

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FD 6526

THE CAJUN SWING

JAY PELSIA, NATHAN MENARD & THE MUSICAL CAJUNS
WITH SINGING BY RAY THIBODEUX

RECORDED BY SAM CHARTERS



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C139
1980

CAJUN MARDI GRAS AT MAMOU, LOUISIANA / PHOTO BY SAM CHARTERS

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

MUSIC LP

Side A

1. Don't Get Married 2:51
2. Cher Tout Tout 3:26
3. The Cajun Swing 3:14
4. La Valse Cajun 3:28
5. The Mulberry Waltz 3:30
6. Crowley Two Step 3:43

Side B

1. The Family Waltz 3:27
2. The Grand Night Special 2:20
3. The Drunkard's Dream 3:28
4. Creole Stomp 2:53
5. La Valse de Meche 3:21
6. Midnight Special 3:12

**Jay Pelsia, Nathan Menard
and The Musical Cajuns**

Jay Pelsia plays the pedal steel, and Nathan Menard the accordian. The singing is by Ray Thibodeaux, who also plays drums. The two violins are played by Dick Richard and Raymond Cormier. On "Don't Get Married" Dick plays the first violin "ride" and Raymond the second. Lennis Richard Jr. plays the bass.

Recorded at Master-Trak Sound Recorders, Crowley, Louisiana on February 7, 1980. Engineer Mark Miller.

All selections are traditional, arranged by the performers.

Photos by Sam Charters.

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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Ray Thibodeaux

One way to describe the music of The Musical Cajuns is to say that this is today's Cajun dance music, and another way to describe it is to say that this is a traditional musical style which synthesizes all the diverse cultural musical and cultural elements of Cajun life. The best thing about their music is that both descriptions fit what they play. This is the music you'll hear in dance halls and in little parlor rooms on a Friday or Saturday night in western Louisiana. It's also a traditional musical style that has stayed relatively fixed in its forms and idiom since the 1940's, and it blends together a wide assortment of influences. As is well known today's Louisiana Cajuns are the descendants of the French speaking settlers what is now called Nova Scotia. They were driven from their homes by the English in 1755, many sold into slavery, and the rest dispersed along the Atlantic coast. At this point Louisiana was still a French colony and after many migrations a number of the fugitives made their way to western Louisiana where there lives and culture took new root. The music that they play today, however, doesn't reflect much of their French background except for the language, and even that has changed considerably in the more than two hundred years that have passed since they had regular contact with French culture. The instruments in a Cajun group reflect an American background more than they do a French heritage. The accordion wasn't invented until 1828, in Vienna, and it doesn't seem to have made an appearance in their part of Louisiana until some years afterwards when groups of German immigrants settled nearby. The pedal steel, of course, was first introduced into the United States--in its early form--by Hawaiian musicians and didn't become popular as the instrument we know today until after World War II. The violin and the guitar go further back in Cajun tradition, but the music that is played today has a strong Country-Western flavor.

The Cajun dance music also is part of the new American background. The waltz didn't make its appearance until the 1840's, and the two step--the other popular Cajun dance--came some time afterwards. Often the song verses, however, use an older language and idiom, and the singing style is unique to the area. The modern Cajun music combines all of these diverse instrumental and vocal styles and somehow reflects all of them. Part of the distinctiveness of the singing is the strong influence of black music, which was also part of the Louisiana background. Many Cajun singers have modeled their blues style on the local black artists who also play the same kind of music, but put more emphasis on blues and on rhythm & blues.

The Cajun dance orchestra--like The Musical Cajuns--is in the tradition of the music that developed immediately after the Second World War. The earliest Cajun recordings, done in the 1920's, used the accordion as an important instrument. It was the old square button instrument they'd been playing for many years, and many artists recorded with it, including Amedie Ardoin, a black musician who played the accordion and sang. Ardoin's are in the white Cajun style, but he also had a broad repertoire of blues and black dance pieces that were known to other musicians in his area.

Styles change often in popular music, and Cajun bands reflect the tastes of their own audience. By the end of the 1930's, and into the war years, the dominant popular style was the Cajun string band, featuring the violin. The accordion was considered old-fashioned, and for a time almost disappeared from the Cajun scene. The dominant artists were bands like Harry Choates, Happy Fats, and the Hackberry Ramblers, and with their violin lead and strong rhythm backup they sounded as much like Country & Western groups as they did like Cajun bands. A single musician named Iry LeJune, however, brought the accordion back into the Cajun orchestra.



Nathan Menard and Jay Pelsia

Iry was born near Church Point, Louisiana in 1928 and grew up in semi-blindness, more or less dependant on music as a career from the beginning. His father, Agnes LeJune, helped him learn the accordion, but the strongest influence on him as Amedie Ardoin, from whom he learned his "crying" style of singing and much of his accordion repertoire. Faced with the near dominance of the violin he at first tried to learn it himself, but soon gave up and went back to the accordion. In 1948 he managed to convince a man named Floyd LeBlanc to take him to Houston to record. His first session, with a band called Virgil Bozman's Oklahoma Tornados, produced a song, "Love Bridge Waltz," that was an immediate success, and soon the accordion was back in Cajun music to stay.

The modern Cajun dance orchestra has also added two new instruments, the pedal steel and the electric bass. The pedal steel was brought over from C & W, and its role is still very much influenced by country music styles. The players, however, use a much heavier tone and fuller chording, and they play an accompaniment part when they're not soloing, strumming the chords like a rhythm guitarist. The bass has been adapted to Cajun music and its part is an unaccented pattern in quarter notes which plays as much of a harmonic role as a rhythmic one. Modern Cajun drumming is very direct and unadorned. Most players use only a snare and bass drum and cymbals, without the paraphernalia of tomtoms and percussion instruments that are part of the R & B and rock drum style.

All of this is part of the style of The Musical Cajuns. Nathan Menard has been playing the accordion for more than twenty years, and he has absorbed the older traditions of Cajun music from his father Ursin Menard, who also played the accordion. Jay Pelsia has been playing the pedal steel for an even longer time, and he has always performed in the Cajun band style. Both Jay and Nathan also played with The Balfa Brothers Orchestra on their newest recording for Sonet Records, and they are sought out for other bands as well. Jay used

the longer spelling of his name, J.W. Pellisier for the other recordings, but he preferred the shorter spelling for this session, where he and Nathan are leading their own dance group.

All of the other musicians have been playing for many years, and they are part of the busy musical life of western Louisiana. Like almost all other musicians they have full time day jobs, and their music is something for weekends. Jay works in a food market and drives a school bus in the small town of Richie, between Eunice and Basile. Nathan is in the insurance business in Rayne. The band's excellent singer, Ray Thibodeaux, is a carpenter in Lake Charles. Lennis Richard Jr. lives in Youngsville, where he's a butcher. Raymond Cormier is a TV technician in Rayne, and Dick Richard is a farmer outside of Eunice. Dick tours regularly with Dewey Balfa, playing the older styles of Cajun music, but the others have generally played in their own areas. Most of them are in their forties or late thirties, except for Lennis, who's just thirty. Since they are among the finest of the musicians around they have done considerable recordings with other groups. Jay and Nathan have recorded with the Balfa Brothers, Ray Thibodeaux with Joe Bonsall, Lennis with Belton Richard, and Raymond Cormier with Johnny Allen, Aldus Roger and Walter Mouton. Dick Richard also recorded with the Balfa Brothers for Sonet, and has done other recording with Dewey Balfa.

The musicians in The Musical Cajuns are deeply versed in their own traditions and they are also experienced performers. One of the most exciting things about their music is that they haven't lost their own sense of pleasure in it. They love to play, and this is evident in their rowdy two steps, just as it is in their more sensitive waltzes. This is today's Cajun dance music at just about its best. For the selections they chose favorites from their dance hall repertoire so you're hearing a sample of the kind of music you'd hear in a local dance hall on a Saturday night. It makes a trip to Louisiana certainly worth while!



from the left: Nathan Menard, Lennis Richard Jr., Raymond Cormier, Raymond Thibodeaux, Dick Richard, and Jay Pelsia

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