

# Cajun and Zydeco: Flavors of Southwest Louisiana

*A Smithsonian Folkways Music Pathway for students in Grades 6–8.*



## Teacher's Guide

*Lesson Hub 1:  
GUMBO! Intro to Cajun and Zydeco*

### Lesson Hub Overview

The music and the official state cuisine of Louisiana share many features. A true musical melting pot, the sounds and styles that are unique to the state come from a rich combination of influences and cultural flavors. Although New Orleans is a widely known hub for musical innovation and development, **Cajun** and **zydeco** music emerged from the southwestern portion of Louisiana known as "Acadiana" (about a 2-hour drive west of New Orleans).

**Cajuns** are descendants of migrants from what is today known as Nova Scotia in Canada, while zydeco music comes from **Creole** heritage, rooted in a combination of Caribbean, West African, Native American, Spanish, and Portuguese influences. Louisiana was a **French** colony during the formation of Cajun and Creole communities. Today, French is still widely spoken in Acadiana, the region of south Louisiana where these French-speaking communities originally settled. Most Cajun and zydeco music is sung in French.

**Cajun music** and **zydeco music** have some similarities and differences. Cajun music is primarily acoustic and is usually played by people of Cajun heritage. This style is influenced by fiddle tunes and Acadian and European ballads. Zydeco music, not fully defined as a genre of its own until the mid-1950s, features more influences from R&B, blues, and jazz, and is typically associated with Creole roots. Although these styles have different origins, Cajun and zydeco music are unique musical flavors of Southwest Louisiana that have formed and influenced one another endlessly. When people with different ancestry combine similar instrumentation, lyrical themes, language, and rhythms into one pot, you get a true “musical gumbo!”

This lesson serves as an introduction to the atmosphere within which Cajun and zydeco music exists. Through a very basic discussion of people and place, as well as engagement with audio and video recordings, students will gain a basic understanding of context for future learning experiences in this pathway.

## In This Guide

<b>Lesson Overview</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Lesson Paths and Student Objectives</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Teaching Plan</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>2014 National Core Music Standards Connections</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Additional Reading and Resources</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Worksheets</b> .....	<b>14</b>

## Lesson Paths and Student Objectives\*



- **What's in a Gumbo? People and Place** (20+ minutes)
  - Students will describe the historical and cultural context within which Cajun and zydeco music developed.









- **Put It in the Pot: The Sights and Sounds of Cajun & Zydeco** (30+ minutes)
  - Students will identify similarities and differences between Cajun and zydeco.



- **Stir It All Up: Make Your Own Musical Gumbo!** (20+ minutes)
  - Students will experience Cajun and zydeco music through engaged listening activities (music-making with a recording).

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\*Note: The learning icons used above signify the type of learning used in each Path. Keep in mind that these Paths are not intended to be sequential; rather, teachers or students may choose which Paths they'd like to use from each Lesson. The time estimate given for each Path indicates "in class" time. The + indicates there are optional extension activities and/or a suggested homework assignment.

While all learning types ( History and Culture,  Music Listening,  Music Making and Creation, and  Creative Connections) fulfill 2014 National Music Standards, non-music teachers will be able to use  History and Culture and  Creative Connections Paths without specific musical knowledge.

## Teaching Plan

### 1. What's in a Gumbo? People and Place



#### *To prepare:*

- Read through the Path
- Preview Path 1 of the **Lesson Hub 1 Slideshow** (slides 2–20)
- Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson Hub landing page, if you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow” link, which will not show the notes.

#### 1. **What's in a Gumbo?** Opening Discussion (Slides 4–8)

##### A. *What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of Louisiana?*

- This question is intended to help you gauge students' prior knowledge/impressions.
- Students might mention things like New Orleans, Mardi Gras, jazz, the Saints (football), food, etc....
- Consider guiding the conversation towards the “food” they think comes from that area of the country...perhaps someone will mention Gumbo! (Which will lead you into the next discussion question).

##### B. *Has anyone ever eaten gumbo? What is gumbo and what typically goes in it?*

- **After leading a short discussion, share the information on the slides that follow.**

#### 2. **Let's Take a Taste:** Cajun vs. Zydeco (Slides 9–10)

##### A. Attentive Listening: Play a short excerpt from both “Zydeco Sont Pas Salé” by Clifton Chenier (zydeco example) and “Zydeco Sont Pas Salé” by Austin Pitre (Cajun example) in order to give students a little “taste” of Cajun and zydeco styles.

- Suggestion: the first 1:45 of the zydeco example (fading out when the vocals return) and 0:48–2:46 of the Cajun example are enough to provide a representative example (“a first taste”) of these genres.
- Students will hopefully notice that these are two different versions of the same song! This connection is explored more deeply in Lesson Path 2.

##### B. Consider asking students to reflect on other similarities and differences between these styles . . . Especially regarding instrumentation.

- **Some basic information about Cajun and zydeco instrumentation is provided on the next slide.**

### 3. **Geographic Connections:** Share Information/Lead Discussion (Slides 11–19)

Use the information embedded in the slideshow to help students make geographic connections. Specific topics include:

- Acadiana (Find the location in relation to New Orleans and the Mississippi River). (slide 13)
- *Who are the Cajuns?* (slide 15)
  - **Cajuns are descendants of people who once lived in Acadia** (parts of what are now New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia in Canada).
- *Who are the Creoles?* (slide 16)
  - The concept of ‘Creole’ identity is more complicated and varies in terms of ethnic background. See discussion points in slideshow (**the concept of “Creole” is explored more in [Lesson 4](#)**).
- *What are parishes?* (slide 17)
  - The equivalent of ‘counties’ in other states
  - *What language do the parish names sound like to you?*
- **The names of parishes sound French** (slide 18)
  - French was the native language for ancestors of both Cajuns and Creoles, and Louisiana was a French territory at the time these communities formed.
  - Today, French is still spoken in Acadiana, and most Cajun music is still sung in French.
  - Zydeco songs are sometimes still sung in French, although many songs are now sung in English.
  - In Southwest Louisiana, food, dance, and music are closely linked, creating a culture of “laissez les bon temps roulez” (Let the good times roll)!
- Cajun and Zydeco: A True Musical “Gumbo” (slide 19)

### 4. **Learning Checkpoint:** (slide 20)

- Where is the birthplace of Cajun and zydeco music?  
**Answer:** Southwest Louisiana
- Who makes Cajun and zydeco music?  
**Answer:** Cajuns and Creoles make Cajun and zydeco music.

## 2. Put It in the Pot: The Sights and Sounds of Cajun and Zydeco



### **To prepare:**

- Read through the Path.
  - Preview Path 2 of the **Lesson Hub 1 Slideshow** (slides 22–36)
    - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the right-hand menu of the Lesson Hub 1 landing page. (*If you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow” link, which will not show the notes.*)
  - Print the “Attentive Listening Worksheet” for each student ([find below](#))
  - *For optional activity:* Print the “Venn Diagram Template” for each student ([find below](#))
1. **“J’ai Été Au Bal” (I Went to the Dance):** Show video (Slides 23–27)
    - A. Play the embedded video (an excerpt from *J’ai Été Au Bal* by Les Blank, Chris Strachwitz, and Maureen Gosling), which will provide the students with another “taste” of Cajun & zydeco music.
    - B. Prompt students to discuss their observations regarding the instruments from the video
      - **The instruments shown most prominently were the fiddle and the accordion. The guitar was also pictured, and percussion instruments were heard.**
      - Lead a short discussion about the instruments featured in the video, and/or ask students to discuss them with partners or a group.
      - *Optional:* After watching the following shorter clips of each instrument, consider small extension discussions:
        - Prompt students to consider the social and ethnic background of the people, the musical styles and lyrics, and the social context of the music.
        - Ask students if this music reminds them of any other types of music.
    - C. Play the shorter clips of the individual instruments featured in the video on following slides.
      - Fiddle – Michael Doucet (from *J’ai Ete au Bal*)
      - Guitar – D. L. Menard (from *J’ai Ete au Bal*)
      - Accordion – Clifton Chenier (from *J’ai Ete au Bal*)
  2. **“Zydeco Sont Pas Salé”** Attentive Listening Activity (Slides 28–32)
    - For this activity, students will write down their thoughts regarding music elements and expressive qualities on the [Attentive Listening Worksheet](#). (If you don’t want to use the attentive listening worksheet, you can lead short class

discussions informed by student responses to each guiding question before moving on.)

- This activity is designed to help students recognize some of the differences between Cajun and zydeco music (especially in terms of musical sounds).
- A. Play an excerpt from “Zydeco Sont Pas Salé” by Clifton Chenier (slide 28). (Students may recognize this track as the same one from Path 1).  
Ask students to consider these questions:
- *Is this Cajun or zydeco?*  
**Zydeco**, but don’t tell them the answer yet.
  - *What instruments do you hear?*
    - The primary instruments heard on this recording are: **accordion, voice, scrubboard, and drums**. This will be unpacked further later in the lesson.
    - If students are not using the Listening Worksheet, consider leading a short discussion about zydeco instrumentation before moving on to the next slide.
- B. Listen to this excerpt several more times (slide 29).  
Each time, students should think about a new guiding question (and write down their observations on the attentive listening worksheet):
- *What do you notice about the beat/rhythm?*  
**The rhythms on this recording have a “swing/lilt.”**
  - *What language do you hear?* **French.**
  - *What is the primary purpose of this music (social/cultural context)?*  
**The rhythms are straight (not syncopated) and intended for dance.**
- C. Play an excerpt from the second audio recording, “Zydeco Sont Pas Salé” by Austin Pitre (slide 30).  
Ask students to consider these questions:
- *Is this Cajun or zydeco?*  
**Cajun**, but, as before, don’t tell them the answer yet.
  - *What instruments do you hear?*
    - The primary instruments heard on this recording are: **accordion, fiddle, voice, and triangle**.
    - If students are not using the Listening Worksheet, consider leading a short discussion about Cajun instrumentation before moving on to the next slide.

D. Listen to this excerpt several more times (slide 31).

Each time, students should think about a new guiding question (and write down their observations on the attentive listening worksheet):

- *What do you notice about the beat/rhythm?*

**This song has a straightforward, steady beat**

- *What language do you hear? **French***
- *What is the primary purpose of this music (social/cultural context)?*

**This music is also intended for dance.**

E. Share contextual/background information about these recordings (slide 32) **(embedded in slideshow).**

3. **Compare and Contrast: Optional Activity** (Slides 33–35)

A. Within this activity, students will use the provided Venn diagram template ([find below](#)) to further explore similarities and differences between Cajun & zydeco music.

- Students can complete this activity individually, in small groups, or as a full class (or as homework).
- After students finish their Venn diagrams, lead a short class discussion of similarities and differences between these musical styles.
- Students can reference their attentive listening worksheets as they complete this activity.

B. After the students finish this activity, click to the next two slides, which provide a breakdown of key similarities and differences that you can discuss with your students.

4. **Learning Checkpoint:**

- What are some similarities and differences between Cajun and zydeco music?

**Answer:**

- Similarities:
  - Both sung in French.
  - Both emphasize accordion.
  - Both are played in a similar social context (dance).
- Differences:
  - Cajun repertoire includes European folk songs and leans towards country-western sounds;
  - Zydeco is more influenced by jazz, swing, and early R&B.
  - *Historically*, Cajun was music of white “Cajuns,” while zydeco was music of black “Creoles.”



### 3. Stir It All Up: Make Your Own Musical Gumbo!



#### *To prepare:*

- *Read through the Path.*
- Preview Path 3 of the **Lesson Hub 1 Slideshow** (slides 38–47).
  - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson Hub landing page. (*If you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow” link, which will not show the notes.*)

1. **Make Your Own Musical Gumbo:** Attentive and Engaged Listening (slides 39–45)
  - A. Play an excerpt from the embedded audio track (“Cajun Two-Step” by Nathan Abshire). 30–45 seconds is a good length for this type of listening activity.
    - Beat: Encourage students to tap their toes to the steady beat as they listen.
  - B. Time Structure: Play the excerpt again (slide 40).
    - *What is the time structure of this song?*
      - **This song is in simple duple time (2/4).** If you have time, unpack this idea further. Many Cajun and zydeco songs are “two-steps.”
  - C. Instruments: Play the excerpt again (slide 41).
    - *What instruments do you hear?*
      - The main instruments featured on this recording **are fiddle, accordion, voice, and triangle.**
  - D. Rhythm: Play the excerpt again (slide 42).
    - This time ask students to pat along with the triangle rhythm.
  - E. Rhythm: Play the excerpt again (slide 43).
    - Encourage students to tap their toes with the steady beat while patting along with the triangle rhythm.
    - Optional extension activities: Consider asking students to notate this rhythm pattern or add classroom instruments.
  - F. Form: Play the excerpt again (slides 44–45).
    - *Do you hear any sections that are repeated? Do you hear any contrast?*
      - Advance to the next slide for an explanation of form (as it relates to this recording). **This song has two contrasting sections (AB).**
    - Students can demonstrate their understanding of AB form by raising one hand when they hear Part A, and two hands when they hear Part B (**starts at approx. 0:19**).



**2. Music Meant for Dance: Creative Movement Activity (Slide 46)**

Within this activity, students will create their own simple dance/choreography that matches the form (AB). Consider the following steps for facilitating this activity:

- A. Split into several small groups (4–5 students per group).
- B. Create one movement/dance step for the “A” section and another movement/dance step for the “B” section.
- C. Practice with your group members.
- D. Perform your dance for the rest of your class!

**3. Learning Checkpoint:**

- What is the social context of Cajun and zydeco music?  
**Answer:** Both are meant for dance and have a strong, steady beat that is easy to feel.
  - What are some common musical characteristics in Cajun and zydeco music (especially time structure and form)?  
**Answer:** Many Cajun and zydeco songs are “two-steps” (simple duple time) and follow an AB structure.
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## **2014 National Core Music Standards Connections**

***MU:Cr1.1.a Generate simple rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic phrases within AB and ABA forms that convey expressive intent***

- Can I create movements that represent AB form? (Path 3)

***MU:Cr2.1.a Select, organize, develop, and document musical ideas for arrangements and compositions within AB or ABA form that convey expressive intent.***

- Can I demonstrate created movements that represent AB form? (Path 3)

***MU:Pr4.2.a Perform a selected piece of music, demonstrating how their interpretations of the elements of music and expressive qualities (such as rhythm, pitch, form, style, phrasing, and harmony) convey intent.***

- Can I play a steady beat along with the recording? (Path 3)
- Can I play the triangle rhythm along with the recording? (Path 3)
- Can I demonstrate understanding of AB form through movement? (Path 3)

***MU:Re7.1.a Demonstrate and explain how selected music connects to and is influenced by specific interests, experiences, or purposes.***

- Can I explain the main purpose of Cajun and zydeco music? (Paths 2 and 3)
- Can I explain linguistic connections in Cajun and zydeco music? (Paths 1 and 2)

***MU:Re7.2.4.a Demonstrate and explain how responses to music are informed by the structure, the use of the elements of music and context.***

- Can I identify the instruments that are primarily associated with Cajun and zydeco music? (Paths 1 and 2)
- Can I explain musical similarities and differences between Cajun and zydeco music? (especially those related to time, rhythm, and form) (Path 2)
- Can I identify the context within which Cajun and zydeco music is usually performed? (Paths 2 and 3)

***MU:Re7.2.b Identify and compare the context of music from a variety of genres, cultures, and historical periods.***

- Can I explain non-musical similarities and differences between Cajun and zydeco music? (Paths 1 and 2)

***MU:Re8.1.4.a Demonstrate and explain how the expressive qualities (such as dynamics, tempo, and timbre are used in performers' and personal interpretations to reflect expressive intent?***

- Can I identify and explain similarities and differences in instrumental timbre between Cajun and zydeco music? (Paths 1 and 2)

***MU:Cn10.0.a Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices when creating, performing, and responding to music.***

- Can I explain how the sounds of Cajun and zydeco are influenced by the musicians' interests, knowledge, and skills? (Paths 1, 2, and 3)
- Can I explain my group's creative movement choices? (Path 3)

***MU:Cn11.0.a Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.***

- Can I describe the historical, cultural, social, socio-economic, geographic, and linguistic context within which Cajun and zydeco music developed? (Path 1)
  - Can I describe how music functions as an important part of culture and daily life for Cajuns and Creoles? (Path 1)
  - Can I explain why Cajun and zydeco music is sometimes referred to as a musical "gumbo"? (Path 1)
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## **Additional Reading and Resources**

Ancelet, Barry J. 1991. "Cajun and Zydeco Music Traditions." *Folklife in Louisiana*.  
[http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles\\_Essays/cajunzydeco.html](http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/cajunzydeco.html).

Reed, Revon. 1967. "Cajun Fais Do-Do." Liner Notes for *Cajun Fais Do-Do*. Arhoolie Records ARH00416. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/ARH00416.pdf>.

Savoy, Ann. 1987. *Cajun Music: A Reflection of the People*. Eunice, LA: Bluebird Press.

Strachwitz, Chris. 1997. "'Zydeco Sont Pas Sale' - King of the Real Creole French Zydeco." Liner Notes for *Zydeco Sont Pas Sale*, by Clifton Chenier. Arhoolie Records ARH09001. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/ARH09001.pdf>.

Worksheets  
Cajun and Zydeco Lesson 1: Attentive Listening Worksheet

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

	<b>Example 1:</b>	<b>Example 2:</b>
<b>Instruments</b>		
<b>Rhythm / Time / Meter</b>		
<b>Language</b>		
<b>Purpose and Context</b>		

Cajun and Zydeco Music Venn Diagram

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

