

CLIFTON CHENIER

BON TON ROULET!



CLIFTON CHENIER Bon Ton Roulet

In April of 1966 Clifton Chenier appeared at the Berkeley Blues Festival on the University of California campus (Arhoolie LP 1030) with just his accordion backed by drummer Francis Clay. Clifton's music caused a lot of excitement at the concert where he got a fantastic reception. For most of the fans and reviewers in attendance, Clifton's unique performance was probably their first encounter with the joyful sounds of Louisiana Zydeco music. The San Francisco Chronicle's famous music critic, Ralph J. Gleason, called Clifton Chenier "...one of the most surprising musicians I have heard in some time, with a marvelous moving style of playing the accordion, blues accordion, that's right, blues accordion!" The Oakland Tribune's jazz writer Russ Wilson said: "Chenier is an adept instrumentalist and the riffs he set up in the bass while playing solo lines in the treble at times sounded like a miniature Basie band".

Although that festival appearance in Berkeley, alongside Lightning Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb, and Muddy Waters and his band, was probably Clifton Chenier's concert debut, he had already been a popular exponent of Zydeco music along the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast for several years. Clifton toured on the Rhythm and Blues circuit in the 1950's following his first hit record of "Ay Tete Fee" on the Specialty label. By the mid 1960's, Chenier was beginning to appear at concerts and clubs for largely white blues loving audiences but he also continued to play dances at various church halls in Los Angeles and in the San Francisco Bay Area for the large community of black Creoles who had moved to the West Coast since World War II to find better job opportunities. Back home in Louisiana Clifton was the King of Zydeco playing more and bigger dances.

ZYDECO is a combination of traditional Acadian/Cajun/Creole music mixed with elements of Jazz, Blues, Soul, Caribbean rhythms, and Black popular music in general. Some people referred to it as "La La music" - others, including Clifton Chenier, simply called it "French music" while others said it was "Creole music" or just "push and pull"! In the early 1960's zydeco "bands" would usually consist of just one man who played the accordion and sang blues in French and English, played fast two steps, slow waltzes and various forms of shuffles and boogies. He would be accompanied by a drummer or a rubboard (washboard) player. At small house parties it was usually just accordion and rubboard, while at the beer joints or dance halls a drummer would be backing the amplified accordion.

Sometimes, especially in Louisiana, a fiddler might join. Clifton Chenier had recorded his R&B hit with a larger group, and a fuller band sound soon began to be in demand. The first time I met Clifton he was accompanied only by a drummer at a small beer joint in a part of Houston called "French Town". After his first Arhoolie 45's became popular on the radio and juke boxes, Clifton always had a full rhythm section with drums, bass, and guitar. For recording, Clifton loved to add a piano, especially Elmore Nixon, who knew how to compliment Clifton's accordion. As the music became more in demand, Cleveland Chenier who had been working with Lightning Hopkins in beer joints, re-joined his brother on rubboard. A few years later Clifton added the fine sax player John Hart and keyboard player Buckwheat, which made the sound of his music even fuller.

The word Zydeco most likely comes from the title of an old tune known by almost every accordionist in the region: "L'haricots sont pas sale", which means: "the snap beans aren't salty!" (recorded by Clifton on his first Arhoolie album 1024). Zydeco is simply the phonetic spelling of the French "L'haricots", but the spelling is not uniform by any means! Cajun/Creole French is an oral language and you will see a number of different ways to spell Zydeco on posters or announcements for dances. Zydeco, however, means more than just the title of an old tune. It refers to the whole social thing of going to a dance, having a good time, eating, drinking, and having a party. The word may also have its origins in parts of Africa where a very similar sounding word means to dance.

During the twenty years since this record was first released, Zydeco music has undergone many changes. Like all Black popular musics, this regional variation has changed and evolved, yet to a remarkable degree, has continued to serve as a very popular dance music, and like its white counterpart, Cajun music, has continued to utilize older and traditional tunes and songs.

This record serves as a good example of the pre-sax Chenier sound with an extraordinary variety of ingredients stirred into Clifton's unique gumbo pot of Zydeco delights! What makes this album rather unique is the addition of Clifton's uncle, Morris "Big" Chenier on fiddle. Clifton knew that I liked the old time zydeco and cajun sounds and told me that his uncle played not only guitar but also fiddle. So we called him in Lake Charles and a few days later he joined us in Houston for this recording session. Throughout the session Morris seemed to be having

problems staying in tune with the band but he played fine on most numbers which Clifton wanted to be in the old style. It wasn't until we were ready to leave the studio that Morris came up to me and rather apologetically pointed at the interior of the fiddle and told me that the bridge inside had fallen down! In spite of this the wonderful blues "Black Gal" became quite a hit and was licensed to several other labels for distribution.

"BON TON ROULET" (Let The Good Times Roll) sung in French is a unique Clifton Chenier version of an older song popularized by Louis Jordan which gained wide spread popularity along the Gulf Coast in the 1940's via various versions recorded by the late Clarence Garlow. "IF I EVER GET LUCKY" and "BLACK GAL" show what a fine blues singer Clifton is. "FROG LEGS" AND "LONG TOES" are two instrumental dance numbers in the rhythm and blues style of the period. On "BABY PLEASE DON'T GO" Clifton is back to the basic zydeco rhythm of just accordion, drums and his uncle on fiddle. I heard this tune at every zydeco dance usually played in a chant or drone like style, repeating the phrase over and over. When I asked Clifton for his version of this obviously popular number, he came up with this interpretation which is closer to that popularized by blues singer Big Joe Williams in the 1930's.

"BLUES DE MA NEGRESSE" opens side B with Clifton singing in French. With the fiddle and drums behind him this is pure Creole French blues! "SWEET LITTLE DOLL ZYDECO" is a fine two step in the old style followed by the national anthem of French Louisiana: "JOLE BLONDE" which Clifton sings in his totally unique style. "AY, AI, AI" was recorded at the first session I had with Clifton the day after we first met. Although recorded at Bill Quinn's Gold Star studios in Houston, I probably could have done just as well with one mike and my old tape recorder! Clifton brought a "band" along for the session, but we could use neither the guitarist nor the bass player because their OD colored army surplus amplifiers were not usable. One literally started to smoke and the other produced only a loud hum! The guys in the band however did not lose their spirits and all helped out on the vocal. Two more instrumentals, "FRENCH TOWN WALTZ" and a reply to Slim Harpo's then popular "Scratch My Back", which Clifton called "KEEP ON SCRATCHING", end the record. (Chris Strachwitz — notes rewritten in 1987).



CLIFTON CHENIER "Bon Ton Roulet"

SIDE A:

1. BON TON ROULET (3:05)
2. FROG LEGS (2:10)
3. IF I EVER GET LUCKY (2:40)
4. BLACK GAL (3:00)
5. LONG TOES (2:10)
6. BABY, PLEASE DON'T GO (2:20)

SIDE B:

1. BLUES DE MA NEGRESSE (3:05)
2. SWEET LITTLE DOLL ZYDECO (1:45)
3. JOLE BLONDE (3:10)
4. AY, AI, AI (2:30)
5. FRENCH TOWN WALTZ (2:35)
6. KEEP ON SCRATCHING (2:15)

All songs composed by Clifton Chenier and © by Tradition Music Co., (BMI).

Clifton Chenier — vocals and accordion
Morris Chenier — fiddle
Elmore Nixon — piano
Robert St. Judy — drums
plus bass and guitar — Houston, Tx.
5/10/1966
Produced by Chris Strachwitz
"Ay, Ai, Ai" was recorded 2/8/1964 with:
Bob Murphy — drums

Cover by Wayne Pope
Cover photo by Chris Strachwitz

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Morris Chenier & Clifton Chenier

Photo: Chris Strachwitz



CLIFTON CHENIER
"BON TON ROULET"

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1031
Side A
(M-185)

1. BON TON ROULET (3:05)
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3. IF I EVER GET LUCKY (2:40)
4. BLACK GAL (3:00)
5. LONG TOES (2:10)
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1031 A

ARHOOIE



CLIFTON CHENIER
"BON TON ROULET"

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1031
Side B
(M-186)

1. BLUES DE MA NEGRESSE (3:05)
2. SWEET LITTLE DOLL (1:45)
3. JOLE BLONDE (3:10)
4. AY AI AI (2:30)
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