

JOHN
DELAFOSE

ZYDECO MAN



CREOLE CULTURE AND CREOLE MUSIC

Zydeco is the syncopated musical melange that has resulted from cultural contact between Cajun, Afro-French and Afro-American peoples in south Louisiana over the last 200 years. It is played today at bars, church halls, barbecues, baseball games and anywhere that black Creoles gather for community entertainment on the Louisiana/Texas Gulf Coast from Lafayette to Houston. The Afro-French population that arrived in Louisiana in the 18th century from French West Africa and Haiti, brought with them their religion, languages, foodways, and above all, music. Within the French colonial sphere of the New World tropics, all these traits were modified by European contact. In addition to the 28,000 French slaves that came to the Louisiana colony in the 18th century, a population of free people of color later developed. These usually lighter and culturally more European people in some cases held land and slaves. They were often noted as artisans and craftsmen and con-

tributed to the birth of jazz in urban New Orleans. Many, however, left both the Crescent City and the sugar plantation culture found along the bayous and levee crest lands of southeast Louisiana and migrated onto the vast sea of prairie land in southwest Louisiana. This was particularly common after the American takeover in 1803 and the subsequent federal land offers. On the prairies, from St. Martin Parish westward, the free people of color and the descendants of slaves — now generally referred to as black Creoles — mingled with the peasant farming and foraging Cajuns, with regional Indians, and other ethnic groups. In rural isolation, and with relatively few class discriminations, a great deal of cultural exchange took place between these groups. In terms of music, the black Creoles accepted the diatonic button accordion — originally a German introduction to the area — and violin, as well as the tunes of Cajun music. At the same time, black Creoles re-

tained the intense syncopation characteristic of Afro-Caribbean dances such as the *Bamboula* and the *Calinda*. In addition, the influence of Afro-American culture and music was felt as American slaves entered the area from the 1820's on. The result is that zydeco, also spelled as "zodico", "zordico" and "zologo", in its traditional form, is mainly composed of Acadian tunes, with blues tonality and call-response structure in a Caribbean rhythmic framework.

In the years since World War II as a result of strong impact from mainstream Afro-American culture, zydeco has increasingly drawn on the big beat of rhythm and blues while being sung more often in English rather than Cajun or Creole French. This modern sound is best exemplified by Arhoolie recording artist Clifton Chenier and his great popularity among Gulf Coast black Creoles and Cajuns alike, as well as their kinfolk who have relocated on the West Coast.

THE MAN AND HIS BAND

John Delafosse and his band, the Eunice Playboys, represent both a return to old time zydeco as well as a unique modern sound. He plays the old time button accordion in a staccato style that emphasizes syncopated rhythm over melody; at the same time he plays the more melodic modern soul/blues sound often on a piano accordion. As to the meaning of the term zydeco, Delafosse comments: "It's the old traditional music. We call it 'zydeco' when we add a rockin' beat to just plain Cajun music. The blacks have a rockin' beat in the music. Zydeco really means snapbeans (*les haricots*). In the old days people might say 'Tu vas faire zydeco?' and mean 'How's it goin'?' If things wasn't so good, you'd say, 'Zydeco pas sales.' That's 'The snapbeans aren't salty,' which was a way to say things wasn't so good."

John Delafosse was born in Duralde, near Eunice, in 1939. The community was founded in the 1830's in part by Cyprian Ceazer, a free man of color and a maternal ancestor of John Delafosse. Today the surrounding area is famous for its Cajun and Creole musicians alike: Dewey Balfa, Nathan Abshire, Cheese Read, Bois Sec Ardoin, Amadie Ardoin, Canray Fontenot and Wilfred Latour among others. Delafosse recalls making guitars and violins as a boy with window screen wire stretched taut over a board and cigar box. This is not unlike what is sometimes called the "diddley-bow" elsewhere in the South. "Since I can remember I liked music. I would beat sticks when I was six and then at

about eight I'd make me those stringed instruments. Mama would yell 'don't tear that screen!', but I wanted my music bad. I also played some harmonica. When I was sixteen, I started on the button accordion. I always wanted to accomplish something. I wanted to be up on the bandstand with the big men."

Delafosse, who came from a sharecropping family of five, farmed until about twenty years ago. He raised cotton, corn, rice and sweet potatoes. As small farmers gave way to what are locally called the *gros chiens* (big dogs) of agribusiness, John switched over to repairing electric fans, a needed occupation in torridly tropical south Louisiana. He also began to make hot music on harmonica and accordion with a variety of pickup bands. He met the Prudhomme brothers, Charles and "Slim", his current guitar and bass players, in nearby Kinder and they formed a steady band about six years ago. This later came to include his teenage sons, seventeen year old John "T.T." Delafosse and Tony Delafosse, eighteen on *frottoir* (rubboard) and drums respectively. Both are students at nearby Mamou high school. Music is a family affair for the entire band since all the men's wives show up at the dances. Of his wife Joenn, a woman with a warm gold-toothed smile, John says, "She meets the people. If she doesn't come out, people ask for her."

Today John Delafosse and the Eunice Playboys are one of the most popular bands on the Louisiana/Texas Gulf Coast from Slim's Y-Ki-Ki club

in rural Opelousas to church dances in urban Houston. Recently, they have also played for the Governor's inaugural festival in Baton Rouge and at folk festivals in Natchitoches and El Paso. Their fans will tell you that their rhythm section is one of the best for dancing. It's their "hot French music" style that has brought the younger crowd back to the Creole dancehalls. This is paralleled by a community-wide revival of black French Creole identity.

On stage the Eunice Playboys move with the dancers in a pulsation of shifting rhythms. The tiny squeeze box looks like a sponge in big John Delafosse's hands while wirey guitarman Joseph "Slim" Prudhomme and his brother Charles shuffle from side to side in a Caribbeanized choreography. The overall impression at a club is one of constant motion as dancers following the band rise and fall from their tables for an evening of fast two-steps, slow waltzes and swaying blues. About the popularity of their hypnotic rhythmic style, Morris Ardoin, local dancehall owner and member of the musical Ardoin family, comments, "Delafosse has a good band. Man, they can cut the grass out from under you and you won't know it." In a proudly competitive comment typical of zydeco band-leaders, John Delafosse adds, "We are number one in demand. I guess many other bands have gone down to nothing after we came along. We have our own sound, so I never worry about them stealin' my songs, because they can't catch our rhythm."

THE SONGS

The songs performed here reflect the diverse influences upon zydeco. There are waltzes, blues and boogie numbers as well as the fast syncopated two-steps that are the hallmark of the music.

Side A

Co-fe? is the popular Creole spelling for *Why?* This two-step, composed by John Delafosse, has a distinct Caribbean feel. Like all old time zydeco two-steps, the melodic figure is repeated with shifting syncopation as the melodic accordion and guitar parts are accented by time changes in the rhythm section. *La Valse a Freole*, one of two waltzes on this LP, reflecting the lesser emphasis on waltzes by black Creoles, was learned from an old man in the Duralde community known as "Freole." He often sang this tune and it is avidly awaited by his children as a musical keepsake. *You took My Heartache* is a two-step created by John Delafosse. Its smooth melody and simplified rhythm reflect the impact of soul music. *Bye-Bye Mo Neg'* is another Delafosse two-step like *Co-fe?*. It features a strong call-response in the melodic figure. *Rag Around Your Head* is played on the chromatic scale piano accordion. The head rag, or *tignon* as it is called in French Louisiana, is sometime used as a symbol of women. This is so because in the old days the way a *tignon* was tied indicated if a girl was old enough to court, had a boyfriend, or was married. Delafosse uses the blues number here to

complain about a lazy woman who keeps the rag on from the night before and lays in bed "... pretendin' she's sick when the man goes off to work all day in the fields." *I Want to Be Your Lovin' Man* is described as "A fast jump number with some rock mixed in. I made this so the young people could swing out on it." *Petite et la Grosse* (Big and the Small) is also known locally as *Madame Edward*. John Delafosse isn't sure where he learned this popular fast two-step, but comments, "Lots of the musicians will play this, but not like my style."

Side B

Joe Pitre a Deux Femmes (Jo Pitre Has Two Women) is often associated with violin player Canray Fontenot of the Ardoin Brothers band. John Delafosse, however, learned it from his mentor Freole. Where the Ardoin Brothers molded the tune around the violin part, Delafosse has adapted it to the accordion as the lead instrument. *No-Good Woman* sounds like a fifties Gulf Coast rhythm and blues number a la Cookie and the Cupcakes, however John believes he learned this from a record by popular Cajun accordionist Belton Richard. *Une Heure Trop Tarde* (One Hour Too Late) has a classic theme of the couple that separates due to the fickleness of one partner — usually the woman — and their failure to get back together again. In this case, the woman returns an hour too late and finds her man with another woman. *Lonesome Road* is a Delafosse instrumental in a blues boogie style reminiscent

of Clifton Chenier. *Madame Sosthane*, in contrast, is a fast Cajun style waltz popular with many local groups. *Prudhomme Stomp*, as the title indicates, is dedicated by the group's leader to the Prudhomme brothers, Charles and Slim. Like the brothers' on-stage image of constant movement, this number is a free swinging zydeco two-step.

This then is the first LP of John Delafosse and his band the Eunice Playboys. *Zydeco men* all, they represent the re-emergence of the rural tradition of black French music in south Louisiana. It is fitting that the Creole cultural revival has produced such a band made of family and friends. John Delafosse concludes, "With me music is a cultural thing. You know I got started, not cause I thought I'd make a lot of money. It's just an accomplishment to be proud of."

Nicholas R. Spitzer
Folklorist, State of Louisiana
November 1980
Baton Rouge



JOHN DELAFOSE ZYDECO MAN

- CO-FÉ? (Why) (2:10)
- LA VALSE À FRÉOLE (2:15)
- YOU TOOK MY HEARTACHE (2:10)
- BYE BYE MO NÈG' (2:00)
- RAG AROUND YOUR HEAD (4:00)(*)
- I JUST WANT TO BE YOUR LOVIN' MAN (2:00)
- PETITE ET LA GROSSE (2:00)
- JOE PITRE A DEUX FEMMES (2:15)
- NO-GOOD WOMAN (3:10)
(Sidney Simien & F. Soileau)
- UNE HEURE TROP TARDE
(One Hour Too Late) (3:10)
- LONESOME ROAD (2:25)(*)
- MADAME SOSTHANE (2:30)
- PRUDHOMME STOMP (2:30)

John Delafosse — Button
accordion, piano accordion on
(*), & vocals
Charles Prudhomme — guitar
Joseph "Slim" Prudhomme — bass
John "T.T." Delafosse Jr. — frottoir
(rubboard)
Tony Delafosse — drums

All selections except A-7, B-2, & B-5
composed by John Delafosse and © 1980
by Tradition Music Co. (BMI)

Produced by Chris Strachwitz
Recorded May 1, 1980 at Master-Trak
Sound Recorders in Crowley, LA.
Recording engineer: Mark Miller; Mixing
by Sierra Sound Labs — Berkeley, CA.
Cover Photo by Chris Strachwitz
Cover: Wayne Pope
Liner Notes: Nicholas R. Spitzer
© 1981 by Arhoolie Productions, Inc.