

# Cajun and Zydeco: Flavors of Southwest Louisiana

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



## *Teacher's Guide*

*Lesson 6:*

*Cajun and Zydeco: Style, Structure, and Social Context*

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### Lesson Overview

The first thing many people notice about Cajun and zydeco music is the unique singing style in each: high pitched and often accompanied by yells and other sound effects. Cajun and zydeco song themes (e.g., suffering or loneliness) are often reflected through repeated vocalizations, in addition to (or sometimes, in place of) the lyrics.

Due to the limitations of the accordion, which can only be played in the key of its making, most Cajun and zydeco songs are in a **major key** (mostly C and D, sometimes G and A), and have very simple **chord progressions** (I-IV-V). Since both Cajun and zydeco music are intended for dance, most songs utilize one of two possible time structures: the **waltz** (groups of three beats) or the **two-step** (groups of two beats).

In this lesson, students will engage with recordings from the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings collection while learning about the typical musical characteristics (outside of instrumentation) of both Cajun and zydeco music. At the end of the lesson, students will use their new knowledge and skills as building blocks to compose their own song.

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## **Lesson Components and Student Objectives\***



### 1. **Exploring Musical Elements** (25+ minutes)

- Students will identify and describe common applications of music elements and expressive qualities in Cajun and zydeco music (singing style, form, time structure, and melodic & harmonic structure).



### 2. **The Two-Step and the Waltz** (20+ minutes)

- Students will demonstrate understanding of the social context within which Cajun and Zydeco music exists by performing a basic Cajun Two-Step.









### 3. **Compose Your Own Song!** (30+ minutes)

- Students will make creative choices related to form, time, rhythm, melody, harmony, instrumentation, and lyrics, as they compose their own music (“in the style of” Cajun and Zydeco).

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\*Note: The learning icons used above signify the type of learning used in each Component. Keep in mind that these Components are not intended to be sequential; rather, teachers or students may choose which Components they’d like to use from each Lesson. The time estimate given for each component 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 Components without specific musical knowledge.

## Teaching Plan



### 1. Component One: Exploring Musical Elements

#### **To prepare:**

- Read through the component.
- Preview Component 1 of the **Lesson 6 Slideshow** (slides 4–20).
  - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson 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.
- If you have access to an instrument that can make chords, make sure you have it for demonstrating chord changes (slide 16). (*If you don’t, you can use slide 17*).

#### 1. **Reflecting on Prior Knowledge:** (Slide 5)

Lead Discussion: Begin the lesson by prompting students to consider these questions:

- *Based on what you know right now, what basic characteristics come to mind when you think of Cajun and zydeco music?\**
- *Outside of instrumentation alone, what defines these styles?*
  - Give students a moment to reflect on these questions (or discuss them with a partner).
  - Encourage them to write their thoughts down . . . they could make a separate column for each genre as they reflect on what they know about these styles thus far.
  - Consider facilitating a short class discussion before moving on with the lesson.

*\*Note: If students have not done any of the other Lessons yet, see if they’ve heard of the genres and if they can name any of its characteristics. It’s ok if they can’t!*

#### 2. **Singing Style:** (Slides 6–8)

A. Share the embedded information about “singing style” in Cajun and zydeco music (slide 6).

B. Attentive Listening (slide 7)

- i. Play short excerpts from several audio tracks (“Chère tout-tou,” performed by Nathan Abshire, “Diggy Liggy Lo,” by the Savoy-Doucet Cajun Band, and “Tante Na Na,” by Preston Frank) in order to illustrate this concept.
- ii. As students listen, they should think about this question
  - *What do you notice about the singing?\**
- iii. Consider leading a short discussion based on student responses before moving on to the next slide (**see prompts in slideshow notes**).

*\*Something to keep in mind: the second example includes vocalization by Ann Savoy, a woman. Historically, there were very few female Cajun singers recorded until the 1980s-'90s, and the recording here is more indicative of the style as opposed to the vocal timbre a woman lends to Cajun music.*

- C. Engaged Listening (slide 8): Have students try to emulate these styles.
- i. Students can pick their favorite song lyrics, or make up something silly—it can be anything—and have them sing it in the styles they just listened to.
    - *Can you make your voice sound like you're a Cajun or zydeco singer?*
    - *What do you have to change to make your voice sound similar?*
  - ii. Ask them to identify what elements of singing they had to change to adapt the new singing styles.

### 3. Chord Progressions

- A. Share embedded information (slide 9) about the most common chord structure of Cajun and Zydeco songs (I-IV-V).\*

*\*Note: Depending on the age and experience level of your students, you may wish to lead a more extensive discussion about harmonic structure and chord progressions. Alternatively, you may wish to limit the discussion to only major and minor scales, playing each to demonstrate the difference.*

- B. Mark the Chord Changes (slide 10) Interactive Listening Activity  
For this activity, teachers should play some simple chord progressions using I, IV, and V on a chordal instrument (use slide 17 if you don't have a chordal instrument). Consider these ideas:
- Have students give physical signals to show they hear when chord changes occur: tapping shoulders, patting knees, clapping hands or snapping fingers.
  - Singing/playing the chords changes: Sing the I tonic, IV tonic and V tonic with them to help them hear the changes.
  - Have them sing the numbers “one” “four” or “five” with the changes.
  - After they demonstrate they can sing the changes, have them play the tonic notes on Orff instruments, resonator bells, or the piano. You may also show a chord chart or guitar tab notation of the piece to help them see the changes.
- C. Identifying Chord Progressions: (slide 11) *Optional Extension Activity*  
Replay the first three listening examples in this slideshow and ask students to identify the chord changes.
- Consider having students show 1 finger for the I chord, 4 fingers for the IV chord, and 5 fingers for the V chord. (See worksheets below for chord changes. If this is too advanced for students to do by ear, have them follow along with the lyrics/chord changes sheet).

#### 4. Structure and Form in Cajun and Zydeco Music

- A. Strophic Form: (slide 12) Share information about the most common form/structure of Cajun and zydeco songs (Strophic, or AAA).
- i. Listen to two or three verses of “Chère Tout-Tou” again, and have students raise their hands each time a new verse starts.
  - ii. *Optional*: Pass out the Chords and Form worksheet ([below](#)) and have students listen to its strophic form.
- B. Structure and Form in Cajun music (AABB Form): (slides 13–14) Share information about the “tune” and the “turn,” and how they are structured in some Cajun songs.
- i. (slide 13) Listen to four verses of “Cajun Reel Medley,” performed by the BeauSoleil Quartet, and have students raise their hands when the turn starts.
  - ii. (slide 14) Explain the structure between sung verses and instrumental verses.
    - Listen to “Jolie Blonde” and have the students raise their hand each time they hear the turn.
    - *Optional*: Pass out the Chords and Form worksheet ([below](#)) and have students listen for its AABB form.
- C. Structure and form in Zydeco Music (slide 15)
- i. Listen to “Tante Na Na,” by Preston Frank, an example of a typical zydeco song in strophic form.
    - *Optional*: Pass out the Chord and Form worksheet ([below](#)) and have students listen for form and for leading instruments during the instrumental breaks.
  - ii. See slide 19 for an example of a zydeco song inspired by blues structure.
- D. Double Fiddle (slides 16–17)
- i. Share embedded information about “double fiddle” (two fiddles play together—one plays lead while the other plays a rhythmic/harmonic back-up).
  - ii. *Beausoleil “Cajun Reel Medley”*: Play the short, embedded video (from the Smithsonian Folklife Festival).
    - As students watch/listen, they should try to identify *which person is playing “lead” and which is playing “second fiddle.”*
    - **In reality, both Michael Doucet (in the hat) and Mitch Reed take turns playing the lead and doing the seconding—see if the students pick up on this.**

#### 5. Zydeco Style and “Blue Notes”

- A. Blue Notes in Cajun and zydeco music (slide 18)  
Listen to a short excerpt from the embedded audio track (which will help to illustrate this idea) - “Blues in Cajun Fiddling” by Dewey Balfa.

B. The Blues and Zydeco Style (slide 19)

- i. Share information about the emerging zydeco “style” and the use of the **12-Bar Blues** chord progression in zydeco music.
- ii. Listen to a short excerpt from the embedded audio track (which will help to illustrate this idea) - “Blues de Ma Negresse,” by Clifton Chenier.
- iii. Depending on the age and experience level of your students, you may wish to further unpack the 12-Bar Blues progression (and even have students play this on classroom instruments). *See the “Women in the Blues” Learning Pathway for more about the 12-Bar Blues.*

6. **Learning Checkpoint:** (slide 20)

- What are some of the distinguishing musical characteristics of Cajun and zydeco music?

**Answer:**

- Both musics are distinguished by a unique singing style: high pitched and often accompanied by yells and other sound effects.
- Cajun bands usually have a fiddle player – or two (double fiddle). In zydeco music, the accordion takes most of the instrumental breaks.
- Most Cajun and zydeco songs are set in a major key and have simple chord progressions.
- Many Cajun & zydeco songs use “Strophic” (AAA form). Cajun music often employs a turn (B section)
- Both are influenced by blues music, as seen in the use of “blue” notes and blues chord progressions

## **2. Component Two: The Two-Step and the Waltz**



### **To prepare:**

- Read through the component.
- Preview Component 2 of the **Lesson 6 Slideshow** (slides 22–35).
  - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson 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. Introduction: The Waltz and the Two-Step**

#### **A. Comparing song forms**

- i. Introduce the basic difference between a waltz (3 beats) and a two-step (2 beats) (slide 23)
- ii. Attentive Listening (slide 24): Play short excerpts from “Kaplan Waltz” by Savoy-Doucet Cajun Band and “Zodico Two-Step” by Clifton Chenier and ask students to identify which is a two-step and which is a waltz.

#### **B. The Waltz**

- i. Share embedded contextual information about the waltz (slide 25).
- ii. Engaged Listening (slide 26): Play another clip from “Kaplan Waltz.”
  1. Prompt students to count the three-beat time structure out loud as they listen.
  2. Play another segment of the track, this time encouraging students to tap or clap along (or play the time structure on an instrument . . . perhaps a triangle).
  3. Optional: prompt students to move throughout the room, taking one large step on the “downbeat.”

#### **C. The Two-Step**

- i. Share embedded contextual information about the two-step. (slide 27)
- ii. Engaged Listening (slide 28): Play a clip from “Zodico Two-Step.”
  1. Prompt students to count the two-beat time structure out loud as they listen.
  2. Play another segment of the track, this time encouraging students to tap or clap along (or play the time structure on an instrument).
  3. Optional: Lead the students through a “[Gordon-style](#)” pat-snap activity to demonstrate the difference between duple and triple.

### **2. Dance a Two-Step! Performance Activity (Slides 29–34)**

- A. Share embedded contextual information about the role of dance in Cajun and zydeco music (slide 29).



- B. Play the short instructional video embedded in the slide, showing how to dance the two-step (approx. 1:30) (slide 31).
- i. Teach students how the “feet” move (detailed instructions embedded in the slideshow (slide 32).
    - **Hint:** The easiest way to start teaching this is to have all the leaders go to one side of the floor and stand in a line facing the followers, who are in a parallel line. That way when they do the quick-quick-slow, they are mirroring each other as they will do when they pair up into couples.
  - ii. Teach students how to perform the two-step with a partner (instructions embedded in slide 33).
  - iii. Try it with the music (slide 34).

3. **Learning Checkpoint:** (slide 35)

- What is the main similarity between waltzes and two-steps?  
**Answer:** Both waltzes and two-steps are made for **dancing**.
- What are some differences you can hear by listening alone?  
**Answer:** A waltz is in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time, or triple meter.  
A two-step is in  $\frac{4}{4}$  or  $\frac{2}{4}$  time, or duple meter.  
Waltzes are typically slower.



### **3. Component Three: Compose Your Own Song!**



#### ***To prepare:***

- Read through the component.
- Preview Component 3 the **Lesson 6 Slideshow**. (slides 37–45)
  - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson 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.
- Decide how you will structure/customize this composition activity to best meet the needs of your students.

#### **1. Time to Compose:** Music Composition Activity (Slides 38–44)

There are many ways to customize this compositional activity to meet your students’ needs – this activity can be as simple or complex as you’d like it to be. Most importantly, this activity is intended to help students be creative and synthesize what they have learned about the ways in which music elements are typically used in Cajun and zydeco music.

Use the suggestions and steps outlined below (more detailed info provided in the slideshow) as a guide to as you craft a composition exercise that will be meaningful for your students.

In lieu of having students compose individually, consider having them compose in small groups (or even compose one song as a full class). Composing rhythms in 2/4 or 3/4 time might be enough for younger, more inexperienced students. Older, more experienced students might be able to complete all the suggested compositional steps. This is just a suggested order of operations – you can choose which your class would like to start with first (e.g. time structure and melody before lyrics) - feel free to jump around!

- A. Choose your form** (slide 39): Strophic, AB, or AABB
- B. Write your lyrics** (slide 40): See slideshow for detailed instructions.
- C. Choose your time structure** (slide 41): Triple (waltz) or duple (two-step). *How many beats will you put in a measure?*
- D. Find your melody and chord progression** (slide 42):
  - See slideshow for detailed instructions.
  - Document your ideas as you compose (through music notation or an audio/video recording).
- E. Add your “flavor”** (slide 43):
  - Consider instrumentation and/or create rhythmic *ostinati*.
  - Name your song.

- Practice your song.
2. **Perform for an Audience:** Extension (slide 44)
- A. Rehearse, refine, and present your performance of your original song for a live audience (or record it).
  - B. Have members of the class demonstrate the dance that fits with the time structure (waltz or two-step).
3. **Learning Checkpoint:** (slide 45)
- What creative choices related to form, time, rhythm, melody, harmony, instrumentation, and lyrics did you make as you composed your song?
  - How did these choices related to *Cajun* and/or *zydeco* music?
- Answer:** Answers will vary.
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## **2014 National 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 generate creative choices related to form, time, rhythm, melody, harmony, instrumentation, and lyrics, through the composition process? (Component 3)

***MU:Cr2.1.a Select, organize, and document personal musical ideas for arrangements and compositions within AB or ABA forms that demonstrate and effective beginning, middle, and end, and convey expressive intent.***

- Can I make creative choices related to form, time, rhythm, melody, harmony, instrumentation, and lyrics, as I compose my own music (“in the style of” Cajun & zydeco)? (Component 3)

***MU:Cr2.1.b Use standard and/or iconic notation and/or audio/ video recording to document personal simple rhythmic phrases, melodic phrases, and two-chord harmonic sequences.***

- Can I document my compositional ideas? (Component 3)

***MU:Pr4.2.a Explain how understanding the structure and the elements of music are used in music selected for performance.***

- Can I explain how the elements of music and stylistic considerations are applied in Cajun and zydeco music (specifically vocal and instrumental timbre, form, and chord progressions)? (Component 1)
- Can I explain how the elements of music are applied in waltzes and two-steps specifically? (Component 2)

***MU:Pr4.2.c Identify how cultural and historical context inform performances***

- Can I explain the social/cultural/historical context of two-steps and waltzes withing Cajun & Creole culture? (Component 2)

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

- Can I practice a basic Cajun two-step and show improvement over time? (Component 2)

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

- Can I perform a basic Cajun two-step with technical accuracy? (Component 2)

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

- Can I identify and describe common applications of music elements and expressive qualities in Cajun & zydeco music (singing style, form, time structure, and melodic & harmonic structure)? (Components 1 and 2)

***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 why the musicians' application of music elements and expressive qualities encourage people to dance (the social context of the music)? (Component 2)

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

- Can I discuss how my interests, knowledge, and skills influenced my compositional choices? (Component 3)

***MU:Cn11.0.7a Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.***

- Can I explain the social context of many Cajun & zydeco songs (and the way in which they are used in daily life)? (Component 2)
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## **Additional Resources**

- Dole, Gerard. 1990. Liner Notes for *Cajun Social Music*. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFW40006. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/SFW40006.pdf>.
- François, Raymond E. 1990. *Yé Yaille, Chère! Traditional Cajun Dance Music*. Ville Platte, LA: Swallow Publications.
- Louisiana Division of the Arts. n.d. "Folklife in Louisiana." Accessed March 18, 2022. <http://www.louisianafolklife.org/>.
- Savoy, Ann. 1984. *Cajun Music: A Reflection of the People*. Eunice, LA: Bluebird Press.
- 64 Parishes. n.d. "Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities' Encyclopedia." Accessed March 20, 2022. <https://64parishes.org/encyclopedia>.
- Strachwitz, Chris. 1995. Liner Notes for *Cajun Fais Do-Do*. Arhoolie Records ARH00416. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/ARH00416.pdf>.
- Strachwitz, Chris. 1997. "Zydeco Sont Pas Sale' –King of the Real Creole French Zydeco." Liner Notes for Chenier, Clifton. *Zydeco Sont Pas Sale*. Arhoolie Records ARH09001. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/ARH09001.pdf>.

## Worksheets

### “Chère Tout-Tou,” performed by Nathan Abshire

<u>Lyrics and Chord Changes</u>	<u>Form</u>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Instrumental Intro</b></p> <p><b>I</b> Ay, Chère tout toute</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>V</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>I</b></span> Viens chercher chère tout toute à la maison</p> <p><b>I</b> Ay, Chère tout toute</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>V</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>I</b></span> Tu m’as quitté pour t’en aller avec un autre</p>	<p><b>Instrumental Intro:</b> (circle one)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>A</b> <b>B</b></p> <p><b>Lead instrument(s):</b> _____</p> <p><b>Verse 1:</b> <b>A</b> <b>B</b> (circle one)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Instrumental Break</b></p> <p><b>I</b> Ay, Chère tout toute</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>V</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>I</b></span> Moi je m’ennuie pour te voir cher tout toute</p> <p><b>I</b> Ay, Chère tout toute</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>V</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>I</b></span> T’as quitté de sa maison pour t’en aller</p>	<p><b>Instrumental Break:</b> (circle one)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>A</b> <b>B</b></p> <p><b>Lead instrument(s):</b> _____</p> <p><b>Verse 2:</b> <b>A</b> <b>B</b> (circle one)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Instrumental Break</b></p> <p><b>I</b> Ay, Chère tout toute</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>V</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>I</b></span> Dit connais, je mérite pas ça t’as fait faire</p> <p><b>I</b> Ay, Chère tout toute</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>V</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>I</b></span> T’écoute tous les conseils des tous les autres</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Instrumental Outro</b></p>	<p><b>Instrumental Outro:</b> (circle one)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>A</b> <b>B</b></p> <p><b>Lead instrument(s):</b> _____</p> <p><b>Verse 3:</b> <b>A</b> <b>B</b> (circle one)</p> <p><b>What is the Form?</b> (circle one)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Strophic</b> <b>AABB</b></p>





## “Tante Na Na,” by Preston Frank

<u>Lyrics and Chord Changes</u>	<u>Form</u>
<b>Instrumental Intro</b>	<b>Instrumental Intro (phrase 1):</b> A B (circle one)
<b>G</b> S'en aller c'ez Tante Na-na	<b>Lead instrument(s):</b> _____
Tante Na-Na elle etait pas là	<b>Instrumental Intro (phrase 2):</b> A B (circle one)
<b>Am</b> Ye mande ayou elle est	<b>Lead instrument(s):</b> _____
<b>G</b> Après aller et roulailler	<b>Verse 1: A B (circle one)</b>
<b>G</b> Tu m,'as dit que tu m'aimais	<b>Verse 2: A B (circle one)</b>
O y yaille mon cher 'tit monde	<b>Instrumental Break (phrase 1):</b> A B (circle one)
<b>Am</b> Tu m'as dit que tu m'aimais	<b>Lead instrument(s):</b> _____
<b>G</b> O y yaille mon cher 'tit cœur	<b>Instrumental Break (phrase 2):</b> A B (circle one)
<b>Instrumental Break</b>	<b>Lead instrument(s):</b> _____
<b>G</b> S'en aller c'ez Nonc Edde	<b>Instrumental Break (phrase 1):</b> A B (circle one)
Nonc Edde il etait pas là	<b>Lead instrument(s):</b> _____
<b>Am</b> Tu m'as dit ayou il est	<b>Verse 3: A B (circle one)</b>
<b>G</b> Après gaimbiler et roulailler	<b>Verse 4: A B (circle one)</b>
<b>G</b> Tu m,'as dit que tu m'aimais	<b>Instrumental Outro (phrase 1):</b> A B (circle one)
O y yaille mon cher 'tit monde	<b>Lead instrument(s):</b> _____
<b>Am</b> Tu m'as dit que tu m'aimais	<b>Instrumental Outro (phrase 2):</b> A B (circle one)
<b>G</b> O y yaille mon cher 'tit monde	<b>Lead instrument(s):</b> _____
<b>Instrumental Outro</b>	<b>What is the Form? (circle one)</b> <b>Strophic AABB</b>