

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA 2623

# RICHARD FONTENOT CAJUN COUNTRY GUITAR

EDITED AND ANNOTATED BY GERARD DOLE



PHOTOGRAPH: RICHARD FONTENOT AND HIS BROTHER HUBERT, 1944

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE



FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA 2623

SIDE 1

- 1) MON BON VIEUX MARI
- 2) TOUS LES DEUX POUR LA MEME
- 3) ALLONS A LAFAYETTE
- 4) HEY MOM
- 5) PAUVRE HOBO
- 6) GRAND TEXAS

SIDE 2

- 1) JOLIE BLONDE
- 2) J'AI PASSE DEVANT TA PORTE
- 3) GABRIEL
- 4) BAYOU POPON
- 5) COLINDA
- 6) HIP ET TAIAUT

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# RICHARD FONTENOT

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## CAJUN COUNTRY GUITAR

EDITED AND ANNOTATED BY GERARD DOLE

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA 2623



## FINDING RICHARD FONTENOT

by Gérard DOLE

RICHARD FONTENOT - CAJUN COUNTRY GUITAR

Edited and annotated by Gérard DOLE

### SIDE A

- 1) MON BON VIEUX MARI
- 2) TOUS LES DEUX POUR LA MEME
- 3) ALLONS A LAFAYETTE
- 4) HEY MOM
- 5) PAUVRE HOBO
- 6) GRAND TEXAS

### SIDE B

- 1) JOLIE BLONDE
- 2) J'AI PASSE DEVANT TA PORTE
- 3) GABRIEL
- 4) BAYOU PONPON
- 5) COLINDA
- 6) HIP ET TATAUT

I met Richard Fontenot in the summer of 1975, when I was collecting Cajun music in Southern Louisiana. Mrs. Agnes Bourke of Eunice had sung me some precious French ballads (1), then let me hear a very beautiful version of the *Mardi-Gras* by one Ira Lejeune (not related to Iry Lejeune) of Iota, a village in Acadia parish. So off I went in search of this old man born in 1893.

At last I traced his grandchildren who told me that he was then dead. Had he recorded any other songs? They could not tell me for certain, but advised me to contact the person who had produced the small record for the Lejeune family, a certain Richard Fontenot, who played discrete guitar behind Ira's singing.

That same evening, a *sauce piquante* at the home of Allie Young, accordionist and singer of Basile, was enticing me, and in the night there was the promise of a musicians' party (2). So I put off my visit to the Fontenots.

I returned to Iota some days later, on Tuesday 16th September, invited to a gumbo by Etienne Lewis, a black creole who wanted to entertain me with some old blues in the company of fiddle-playing neighbour Lynn Dozart, and Frémont Fontenot, an accordionist from Basile (3).

Evening fell. I was early at the Lewis's house. I used the spare time to go for some bottles of beer from the village grocer's shop. As often happens on the Louisiana prairies, a violent thunderstorm suddenly broke. I rushed into the shelter of the shop. Later, sitting on the *galerie*, beer in hand, I gazed at the pouring rain. The idea came to me that Richard Fontenot must live in these parts. I asked the friendly shopkeeper, a good Acadian woman, who pointed towards a small wooden house behind the watery screen.

Taking courage, wrapped in an old tarpaulin provided by the shopkeeper, I dashed through the rain and lightning the short distance which separated me from the dwelling. I clambered up some rickety steps and knocked at the door. No reply. A peal of thunder shook the house. In the distance, the lightning flash hit the conductor on the post office. I drummed harder. A curtain drew back at last, revealing an astonished face at the clouded window pane. Tepid water dripped into my face from the porch; with feverish signs I urged the apparition to let me in. Slowly, it signalled me to pass round the house. I splashed once more into the mud and entered at last,

soaked to the skin, into an incredible kitchen filled with pots and pans of all kinds. A strong odour of coffee enveloped me. A stout man in a white vest was finishing stringing a guitar on the oilcloth laid on the big oak table - it was my Richard for sure. His wife at once offered me a cup of steaming black coffee, while a youngster pushed a chair towards me, turning out an extraordinary little dog with three legs. At last I relaxed, and quickly told my story.

I soon learned that Ira Lejeune had died after recording only one 45 rpm record meant for his children. The last available copy had been lent to neighbours and, as the storm subsided, Mrs. Fontenot sent her daughter to find it. Shyly, Richard asked about my researches, astounded at my interest in Cajun music. I recounted my misadventures in finding him, which made him burst with laughter.

Since my entry into their home, I was touched by the kindness and goodwill of the Fontenots. The spontaneity and simplicity of their welcome bore witness to the proverbial hospitality which is a continual marvel to the traveller in Southern Louisiana. Richard's questions in French multiplied; his curiosity seemed limitless.

As he went on, he had tuned his guitar and softly played *Allons à Lafayette*, and old two-step. I was intrigued by this incongruous combination. When questioned, Richard told me that he had played the guitar since the age of seven and that he had transposed this old dance tune, which he had played on the fiddle in his youth, using a special technique, the *touch finger style*. In effect, this was his way of perpetuating the tradition. He proceeded to play for me some spirited versions of Cajun classics such as *J'ai passé devant ta porte*, *Jolie blonde*, and *Colinda*.

Then the little girl came back into the kitchen, all out of breath, with the sleeveless record in her hand. Wiping it without further ado with her fingers, she gave it to me with a big smile. Richard led me into the side room to hear it.

While the *Mardi-Gras* song was playing on the gramophone, Mrs. Fontenot brought out some yellowed photographs from the family album. The first she showed me dated from 1944. There was Richard as a small boy, playing fiddle in the company of his eldest brother Hubert on the guitar. The second, taken around the same time, caught father and son Fontenot posing proudly in front of a cabin in the swamps, their arms full of freshly tanned hides. Yet another showed Richard all dressed up and full of himself, holding a guitar. A last showed his old mother, surprised sewing some clothes in her old creole chair.

Richard told of the old times at Jennings, by the side of the river. I was captivated, imagining their life in the Louisiana of a bygone age.

I would have liked to have spent the whole evening with the Fontenots who had taken me in and did not want to let me go. But I knew that at the other end of the village the Lewis's would be concerned at my long absence. So I regretfully cut short my visit, promising to return the next day. I turned back many times from their dimly-lit porch, and after long goodbyes, finally plunged into the night.

### References

- |                            |                         |                  |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| (1) CAJUN HOME MUSIC       | Recorded by Gérard DOLE | Folkways FA 2620 |
| (2) CAJUN SOCIAL MUSIC     | "                       | " FA 2621        |
| (3) LOUISIANA CREOLE MUSIC | "                       | " FA 2622        |



Since its introduction in the nineteen twenties into the Cajun music of Southern Louisiana, the guitar has chiefly been employed as a means of accompanying the accordion or fiddle, combining both the rhythmic role of the triangle and the harmonic role of a second fiddle. The decisive innovation was brought about by Cleoma Breaux in backing the accordion and singing of Joe Falcon on their 1928 recordings. Her playing was limited to a rhythmic beating of simple chords.

Later, guitar accompaniments became embellished with some simple bass figures, as witnessed by the playing of Clifford Breaux in a series of recordings made by the Breaux Frères in 1934.

Towards the end of the thirties, certain groups were influenced by commercial pressures to introduce elements of "foreign" music (pop and hillbilly) and attempted some simple guitar solos. From photographs of the period, it would seem that most guitarists had equipped themselves with resonator guitars of the "National" type.

Contact with the "American" work force of the naval dockyards of Texas such as Orange and Port Arthur, where numerous Cajuns enlisted during the second world war, resulted in the adoption of the steel guitar by the electric groups. This instrument can be heard, for example, on the recordings made by Harry Choates in Houston in 1946. At about this same time, the use of an electrified rhythm guitar became the accepted standard.

Towards the end of the sixties, the pedal steel guitar finally replaced the steel guitar as an essential feature of the popular dance bands, taking solos on an equal basis with the accordion and fiddle.

#### MON BON VIEUX MARI

Recorded in 1928 by Joe Falcon and Cleoma Breaux as *Le vieux souldard et sa femme*, a Cajun version of *My good ol' man*.

#### 'TOUS LES DEUX POUR LA MEME

This was formerly a waltz. Fiddle player Dennis McGee, born in 1893, tells that it was the first tune he learned to play.

#### ALLONS A LAFAYETTE

The first Cajun recording, made by Joe Falcon in 1928, this two-step is a version of *Jeunes gens de la campagne*, itself adapted from an old Acadian ballad *Oh si j'aurais des ailes*.

#### HEY MOM

Recorded by Mayeus Lafleur and Leo Soileau six months after Joe Falcon's first session.

#### PAUVRE HOBO

Recorded in 1930 by Ségura and Hébert as *Quand j'ai quitté d'la maison*, this two-step was popularised in Texas after the second world war by Harry Choates.

#### GRAND TEXAS

Like *Pauvre hobo*, this was recorded by Harry Choates in Houston in 1946.

#### JOLIE BLONDE

The "Cajun anthem" was first recorded by the Breaux Frères in 1929 under the title *Ma blonde est partie*. Innumerable versions have since been made, of which *Jole blon* (sic) by Harry Choates became a nationwide success. According to Will Balfa, it was formerly known as *La valse du troisième chène*.

#### J'AI PASSE DEVANT TA PORTE

This sad waltz was recorded in 1929 by Joe Falcon and Cleoma Breaux as *Mon coeur t'appelle*, and remains a favourite today.

#### GABRIEL

An old waltz, which was popularised in the sixties by Nathan Abshire.

#### BAYOU PONPON

This one-step was first recorded by Angéla Lejeune in 1929, and later brilliantly re-worked by Iry Lejeune as his *Bayou Pon Pon Special*.

#### COLINDA

A rather lukewarm white version of a Bantou (voodoo) dance, *La calinda*, which was banned by the plantation owners of the lower Mississippi, who would not tolerate such wantonness amongst their slaves.

#### HIP ET TAIAUT

Recorded in 1935 by Joe Falcon and Cleoma Breaux as *Ils ont volé mon traineau*. Falcon later recounted that he had learned the piece from a negro named Babineaux.

#### RICHARD FONTENOT'S "TOUCH FINGER STYLE" and the GUITAR TABLATURES

by Dave SMITH

Richard Fontenot has taken the old classic Cajun tunes and adapted them for the solo guitar. This naturally involves the insertion into and around the melody of much ornamentation and syncopation, which helps to sustain the player's and listener's interest. Fontenot also makes use of some of the special effects available to the modern electric guitarist. In fact, in some passages the underlying Cajun theme will only be easily recognisable by those already familiar with this music. This very personal interpretation of the Cajun tradition is called by Richard Fontenot the *touch finger style*.

The tablatures represent the top four strings (E,B,G,D) of a guitar in standard tuning. As usual with tablature of this type, the written numbers indicate the fret to be fingered, and any indication of timing is restricted to a division into individual bars. The player should listen to Fontenot's playing itself for further guidance in this latter respect. Because Fontenot's style results in the production of endless variations, the only aim of these transcriptions has been to write down the underlying Cajun melody (usually based on the first time each theme is played through) as it would be played on the lowest frets of the guitar fingerboard.



RICHARD FONTENOT

# mon bon vieux mari

**tous les deux pour la même**

# allons à lafayette



# hey non

E	0		0 1 3	1	0 1 3	0	0 1 3	1 1	0 0	
B		1		3		1		3	3 3 1	
G										
D										

			0 3	1	0 3		0 3	
	1 0	1		3 0	1	1 0	1	
0		2 0		0		2 0		

1								
3 0	1							
0								

# pauvre hobo

E			0			0		
B	0 0 0		3 0		0	3 0		
G		0	0		2	2 0		
D								

7 5	3 0	0 3		2 0				
		3 3		3 2	1 0			
					3 0			

# grand texas

E	5 3 0	3 0	1 3 1		7 7 5	3 5 3	8	3	
B			3 0						
G									
D									

5 3 0	3 0	1 3 1		7 7 3	5 3 0		3	
		3 0			3 1	5	1	

# jolie blonde

E		1	0		0		0		
B	0 3		3	1 3 3		0 0	3	3	
G	0				0 0			4 2	0
D									

0 3	5 3 5 3 5 3	5 3 5 3 5 3	5 3 0 3	0 0	3 1
0				0	

0 2					
4	0				



# j'ai passé devant ta porte

E	3	1	0		0	1	0			3	1	0	0	1	3	
B			0	1	3			3	0	1	3					
G								0								
D																

5	3	1	0													
			1	3	0	1										

# gabriel

E					0											
B				0	0	1	3	3	1		0					
G		0	0	0	2	2			2							
D	0	2	4						4	0						

			0	0												
1	1	0	1	3	3	3	1	0								
							2	0								

# bayou pompon

E	3	0	1	3	3	3	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	
B							3		1	1			3	0	0	
G																
D																

				0	3	1		0	3			0	3	0		
0	2	0		1	0	2	0		1	3	0		1	0	2	0

1																
3	0		1													
0																

# colinda

E		0	2	2	0	2	3	0		0	0	2	0			
B		3			3				2		2		2	0		
G	2													2		
D																

	0	2	2	0	2	3	0		0	0	0	5	7	5	3	2	0
3				3				2								3	
2																	



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