

# C ▾ J ▾ CHENIER

AND THE NEW RED HOT LOUISIANA BAND



ARHOOLE  
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*Let Me In Your Heart*



The pretenders to the throne, those squeeze-box pushing Clifton Chenier imitators, had been hovering like vultures, waiting for the King to die. Some lost patience, crowning themselves zydeco's new kings, even as the old man continued to practice his red-hot inventions, holding his accordion firm, pumping out his soul, night after night across America, though he was frequently in pain. Clifton Chenier was going down slow, albeit with great dignity, but little did these would-be kings know he had a plan up his sleeve.

Clifton had a son, Clayton Joseph Chenier, in Port Arthur, Texas. He hardly knew the boy but kept in touch with C.J.'s mother, who informed him about their son's progress. By the time he was 16, C.J. was a professional musician. He played alto saxophone, keyboards and just about any other instrument he picked up. C.J. knew nothing of zydeco, his father's music, but that was okay. He was a quick learner. Clifton, who had created zydeco as we know it today, would teach his son.

C.J. joined his dad's Red Hot Louisiana Band a decade ago, when he was 20. He played saxophone with it, but as Clifton's health began to worsen and he was unable to carry the load of an entire evening's performance himself, he taught his son the accordion and began having him warm up the crowd. Toward the end, Clifton would sometimes be too sick to perform at all and C.J. would have to front the band himself.

He became the full-time leader of the Red Hot Louisiana band following his father's death in December 1987. They played their first engagement in Houston the night after the funeral and have been criss-crossing the country ever since, keeping dancers jumping and the tradition alive.

C.J. has no pretensions, however, about being the king of zydeco. "The crown is not something to be handed down," he told the Los Angeles Times during the group's first West Coast tour. "It won't fit on any head but his."

"I was the first Texas-born in my family," says C.J., who was born in Port Arthur on September 28, 1957. "Everybody else before me was from Louisiana." He never learned to speak French, either, though he now sings a few numbers in the language.

C.J. saw his father infrequently, "maybe once, maybe twice a year," and he didn't listen to Clifton's records either. Indeed, his Port Arthur playmates used to make fun of zydeco. "It was a joke to them," C.J. recalls. "Oh, your daddy can play that old chanky-chank music.' They called it 'chanky-chank' and laughed about it, but everybody knew (about) Clifton Chenier still. They called it old 'la-la' music too. They never called it 'zydeco.' They didn't know."

Although he initially wanted to play trombone, C.J. took up the saxophone in the fourth grade at his mother's insistence. "She knew saxophone was a good blues instrument," he explains. And he took piano lessons for three months. "Back then," he says, "kids would call you a 'sissy' if you played piano. That kinda made me quit."

When he was 16, C.J. joined a local Top 40 band--Carl Wayne and the Magnificent Seven. "We never went no further than the small area around Port Arthur," he remembers. At first, he was the group's saxophonist, then, after disco had become popular, switched to Fender Rhodes piano.

One day in 1978, Clifton phoned C.J.'s mother. "Tell him to meet me in Bridge City," he said. "I'm takin' him on the road with me."

C.J. describes that first engagement in nearby Bridge City as "rough." "The whole first year was rough," he adds. "I knew no zydeco at all. I was green. I couldn't tell one tune from another. I had been off my saxophone for six months or so. Then, I was following behind the great John Hart. That wasn't easy."

Clifton gave his son little feedback. "He wasn't an emotional person," C.J. explains. "He never showed whether he liked it or didn't like it. He just always told me what I should do and how I should play things. He knew I'd never played nothin' like that before. I'd heard John Hart a little bit, so I kinda had an idea. I just had to put it all together."

After four years as a member of the Red Hot Louisiana Band, C.J. had gotten it together enough to be appointed band leader. A year later, Clifton began teaching him the accordion. "It was not easy at all," C.J. recalls. "I mean, I played sousaphone in the 12th grade in marching bands, and I think accordion was a lot harder than that. It might even be a little heavier too."

Today, C.J. plays a Soprano brand accordion that his father gave him about a week before his death. C.J.'s style differs a little from Clifton's, though his repertoire contains fewer French numbers.

"I guess I hear things like a sax player," C.J. says, "but being that Clifton Chenier was the only accordion player that I ever

really listened to, there's no other style I could have. I never even listened to his records. I mostly listened to him, live, standing next to him. It was an on-stage experience."

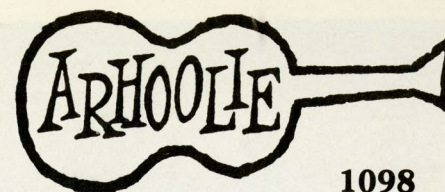
Taking over the Red Hot Louisiana Band following his father's death, C.J. kept the same personnel, adding only a second guitarist--Selwyn Cooper. (Since this album was cut, a saxophonist has also been added.) The process of recording this album, according to Chris Strachwitz, who had produced countless Clifton Chenier albums over the years, was a lot smoother than the ones with Clifton, largely because C.J. was able to communicate with his band members in musical terms.

On stage, C.J. Chenier is a commanding personality, a strong singer and a fine accordionist. Though he's added some numbers of his own to the band's repertoire, they remain faithful to the grand Clifton Chenier tradition. Indeed, C.J. had no desire to alter the musical course his father set years ago and recommends to anyone who is just becoming aware of zydeco that they check out its source.

"People who didn't know about Clifton Chenier a whole lot should buy some of his early albums where they can really hear the kind of stuff he was puttin' down," C.J. says. "Then they'll know for sure who the King of Zydeco is. I don't care who jumps in or who they crown, to me, there'll only be one King from now until."

--Lee Hildebrand

(Note: Clifton Chenier's best music on Cassettes, CD's, LP albums and Video cassettes is available from ARHOOLIE RECORDS.)



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## C.J. CHENIER & The Red Hot Louisiana Band

**Side A:**  
**CHECK OUT THE ZYDECO**  
**I'M COMING HOME**  
**SHE'S MY WOMAN**  
**BLUE FLAME BLUES**  
**MY BABY DON'T WEAR NO SHOES**

**Side B:**  
**LET ME IN YOUR HEART**  
**(For You I'm The Only Man)**  
**BOW-LEGGED WOMAN**  
**BANANA MAN**  
**I'M ALL SHOOK UP**  
**USED AND ABUSED**  
**I'LL BE LONG GONE**

C.J. Chenier-accordion, alto & vocals  
Cleveland Chenier-rubboard  
Selwyn Cooper-guitar  
Joseph Edwards-drums  
Harry Hypolite-guitar  
Wayne Burns-bass

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C.J. & Cleveland

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