

FOLKSONGS OF THE LOUISIANA ACADIANS

Vol. 2

Wallace "Cheese" Reed
Isom Fontenot
Cyprien Landreneau
Milton Molitor
Austin Pitre
Lurlin Lejune



STEREO

Recorded by Dr. Harry Oster





Austin Pitre, Lurline Le June, & Milton Molitor, photo by Harry Oster

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The roots of Cajun music in Louisiana reach far back in history, to the France of the sixteenth century and to Acadie in Canada, settled in 1604 by immigrants from the provinces of northern France—Brittany, Normandy, and Picardy. With the loss of Acadie to the English in 1713, the stage was set for the tragedy to come. In 1714 the British rulers insisted that either the Acadians take an unrestricted oath of allegiance to the British crown or leave Acadia without taking their possessions. Although the Acadians refused to take the unrestricted oath, as long as the French colony was useful England did not press for their departure.

During the French and Indian War, which began in 1747, Lawrence, the governor of Acadia, plotted secretly to exile the Acadians from Canada and to expropriate their rich lands. Since the British had brought over twenty-five hundred settlers from England in 1748 and established the city of Halifax, the government decided that the Acadians had outlived their usefulness to the empire. Lawrence insisted that the inhabitants of Grand Pré take an unqualified oath of allegiance to the English crown, swearing loyalty forever to England and agreeing to bear arms against her enemies.

When most of the Acadians refused, Lawrence summoned the men of Grand Pré to the village church on September 5, 1755. There Winslow, Lawrence's aide, read them their cruel fate, "That your lands and Tenements; cattle of all kinds and Live Stock of all Sorts are forfeited to the Crown with all your effects, Saving your money and Household goods; and yourselves to be removed from his province." Winslow then put the assembled four hundred and eighteen men of Grand Pré and vicinity under arrest. Five days later the young men, the most likely source of rebellion,

were forced onto the five transports then available. As soon as the other Acadians had been driven from their farms, Winslow ordered the buildings burned to the ground, often before the eyes of their agonized owners.

During the next eleven years the British continued to deport Acadians, more than eight thousand of them, four thousand of whom died at sea of smallpox and other diseases. The surviving exiles were scattered widely, at first to New Haven, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Hampton Roads, Charleston, and Savannah—usually without advance notices to the governors. Almost everywhere their reception was cold. Philadelphia received them reluctantly, and Governor Reynolds of Georgia banished them as soon as they arrived because of a statute which forbade the settling of Catholics. Since almost everywhere the pathetic exiles found themselves unwanted, many of them pushed on to Louisiana, hoping to join other Frenchmen.

When the first group reached Louisiana in 1756, the French and Spanish welcomed them and helped them settle in the southwest of the state, the area along Larouche, Têche, and Vermilion bayous. Here they have remained for more than two centuries, relatively isolated for most of this period. A generation ago, a French visitor to southwest Louisiana could easily have imagined himself in a province (somewhat tropical) of France itself. He would have noticed that the people spoke French almost exclusively, a dialect much like those of some of the provinces, that they still practiced many French customs, and that some of the people sang ancient French folksongs.

During the past forty years, however, the strength of the French influence has been waning

because of a variety of forces. When the public schools came into general existence, many of them forbade the speaking of French on the premises. The purpose was to force the children to speak English.* The widespread building of roads during the nineteen thirties brought the community into more easy contact with the tide of Americanization. The rise of phonograph, radio, motion pictures, and most recently, television, has had the double effect of changing the tastes of this traditional people in the direction of conformity, and of substituting mass produced homogeneous entertainment for the old folk dances and songs. In addition, the return of veterans of World War II after years elsewhere, the discovery of oil on many farms in southwest Louisiana, industrialization and the consequent influx of executives and workers from other states are upsetting the ancient ways which were so traditionally a part of an agricultural way of life.

Since the modern descendants of the Acadians (now usually called "Cajuns"—a colloquial shortening of "Acadiens") are in a state of rapid transition, one can still find music representing three important stages of development. The music now being performed includes (1) *the folk music of seventeenth and eighteenth century France*, still circulating in relatively pure form; (2) *hybrid folksongs*, combining lyrics in Cajun French with elements from one or more outside sources (southern mountain folksongs, Tin Pan Alley hits, country-and-western music, hill-billy, Negro jazz), and (3) *current popular music*, the output of the mass media.

For the most part those who sing songs in the early French and Acadian tradition are among the older members of the community, those over sixty, grandparents and great-grandparents, many of whom learned these songs from their parents before the phonograph came into wide use in the state. Some of these oldsters speak only French. Their children, ranging in age from about twenty-five to fifty, generally speak both French and English; the music they like best is hybrid. Today's youngsters often speak English and only understand English; the songs they sing and the tunes they dance to are identical with the commercial popular music of the rest of the United States. The songs in this album represent the tastes of the middle group.

One of the attractive features of folk life which still survives, though in a somewhat modified form is the big Saturday all-night dance, the *fais-dodo* (literally, go to sleep), so called perhaps because mothers sing *fais-dodos* (lullabies) to put to sleep the babies, who are brought along to the dance with all the other members of the family. While the dances seldom run all night now, there is still plenty of hilarity and exuberance, expressed in wild whooping and rhythmic stamping of feet as the dancers gyrate through the current favorites, the two-step, the waltz, and a Cajun form of jitterbugging. Passing the bottle in comradely fashion, the dancers drink their whiskey directly from a fifth with no nonsense about branch water to weaken their bourbon.

The traditional instruments are the Cajun accordion (an instrument usually made in Germany, which has only two chords, the tonic and dominant, and can play in only one key), the fiddle, and a rhythm instrument, originally the triangle or spoons, recently the guitar. The vocalists sing at the upper end of their voices, the tone often harsh, the throat usually tightly constricted.

** In the past several years the schools in southwest Louisiana have taken an active interest in reversing this trend and have even gone to the expense and trouble to bring in French teachers from France in an attempt to familiarize their children with Parisian French.*

Notes by Dr. Harry Oster — ca. 1960

The material heard on Side B of this album was once part on an LP entitled "Cajun Folk Music" (Prestige/International 25015). All the material heard on Side A was recorded about the time of Volume One (Arhoolie 5009) and is issued here for the first time.

ARHOOLIE 5015
STEREO

LANCE MEG WALTZ
FRENCH JIG
THE WALTZ OF THE WAYSIDE*
RABBIT STOMP*
MA CHERE BELLE
EMPTY BOTTLE STOMP
LA BELLE DE LA LOUISIANNE
TON AVAIT, TON AURA PLUS**

CHERE MOM (1)
MOLITOR WALTZ (1)
LOST LOVER BREAKDOWN (2)
LE BLUES DE ELTON (1)
CONTREDANSE (2)
CHERE JOUES ROSES (2)

Side A:
Wallace "Cheese" Reed — fiddle and vocals
Isaac Soileau — 2nd fiddle on *
Isom Fontenot — harmonica and triangle (and vocal on **)
Cyprien Landreneau — accordion (and triangle on **)

Side B:
Milton Molitor — accordion and vocals on (1)
Austin Pitre — fiddle and vocals on (2)
Lurlin LeJune — guitar

Recorded by Dr. Harry Oster near Mamou and Eunice, La.

Produced by Dr. Harry Oster and Chris Strachwitz

Cover photo of Wallace "Cheese" Reed by Chris Strachwitz

Cover by Wayne Pope

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