas, La. on June 25, 1925, Clifton recalled hearing his father Joseph Chenier play accordion at many a dance. He would play tunes like "Calinda," two-steps, waltzes, and many of the traditional Cajun tunes. Clifton grew up helping his parents work in the cotton, rice, sugar, and corn fields. As far back as he could recall, Clifton had wanted to be a musician. In 1946 he followed his older brother Cleveland to Lake Charles, La. where they both got jobs at the Gulf oil refinery. They began playing music occasionally at house parties and "made good money in tips" by playing outside the refinery gate at quitting time when fellow workers were on their way home.

The music Clifton heard around him growing up was mostly traditional "French" and he recalled hearing records by Amédé Ardoin – who he told me was: "the first black man to play blues on the

accordion." He also heard and learned from Claude Falk and others who never recorded: Jesse and Zozo Reynolds, Izeb Laza, and Sidney Babineaux. (Sidney Babineaux along with several other early pioneers of this music can be heard on Arhoolie CD 307 and Amédé Ardoin on Arhoolie CD 7007). Clifton learned many tunes from them though he heard other types of music as well and the first piece he recalled playing on the accordion was Joe Liggins' "The Honeydripper." Clifton's uncle Morris "Big" Chenier, who played guitar and fiddle and operated the Horseshoe Club in Lake Charles, was also a strong influence on him and later recorded with Clifton on his hit "Black Gal" (Arhoolie CD 345).

In 1947 Clifton and his wife Margaret, whom he had met in 1945 while working as a cane cutter in New Iberia, went to Port Arthur, Texas, where he worked for the Gulf and Texaco oil refineries until 1954. On weekends he would play music at house parties and local juke and dance halls. One day J.R. Fulbright, legendary record scout and producer of his own label

from Los Angeles, Calif., came through the area and heard Clifton play out in the country and told him: "You play too much accordion to be in these woods." He recorded Clifton's first records at KAOK, a Lake Charles radio station (these sides are now available on Arhoolie CD 307). Although sales of these and subsequent records were largely confined to the Gulf Coast region, "It gave me a name" as Clifton put it, and in 1955 Specialty Records issued "Ay Tete Fee" which became a national R&B hit and established Clifton Chenier as a rhythm and blues artist throughout the country. On the heels of that record Clifton and his band went to Los Angeles and played the 5-4 Ballroom. Later he went on tour with various R&B acts and by 1956 had become a full-time musician.

By 1964, when I met Clifton, he was back playing in little joints for fellow expatriates from Louisiana's rice and sugar cane fields who had come to Houston for better paying jobs. Although Clifton Chenier never gained the kind of popularity achieved by his idol and rival: Fats Domino, I feel he brought dignity, respect, acceptance and a new life to once frowned upon, neglected, and almost forgotten rural Creole music. Clifton will also be remembered for his large repertoire of compositions, his incredible singing and superb musicianship. His talents and personality have never been surpassed. Neither history nor I will ever forget the King of Zydeco – nor his music.

Chris Strachwitz - 2004

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7. **Banana Man**
8. **Ay-Tete-Fee**
9. **It's Hard**
10. **I Can't Stand**
11. **I Can Look Down At Your Woman**
12. **Accordion Boogie***
13. **Banana Man (take 2)***
14. **Ay, Ai Ai***
15. **Clifton's Blues (Where Can My Baby Be)**
16. **Let's Rock Awhile**
17. **Elmore's Blues***
18. **Clifton's Two Step***
19. **Zydeco Et Pas Sale (take 1)***

* = previously unissued

**His first album for
Arhoolie Records (LP 1024)**



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FILE UNDER: ZYDECO/BLUES

