

Cajun and Zydeco: Flavors of Southwest Louisiana

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



Teacher's Guide

Lesson Hub 5:

Join the Band! Instruments of Cajun and Zydeco

Lesson Hub Overview

Although Cajun and zydeco music use many of the same instruments, each genre employs those instruments in slightly different ways. Cajun music is primarily associated with **acoustic** instruments (although in the modern Cajun band the instruments are often amplified for the sake of performance), while zydeco music commonly uses **electric** instruments. Although Cajun and zydeco bands often share repertoire, the differences in instrumentation create a unique feel for each.

The **accordion** is the most characteristic and defining instrument of Cajun and zydeco music. The accordion was invented in Germany and Austria in the 1820s. Before music could be amplified, a Cajun band was usually composed of **fiddle**, **accordion**, **acoustic guitar**, and sometimes **triangle**. The accordion played the melody and, together with the guitar, filled the role of the acoustic bass (which was too quiet to be heard over an accordion), while the guitar and triangle played percussion. **Drums** became more common in live Cajun bands in the twentieth century along with both electric and steel guitars. The most common configuration for zydeco bands today is **accordion** (piano, or double/triple row), **electric bass**, **electric guitar**, **scrubboard** (frottoir) and **drums**.

In this lesson, students will engage with music from the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings collection while learning about the instruments that give Cajun and zydeco music their unique sound. Through active listening, students will compare and contrast Cajun with zydeco instrumentation and its effect on overall style and will have an opportunity to play in their own Cajun-style band!

In this Guide

Lesson Hub Overview	1
Lesson Paths and Student Objectives*	2
Teaching Plan	3
2014 National Music Standards Connections	11
Additional Resources	12
Worksheets	13

Lesson Paths and Student Objectives*



1. **The Fiddle, Accordion, and Beyond** (25+ minutes)
 - Students will identify typical Cajun and zydeco instrumentation.









2. **Cajun & Zydeco: Similar Songs, Different Sounds** (20+ minutes)
 - Through attentive listening, students will identify similarities and differences between Cajun and zydeco interpretations of the same song.



3. **Build a Band!** (20+ minutes)
 - Through performance, students will demonstrate the ways in which music elements such as melody, rhythm, timbre, and harmony are used in a traditional Cajun tune.

*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. Path One: The Fiddle, Accordion, and Beyond



To prepare:

- Read through the Path.
- Preview Path 1 of the **Lesson Hub 5 Slideshow** (slides 4–35).
 - 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. The Evolution of Cajun and Zydeco Instrumentation (slides 4–7)

Basic differences between Cajun and zydeco music

- Cajun music is played primarily on **acoustic** instruments (slide 6).
- Zydeco musicians tend to use more **electric** instruments (slide 7).

2. Early Cajun Sound: The Fiddle (slides 8–14)

A. Early Cajun music utilized mainly **fiddle** and **voice**.

- Share information on slides 8–10.
- Listening: (slide 11) Play the embedded audio clip (“O Malheureuse,” performed by Dennis McGee) to illustrate the early Cajun fiddle style.
- Double fiddle: (slide 12) Two fiddles were often played together. This is called “*double fiddle*.”
 - *Optional*: Click to watch video clip that features two Cajun fiddlers (Michael Doucet & Mitch Reed).

B. The fiddle was also important in early Creole* music.

- **Note: Zydeco music didn't come into full form until the middle of the twentieth century. Influences for zydeco can be found in what we are calling "early Creole music."*
- Listening: Play the embedded audio clip (“Joe Pitre a Deux Femmes” by Canray Fontenot) to illustrate the early Creole fiddle style.
- However, the fiddle is rarely seen in modern-day zydeco bands.

3. The Voice (Slides 15–16)

A. Attentive Listening (slide 15): Play a short clip from the previous Cajun example (“O Malheureuse,” performed by Dennis McGee).

- As students listen, they should think about this question: *What do you notice about the singing?* (**specific questions suggested in slideshow**).

- Consider leading a short discussion based on student responses before moving on to the next slide.
 - B. Share information about the voice as an instrument in Cajun and zydeco music (slide 16).
- 4. The Accordion: The Foundation of Cajun and Zydeco Music** (slides 17–23)
- A. Share information about the origins of the **accordion** (slide 17).
 - B. Listening: (slide 18) Two-Step in G, "J'Etai au Bal Hier au Soir," performed by Gérard Dôle
 - As students listen, they should think about these questions:
 - *What do you know about the accordion? What does it look like? Why might musicians during the 1800s and 1900s prefer to use this instrument instead of a violin or a piano?*
 - Consider leading a short discussion based on student responses before moving on to slides 19–20 (which contain more explanation about the role of the accordion in Cajun and zydeco music).
 - C. Share information about the benefits and mechanics of the accordion (slides 19–23)
 - Benefits of the accordion (slides 19–20)
 - Accordion Mechanics (slide 21) Optional video: Click the button to watch a short video that features three accordionists in action.
 - The accordion in Cajun music: single-row button accordion (slide 22). Optional video: Making an accordion. Click the button to watch accordion maker Mark Savoy explain how one is made (start video at 21:17).
 - Types of accordions in zydeco music (slide 23).
- 5. Additional Instruments: Share information** (Slides 24–28) about:
- A. The triangle (*tit fer*)
 - B. The scrubboard (*frottoir*)
 - C. The guitar
- 6. Cajun and Zydeco Band Instrumentation** (slides 29–34)
- A. Instruments in the Cajun band
 - Traditional (slide 29) – Fiddle, accordion, acoustic guitar, sometimes drums and triangle.
 - The electric guitar and the steel guitar (slide 30).
 - Play embedded example of a Cajun song that includes steel guitar: “Hackberry Hop” by Harry Choates.

- Consider doing the optional activity designed to help students distinguish between the sound of acoustic and electric instruments.
- Modern (slide 31) – Fiddle, accordion, acoustic, electric, or steel guitar, sometimes drums, triangle, and electric bass.

B. Instruments in the zydeco band

- Electrical instruments and the saxophone (slide 32)
 - Play embedded audio example that includes saxophone: “Ride em Cowboy” by Clifton Chenier
- Common configuration of the zydeco band (slide 33) – Accordion, electric guitar, electric bass, drums, sometimes triangle and saxophone.

7. **Learning Checkpoint:** (slide 34)

- In what ways are Cajun and zydeco instrumentation similar?
 - **Similarities:** Both styles use the accordion and the guitar, and sometimes the drums, bass, and triangle.
- In what ways are they different?
 - Most commonly, **Cajun bands** incorporate **fiddle**, accordion, **acoustic** guitar (sometimes triangle, bass, and drums). Cajun bands tend to use more acoustic instruments.
 - Most commonly, **zydeco bands** incorporate accordion, **electric** guitar, **electric** bass, **scrubboard**, and drums (sometimes **saxophone** and triangle). Zydeco bands tend to use more electric instruments.

2. Path Two: Cajun & Zydeco: Similar Songs, Different Sounds



To prepare:

- Read through the Path.
- Preview Path 2 of the **Lesson Hub 5 Slideshow** (slides 36–46).
 - 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. Similar Repertoire/Different Instrumentation

- Introduce the topic with the information on slide 37.
- In the following slides, students will hear two different interpretations of the same song so that they can hear the different Cajun and zydeco approaches to the same repertoire.

2. Interpretation One: “Grand Mamou”

A. Attentive Listening (Slide 38)

- Play the embedded version of the popular song “Grand Mamou” (recorded by Cyprien and Adam Landreneau).
- As students listen, they should think about these questions:
 - *What instruments do you hear?*
 - *Based on what you have learned so far, is this an example of Cajun or zydeco music?*
- Encourage students to write the instruments down. Gather student input before moving on. (**Questions are answered on following slide**).

B. Cajun Instrumentation (slide 39)

Share information about the instruments in this Cajun interpretation of the song.

C. Attentive Listening (slide 40)

- Listen to at least four short excerpts of the same song (using the pause feature on the button).
- Each time, prompt students to listen to the unique role of a different instrument, using the prompts on the slide.
 - *How many fiddlers are playing? Can you hear a high-pitched melody, and the lower chords being repeated rhythmically? **Two—one playing the melody high, and the other low—“doubling,” or playing drone bass notes with embellishments below.***
 - *How does the accordion interact with the fiddle? Can you hear the bass notes it plays, and the melody? **the fiddle and accordion are mimicking each other, each playing the melody. When one goes high, the other does at the same time.***

- *What role does the voice play in this recording? Does it follow an instrument? If so, which one? What does the voice add to this recording (other than words)?* **It follows and the accordion and fiddle that are playing the melody. The voice lends emotion to the song, a feeling of longing.**
- *What rhythm is the triangle playing? Does the triangle part help you know that this is a waltz in 3/4?* **Yes, the triangle keeps the rhythm and makes it prominent.**

3. Interpretation Two: “Grand Mamou”

A. Attentive Listening (slide 41)

- Next, play the second version of the same song (by John Delafosse).
- As students listen, they should think about these questions:
 - *What instruments do you hear?*
 - *Based on what you have learned so far, is this an example of Cajun or zydeco?*
- Encourage students to write the instruments down. Gather student input before moving on. **(Questions are answered on following slide).**

B. Zydeco Instrumentation (slide 42)

Share information about the instruments in this zydeco interpretation of the song.

C. Attentive Listening (slide 43)

- Listen to at least four short excerpts of the same song (using the pause feature on the button).
- Each time, prompt students to listen to the unique role of a different instrument, using the prompts on the slide.
 - *Which instrument is leading this recording? Is the accordion mainly playing melody, rhythm, or harmony?* **Accordion, drums, scrubboard, guitar, and bass. The accordion is playing melody.**
 - *What role does the voice play in this recording? Does it follow an instrument? If so, which one? What elements, other than words, does the voice add?* **The voice follows the accordion, singing the melody. It also lends a rhythmic quality, as well as emotion—a feeling of longing.**
 - *What rhythm is the scrubboard keeping? Can you tell by the scrubboard that this is a waltz in 3/4?* **Yes, the scrubboard keeps the 3/4 rhythm consistent and is prominent.**
 - *Can you hear the guitar and the bass separately from one another? Is the guitar keeping rhythm, or playing an interlude?* **Both the bass and**

guitar are keeping rhythm in this song. The guitar is hitting chords in time.

- *Is the drum prominent in this recording or set back? Is it the primary instrument keeping rhythm? **In this recording, the drums are set back; although they lend themselves to the overall rhythm, the scrubboard is the most prominent instrument in the recording keeping time.***

4. **Optional Discussion:** Compare and Contrast (slide 44)

If you choose to facilitate this optional discussion activity, you can use the following questions to encourage students to consider similarities and differences between these recordings:

- *Which instruments are playing similar roles? **Scrubboard and triangle play similar roles: keeping time. Accordion and fiddle also play similar roles of playing the melody.***
- *How do the vocal styles compare? **Both demonstrate an emotion of longing through their vocal tone, but the Cajun version has more long, drawn-out notes and follows a less defined rhythm.***
- *What are the biggest differences in overall style that you notice? **The first (Cajun version) is all acoustic and doesn't have as many instruments keeping the rhythm. The melody is the focus of the instruments in the front (accordion and fiddle). The second version (zydeco) is all electric and features guitar, bass, AND scrubboard on the rhythm.***

5. **Learning Checkpoint** (slide 45)

- Cajun and zydeco music share repertoire, but the sound and “feel” are often very different. Why?

Answer:

- Cajun and zydeco music utilize different instruments and apply musical elements (rhythm, melody, tempo, harmony, texture, timbre, etc.) in different ways.
- Zydeco music tends to put the rhythm in the front – while both styles are very rhythmic, oftentimes Cajun music will put the melody in the front of a recording, while in zydeco more instruments will be focusing on the rhythm.

3. Path Three: Build a Band!



To prepare:

- Read through the Path.
- Preview Path 3 of the **Lesson Hub 5 Slideshow** (slides 47–55).
 - 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.
- Print the song lyrics/translation document (or prepare to display it for students) ([find below](#)).
- *Optional*: Print the sheet music document ([find below](#)).
- *Optional*: If you want students to practice on instruments, provide them, or ask them to bring their own.

Important note: This lesson Path is meant to be customized! Use the materials provided in the slideshow to facilitate a music-making experience that will be meaningful for your students (it can be as simple or complex as you'd like it to be).

- Here are some ideas for modifying:
 - Students could choose only ONE or TWO music elements to focus on. For example, students could learn to speak/sing the first four lines of the song while accompanying themselves on the ukulele (slides 51 and 52).
 - Alternatively, they could play along on the steady beat and create a rhythmic *ostinato* to play along with the audio track (slide 50).
 - You might give the sheet music to students who already play a melodic instrument (such as piano or violin) to learn at home (slide 53).
 - You could also consider making this a multi-day experience: Tackle different music elements (slides 50-53) on different days.
 - It is OKAY if you don't get to the final performance activity on slide 54 (which is most appropriate for more advanced/older students).

1. Instruments in the Cajun Band

A. Attentive Listening (“Hip et Taïaut”) (Slide 49)

Play a short excerpt from the embedded recording of “Hip et Taïaut” (recorded by Joe Falcon) so students can get a “taste” of it.

- Share embedded contextual information about this song.
- Consider asking students to share their general observations.
- Encourage students to identify *why* this song is Cajun (not zydeco) . . . especially emphasizing instrumentation (covered in Paths 1 and 2).

B. **Musical Elements: Engaged Listening: “Hip et Taïaut”** (Slides 50–53)

Within this activity, students will play along (engage) with this recording in several different ways (instructions and more detailed “hints” are provided within the slideshow).

- *Time and Rhythm* (slide 50) - Students will explore the beat and rhythm of the song through clapping or playing instruments.
- *Text/Voice* (slide 51) - Students will hum, speak, and sing with and without the recording (lyrics and translation can be found below).
- *Chords* (slide 52) - Students will follow along (and play along) with chords and changes (on any chordal instrument).
- *Melody* (slide 53) - Students will play the melody on an instrument (by ear OR with sheet music, which can be found below*)

**Note: the sheet music is titled “Ils ont volé mon traineau” (the main lyrical refrain of the song) as this is the title first used in many scholarly circles, although the first recording was titled “Hip et Taïaut.”*

2. Build Your Band! (Slide 54)

Students will choose one part to focus on for this performance activity (voice, rhythm, melody, or chords).

- Students could break into small groups (at least one person on each part) and practice/perform their parts together.
- You could also facilitate this activity as a whole class (instead of splitting them into small groups).

3. Perform the song: Students can rehearse, refine, and present their rendition of “Hip et Taïaut” for a live audience (or record it).

4. Learning Checkpoint (slide 55)

- How did you use (or change) music elements, such as melody, rhythm, instrumentation, and harmony (chords) to build your own “Cajun-style” band?
Answer: Answers will vary.

2014 National Music Standards Connections

MU:Pr4.3.a Perform a selected piece of music demonstrating how their interpretations of the elements of music and the expressive qualities (such as dynamics, tempo, timbre, articulation/style, and phrasing) convey intent.

- Can I use (and change) music elements and expressive qualities as I interpret and perform “Hip et Taïaut”, a Cajun “standard”, with my group members?

MU:Pr5.1.b Rehearse to refine technical accuracy and expressive qualities to address challenges, and show improvement over time.

- Can I practice and refine “Hip et Taïaut” with my group members and show improvement over time?

MU:Pr6.1.a Perform the music with technical accuracy to convey the creator’s intent.

- Can I accurately perform my part in “Hip et Taïaut”, while incorporating instrumentation and stylistic elements that are important in the Cajun and zydeco traditions?

MU:Re7.2.a Explain how the elements of music and expressive qualities relate to the structure of contrasting pieces.

- Can I identify the ways in which the elements of music (especially instrumentation) help to distinguish Cajun and zydeco music?

MU:Re8.1.a Describe a personal interpretation of how creators’ and performers’ application of the elements of music and expressive qualities, within genres and cultural and historical context, convey expressive intent.

- Can I describe similarities and differences between the ways in which Cajun and zydeco musicians apply the elements of music and expressive qualities (especially regarding instrumentation)?

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

- In what ways did my interests, knowledge, and skills influence the part I chose to play (voice, rhythm, melody, harmony)?

Additional Resources

- Balfa, Dewey, and Tracy Schwarz. 1976. Liner Notes for *Traditional Cajun Fiddle: Instruction*. Folkways Records FWO8361. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/FWO8361.pdf>.
- Comeaux, Malcolm L. 1999. "Introduction and Use of Accordions in Cajun Music." *Folklife in Louisiana*. http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/intro_and_use_of_accordions.html.
- Dole, Gerard. 1977. Liner Notes for *Traditional Cajun Accordion: An Instruction Record*. Folkways Records FWO8363. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/FWO8363.pdf>.
- Garnier III, D'Jalma. 2015. "The Musical and Cultural Roots of Louisiana Creole and Zydeco Fiddle Tradition through Canray Fontenot." *Folklife in Louisiana*. http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/lfmzydecofiddle.html.
- Korges, Wilson. 2017, July 19. "Accordions on the Move." *2017 Folklife Festival* (blog). *Smithsonian Folklife Festival*. <https://festival.si.edu/blog/accordions-on-the-move>.
- Louisiana Division of the Arts. n.d. "Folklife in Louisiana." Accessed March 18, 2022. <http://www.louisianafolklife.org/>.
- Louisiana Educational Television Authority. 1982. "Accordion Maker Marc Savoy." Video, 07:35. Aired March 3, 1982, on Louisiana Public Broadcasting. Hosted by Beth George. Retrieved from the Louisiana Digital Media Archive. http://ladigitalmedia.org/video_v2/asset-detail/LSWI-0523-04_Savoy.
- Savoy, Ann. 1984. *Cajun Music: A Reflection of the People*. Eunice, LA: Bluebird Press.
- Savoy, Marc. 2018. "Reminiscences of a Cajun Accordion Builder." *Folklife in Louisiana*. http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/lfmsavoymusic.html.
- Strachwitz, Chris. 1989. "Zydeco." Liner Notes for *Zydeco Volume 1: The Early Years 1949-62*. Arhoolie Records ARH00307. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/ARH00307.pdf>.
-

Worksheets

"Hip et Taïaut" Lyrics/Chords/Translation

As performed by Joe Falcon
Translation by Ann Allen Savoy

French Lyrics / Prononciation / Chords**Translation:**

C **F**
C'est le Hip et Taïaut, cher
(Say luh Hihp ay Tahee-yoh, shehr)

It's Hip and a Hound, dear

C
Qu'a volé mon traineau, cher
(Kah voh-lay mohn treh-noh, sher)

Who stole my sled, dear

G
Quand ça a vu j'étais chaud, cher
(Kahn sah voo zhay-tay shoh, shehr)

When they saw I was hot (mad), dear,

C
Ça a ramené mon traineau
(Sah rahm-nay mohn treh-noh)

They brought back my sled.

C **F**
Ça a volé mon chapeau, cher
(Sah voh-lay mohn shah-poh, shehr)

They stole my hat, dear,

C
Ça a volé mon capot, cher
(Sah voh-lay mohn kah-poh, shehr)

They stole my coat, dear,

G
Quand ça a vu j'étais chaud, cher
(Kahn sah voo zhay-tay shoh, shehr)

When they saw I was hot (mad), dear,

C
Ça a ramené mon traineau (Sah rahm-nay
mohn treh-noh)/ Repeat

They brought back my sled.

"Hip et Taïaut" Sheet Music (melody and chords)

Key of C
(1st Position)

ILS ONT VOLE MON TRAÎNEAU
("Il la volés mon trancas")

Music transcribed by Susie Rothfield
Lyrics transcribed by Ann Allen Savoy

C F

Ils ont vo - lé mon traî - neu , cher ,
(Eez ohá voh - lay mohá trehá - noh , shehr ,

C

Ils ont vo - lé mon traî - neu , cher ,
(Eez ohá voh - lay mohá treh - noh , shehr ,

G

Quand ça a vu j'é - tais chaud , cher ,
(Kahá sah voo zhay - tay shoh , shehr ,

C

Ils ont ram' - né mon traî - neu .
(Eez ohá rahm - nay mohá trehá - noh .)