

Cajun and Zydeco: Flavors of Southwest Louisiana

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



Teacher's Guide

Lesson Hub 7:

Stylistic Developments in Cajun Music

Lesson Hub Overview

Early Cajun music was often played with **two fiddles** – one playing the melody, and another playing the back-up (rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment). Around the turn of the 20th century, the **diatonic accordion** gained popularity among Cajun musicians, which led to a major stylistic shift in the rhythms, chords, and repertoire. During this time (early 20th Century, pre-WWII), the setting in which this music was played changed too. Music had always been a central point of social life, but for the early Cajuns, music was primarily an at-home activity – for small family gatherings. In the 1920s, **dance halls** began to pop up around the prairie, and soon the dance hall was the primary place to hear Cajun music. This new performance setting solidified the need for louder and more upbeat music. Bands in dance halls were centered around the **accordion**, with a **fiddle** or **triangle** as accompaniment. This period before World War II, from roughly 1900–1934, is sometimes referred to as the "golden accordion era," or more commonly, the "first accordion era."

By the mid-1930s, the sound of Cajun music shifted; **country**, **blues**, and **jazz** began to influence the genre. The onset of WWII made acquiring accordions difficult (they were primarily German imports), and by 1940, the accordion was phased out almost entirely. This period came to be known as the "string band era" in Southwest Louisiana. After WWII, accordions once again became readily available and found their way back into the featured spot in the Cajun band, where it remains today.

In this lesson, students will engage with recordings from the Smithsonian Folkways collection while learning about some of the stylistic changes that impacted Cajun music throughout the 20th century. Students will gain an understanding of the sounds of a "traditional" Cajun band and why the sound has endured for so many years. Finally, students will have an opportunity to learn and play the Cajun standard "Jolie Blonde."

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Lesson Paths and Student Objectives*



1. Cajun Music: The First Accordion Era (20+ minutes)

- Students will describe the Cajun “sound” during the “Golden Accordion Era” (roughly 1900–1934).



2. Cajun Music: The “String Band Era” (and Beyond)

(20+ minutes)







- Students will identify the ways in which Cajun music began to change in the mid-1930s.



3. Performing “Jolie Blonde” (30+ minutes)

- Students will interpret and perform the Cajun standard, “Jolie Blonde.”

*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: Cajun Music: The First Accordion Era



To Prepare:

- Read through this Path.
- Preview Path 1 of the **Lesson Hub 7 Slideshow** (slides 4–20).
 - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson Hub landing page. If you can use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow link, which will not show the notes.

1. Early Cajun Music (slides 5–8)

- A. Share information in the slides about the early style of Cajun fiddling (slide 5).
- B. Fiddle Legend Dennis McGee
 - i. Play an excerpt from the embedded audio track (“La Réel à Fruge” by Dennis McGee & Sady Courville) and ask students to describe the emotions they hear (slide 6).
 - ii. Share information about “loneliness” in Cajun fiddling (slide 7).
- C. Double Fiddling: Share information about the importance of “double fiddle in Cajun style (slide 8). For video example, see Lesson 6, Path 1.

2. Enter the Accordion: (slides 9–10)

Share embedded information about the emergence of the diatonic* accordion as an important instrument in the early 20th century.

**Discussion of diatonic and its use in Cajun music:* diatonic means: using only notes from one major scale. It could be any key, but just the notes from that one key, that one scale.

Aside: Many melodies are diatonic (“Happy Birthday,” “Joy to the World”) and many are not (“Star-Spangled Banner”). Minor-mode songs like “Greensleeves” have diatonic variants (using the natural minor scale) and non-diatonic ones (using melodic and harmonic minor).

3. Creole Influence (slides 11–12)

- A. Share information embedded in slide about the influence that Creole musicians had on Cajun musicians during this time (slide 11).
- B. Attentive Listening: Play an excerpt from the embedded audio track, “Jolie Bassette,” by accordionist Alphonse ‘Bois Sec’ Ardoin and Creole fiddler Canray Fontenot (slide 12).

4. Settings for Cajun Music (slides 13–18)

- A. Music with the family: Music is commonly a central point of social life, but for the early Cajuns, music was primarily home-made, usually at small family gatherings.
- B. Dance Halls (slides 14–15)
- i. Dance Halls became the primary place that one would hear this music. This solidified the need for the music to be louder and more upbeat.
 - ii. Bands in dance halls were often centered around the accordion, with a fiddle or triangle for accompaniment. Later, the guitar was added as an important rhythmic accompaniment.
- C. The Rise of the Radio and Recorded Music (slides 16–18)
- i. Radio, and therefore, mainstream American music, began to influence Cajun musicians and the music they played in dance halls.
 - ii. Listen to an excerpt from the very first Cajun record, “Allons a Lafayette,” recorded by Joe Falcon and Cleoma Breaux.
 - iii. Joe and Cleoma took mainstream country & western songs that were popular on the radio, translated them into French, and played them on accordion and guitar.

5. The Golden Accordion Era: (slide 19)

- This time period we’ve been discussing, roughly 1900–1934 became known as the “golden accordion era” because it is the time during which the sound of “traditional Cajun music” was defined.
- Most of the songs we think of as “Cajun standards” were written during this time and popularized on the radio. The defining feature of that sound was the accordion.

6. Learning Checkpoint: (slide 20)

- What were some characteristics of early Cajun music?
Answer: Early Cajun music was characterized by a "lonely" sound. Much of the music was performed using voice and/or fiddle. Over time, a second fiddle was often added, and the accordion started to become popular.
- Why is the time period before World War II (roughly 1900-1934) now sometimes referred to as the “Golden Accordion Era?”
Answer: Because of the changing context of Cajun music from the home to the dance halls to the radio, the accordion became more prominent in Cajun music. This was the era in which the accordion became the defining sound of Cajun music, and when it was the lead instrument in the band.

2. Path Two: Cajun Music: The “String Band Era” (and Beyond)



To Prepare:

- Read through the Path.
- Preview Path 2 of the **Lesson Hub 7 Slideshow** (slides 22–36)
 - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson Hub landing page. If you can use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow link, which will not show the notes.

1. Changes in Cajun Music

- A. The Influence of the Radio:** (slide 23) Review the defining characteristics of the “Golden Accordion Era” and the ways in which Cajun music began to be influenced by the rise of the radio in the mid-1930s.
- B. The Onset of World War II:** (slide 24) Share embedded information about the limited availability of accordions when WWII began and how this led to a shift in the sound / style of Cajun music.

2. Listening to the String Band Era

- A. Attentive Listening:** the string band sound (slides 25–27)
 - i.** Play the embedded audio track, “Geuydan Two-Step,” performed by J.P. Fuselier with his Merry Makers (recorded in the mid-1930s). As students listen, they should write down their thoughts about these questions:
 - *What instruments do you hear? (fiddle, two guitars)*
 - *Which instrument is leading the band? (fiddle)*
 - *What do you notice about the time/meter? (It is 2/2 (a two-step))*
 - *What makes this music different from Cajun music you have heard before? No accordion, no drums, no triangle, no bass*
 - *What makes this music different that Cajun music during the “Golden Accordion Era”?*
 - *How is it similar? (two-step, sung in French, Cajun yell)*
 - ii.** Consider leading a short class discussion based on student responses before moving on to the next slides (slides 26 and 27 provide answers and more explanation about the changes in instrumentation and the resurgence of the fiddle during the string band era).
- B. Attentive Listening:** Country and honky-tonk influences (slides 28–30)
 - i.** Play the embedded audio track, “Louisiana Boogie,” performed by Harry Choates (also recorded during this era). As students listen, they should write down their thoughts about these questions:

- *What instruments do you hear?* **fiddle, mandolin / banjo, guitar, pedal steel, bass, vocals**
 - *Which instrument is leading the band?* **Fiddle**
 - *What do you notice about the time/meter?* **2/2**
 - *What influences do you hear?* **Country, honky-tonk**
 - *Where do you think you might hear this music?* **Dance hall, radio**
- ii.** Consider leading a short class discussion based on student responses before moving on to information about the influence of country music (especially “honky-tonk” and “boogie-woogie) on slides 29 and 30.
- 3. The Accordion Returns:** Discuss the resurgence of the accordion after WWII (slides 31–32).
- 4. Cajun Pride:** Share information about the renewed sense of Cajun national pride after WWII and its influence on the post-war Cajun sound (slides 33–35).
- 5. Learning Checkpoint:** (slide 36)
- In what ways did Cajun music start to shift during the mid-1930s?
Answer: Due to the lack of accordions and the popularization of the radio with the ensuing influence of 'pop' music trends, Cajun music become defined by a "string band" sound rather than the accordion. The fiddle became the lead instrument and accordions were phased out almost entirely (until WWII when the accordion once again became a symbol of home and Cajun national pride).

3. Path Three: Performing “Jolie Blonde”



To Prepare:

- Read through the Path.
- Preview Path 3 of the **Lesson Hub 7 Slideshow** (slides 38–49).
 - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson Hub landing page. If you can use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow link, which will not show the notes.
- Print student copies (or click on the button in the slideshow to display) the [song lyrics/translation/pronunciation guide](#) for “Jolie Blonde” (find below)
- Print student copies (or prepare to display) the [chord chart](#) for “Jolie Blonde” (find below).
- Print student copies (or prepare to display) the [sheet music](#) for “Jolie Blonde” (find below).
- Decide how you will structure/customize this “performance” activity to best meet the needs of your students.

1. What is a standard? (Slides 39–42)

- A.** Share embedded information about “standards” (certain songs that stand the test of time) (slide 39).
- B.** Share a little information about the Cajun standard they are about to learn (“Jolie Blonde”) (slide 40), and ask them to consider this question:
 - *Can you think of examples of “standards” in other popular music genres?*
 - Lead a short class discussion on this topic (or provide students with time to discuss this question with a partner or in a small group).
- C.** Provide additional contextual information about the song “Jolie Blonde”
 - Play the embedded audio recording of this song (Hackberry Ramblers version) (slide 41). Optional: Use embedded suggestions to facilitate engaged listening activities.
 - Then, discuss the prevalence of recordings of this song in the Arhoolie Records catalog (slide 42).

2. Active Music Making: Performance Activity (slides 43–48)

This activity is designed to prompt students to actively engage with this recording of “Jolie Blonde.” *It can be as simple or complex as you’d like!*

- A.** Use the suggestions listed below to facilitate a meaningful music-making experience for your students (more details about each suggestion are provided within the slideshow).

- **Suggestion 1:** (slide 44) Sing Along (Pass out—or display—the lyrics / translation / pronunciation guide.)
- **Suggestion 2:** (slide 45) Rhythmic Engagement: Clap or tap along to the beat.
- **Suggestion 3:** (slide 46) Learn the Chords (The chord changes are listed on the lyrics / translation / pronunciation guide.)
- **Suggestion 4:** (slide 47) Put it all together!

Customize a class arrangement based on the interests and skills of the students in your class. Students could:

- Sing
- Keep the waltz rhythm steady on percussive instruments (consider experimenting with triangles and scrubboards)
- Play a melodic riff on a guitar, violin, piano, or ukulele (or any other melodic instrument)
- Play chords on the piano, guitar, or ukulele
- Trade improvised solos
- Play the melody on an instrument (diatonic, in the key of G) (Find the sheet music below)

B. Optional Extension Activities:

- Rehearse, refine, and present your class arrangement of “Jolie Blonde” for a live audience (or record it).
- Ask students to reflect on these discussion questions (slide 48)
 - *What is the feel of your arrangement of this song?*
 - *Did you stick to a traditional “Cajun” style, or was your arrangement influenced by different genres?*
- Consider trying to perform “Jolie Blonde” with a Zydeco feel . . . or . . . add the influence of the students’ favorite types of music.

3. Learning Checkpoint: (slide 49)

- The song “Jolie Blonde” is a Cajun “standard”... What does that mean?
Answer: Standards are songs that are the most popular, timeless, and characteristic of a genre. Reinterpreted endlessly over the years, they remain a staple of the repertoire.
- How did your version of “Jolie Blonde” reflect the stylistic characteristics of Cajun music?
Answer: Answers will vary.

2014 National Music Standards Connections

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

- Can I explain changes in the ways in which the elements of music were used by Cajun musicians as the 20th century progressed?
- Can I describe how the music elements were used in the Hackberry Ramblers' version of Jolie Blonde?

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

- Can I explain the impact of WWII on Cajun music?
- Can I explain the impact of the radio on Cajun music?

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 create an interpretation "Jolie Blonde" that honors the stylistic characteristics of Cajun music?

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

- Can I rehearse my part in "Jolie Blonde" 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 my class's arrangement of "Jolie Blonde," while staying true to the Hackberry Ramblers' version of this song?

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

- Can I describe the ways in which the elements of music and expressive qualities were applied in the audio recordings I listened to during this lesson?

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

- Can I identify and compare the historical context of Cajun music from the "Golden Accordion Era" and the "String Band Era"?

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 identify and interpret the ways in which Cajun musicians' application of music elements and expressive qualities changed as the 20th century progressed?

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 the part I chose to play during the performance activity?
- Can I explain why so many Cajun musicians have chosen to record their own version of the song “Jolie Blonde”?

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 historical, cultural, and social context of the stylistic changes Cajun music experienced during the 20th century?
-

Additional Resources

- Brasseaux, Ryan Andre. 2009. *Cajun Breakdown: The Emergence of an American Made Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carpenter, Gwen, Marlene Weyland, and Thom Wolf, producers. 1981. "Women Jockeys & Cajun Fiddler Dennis McGee." Video, 28:19. Aired April 4, 1981, on Louisiana Public Broadcasting. Retrieved from the Louisiana Digital Media Archive. http://ladigitalmedia.org/video_v2/asset-detail/LALIVE-226.
- Dole, G. 1977. Liner Notes for *Cajun Home Music*. Folkways Records FW02620. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/FW02620.pdf>.
- Fowler, Ken, producer. 1996. *Louisiana Legends*, "Michael Doucet." Video, 25:27. Aired February 14, 1996, on Louisiana Public Broadcasting. Hosted by Gus Weill. Retrieved from the Louisiana Digital Media Archive. http://ladigitalmedia.org/video_v2/asset-detail/LLOLG-1201.
- Savoy, Ann. 1984. *Cajun Music: A Reflection of the People, Vol. I*. Eunice, LA: Bluebird Press.
- Savoy, Ann. 1990. "Cajun Music: Alive and Well in Louisiana." *Folklife in Louisiana*. http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/creole_art_cajunmusic_aliv.html.
- Savoy, Ann. 2020. *Cajun Music: A Reflection of a People, Vol. II*. Eunice, LA: Bluebird Press.
- Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. n.d. "Dewey Balfa: Master of Cajun Music." Artist Spotlight. Accessed March 21, 2022. <https://folkways.si.edu/dewey-balfa-master-cajun/music/article/smithsonian>.
- Strachwitz, Chris. 1993. Liner Notes for Luderin Darbone's Hackberry Ramblers. "*Jolie Blonde*." Arhoolie Records ARH00399. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/ARH00399.pdf>.
- Strachwitz, Chris. 1997. Liner Notes for *Cajun String Bands, The 1930s: "Cajun Breakdown"*. Arhoolie Records ARH07014. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/ARH07014.pdf>.

Worksheets
“Jolie Blonde” Lyrics, Translation, Pronunciation

Hackberry Ramblers’s 1963 recording

Translation by Ann Savoy

Key of A

Verse 1 (translation at right)

A D A Jolie blonde, ‘gardez donc, quoi t’as fait <i>Zhoh-lee blohnd, gahr-day dohn, kwah tah fay</i>	Pretty blonde, so look what you did
A E A Tu m’as quit-té pour t’en al-ler <i>Too mah kee-tay pohr than ah-lay</i>	You left me to go away,
A D A Pour t’en al-ler avec un autre, mon cher bé-bé <i>Pohr than ah-lay ah-vehk uhn oht, mohn shehr bay-bay</i>	To go off with another, my sweet baby
A E A Quel e-spoir et quel av’nir mais moi je p eux a-voir <i>Kehl eh-pwahr ay kehl ahv-neer may mwahzh puh ah-vwahr</i>	What hope and what future can I have?

Verse 2:

A D A Jolie blonde, tu croyais il y avait juste toi <i>Zhoh-lee blohnd, too kray-yay yah-vay zhoost twah</i>	Pretty blonde, you thought you were the only one
A E A Il y a pas juste toi dans le pays pour moi ai-mer <i>Yah pah zhoost twah dahnl pay-ee pohr mwah eh-may</i>	You’re not the only one in the country for me to love
A D A Je va’s trou-ver, chère, juste une autre jolie blonde <i>Zhvah troo-vay shah, zhoost uhn oht zhoh-lee blohnd</i>	I’m going to find just one other pretty blond
A E A Bon Dieu sait, chère, moi, j’aime tant <i>Bohn Dyuh say, shah mwah zhehm tahn</i>	God knows, dear, [that] I love so much

“Jolie Blonde” Song Form

Instrumental sections (in the key of A)

A part

D	D	A	A
E	E	A	A

B part

D	E	A	A
E	E	A	A

Verse 3 (used in some versions, not in Hackberry Ramblers recording):

Jolie blonde, tu m’as laissé moi tout seul
Zhoh-lee blohnd, too mah leh-say mwah too suhl
 [Pretty blonde, you left me alone]

Pour t’en aller chez ta famille
Pohr tahn ah-lay shay tah fah-mee
 [To go back to your family]

Si t’aurais pas écouté tous les conseils de les autres
See toh-ray pahz ay-koo-tay too lay kohn-sayd layz oht
 [If you hadn’t listened to the advice of the others]

Tu serais ici-t avec moi-z-aujourd’hui
Too sray ee-seet ahvehk mwah oh-zhohr-dwee
 [You’d be here with me today]

Verse 4 (used in some versions, not in Hackberry Ramblers recording):

Jolie blonde, mourir ça serait pas rien
Zhoo-lee blohnd, moor-reer sah sray pah ree-ehn
 [Pretty blonde, to die would be nothing]

C’est de rester dans la terre aussi longtemps
Sayd reh-stay dahn lah tehr oh-see lohn-tohn
 [It’s just staying in the earth for a long time]

Moi j’vois pas quoi faire si tu reviens pas, bébé
Mwahzh vwah pah kwah fehr see too ruh-vee-ehn pah, bay-bay
 [I don’t see what I’m gonna do if you don’t come back baby]

T’en revenir avec moi dans la Louisiane
Than ruhv-neer ah-vehk mwah dahn lah Loo-ee-zee-ahn
 [Come back with me to Louisiana]

“Jolie Blonde” chord chart for instrumentalists

Key of A

3/4 time

each chord symbol has a duration of one measure

<u>Section</u>					
A	4	4	1	1	
	5	5	1	1	
A	4	4	1	1	
	5	5	1	1	
B	4	5	1	1	
	5	5	1	1	
B	4	5	1	1	
	5	5	1	1	
Verse 1	4	4	4	1	1
	5	5	1	1	
	4	4	1	1	
	5	5	1	1	
A	4	4	1	1	
	5	5	1	1	
B	4	5	1	1	
	5	5	1	1	
B	4	5	1	1	
	5	5	1	1	

Verse 2	4	4	4	1	1
	5	5	1	1	
	4	4	4	1	1
	5	5	1	1	
A	4	4	1	1	
	5	5	1	1	
B	4	5	1	1	
	5	5	1	1	
B	4	5	1	1	
	5	5	1	1	

“Jolie Blonde” Sheet Music

Jolie Blon (Jolie Blonde)

Music transcribed by Daniel Coolik
Lyrics transcribed by Ann Allen Savoy

Jo - lie blonde, _____ mais jo - lie fille _____
 (Zhoh - lee hlohnd, _____ may zhoh - lee fee _____)

5 chère pe - tite, _____ mais jo - li coeur _____
 shehr pee - teet, _____ may zhoh - lee kuhr _____

9 t'm'as lais - sé _____ pour t'en al - ler _____ a - vec un _____ autre, _____ mais chère pe - tite, _____
 t'mah leh - say _____ pohr tahn ah - lay _____ ah-vehk uhn _____ oht, _____ may shehr pee-teet, _____

13 _____ dans l'pa - ys _____ de la Loui - siane _____ mais mal - heu - reuse. _____
 _____ dahl pay - ee _____ duh lah Looee - zeeahn _____ may mah - luh - ruh. _____

O, mais joli coeur, ça t'as fait à ton papa,
 Tu m'as laissé, mais chère petite, mais moi tout seul,
 mais malheureuse,
 Quel espoir, mais quel avenir mais moi je peux
 avoir?

(Oh, may zhohlee kuhr, sah tah fay ah tohn pah-pah
 Tsee mah leh-say, may shehr pee-teet, may mohn too
 suhl may mah-luh-ruh
 Kehl ehs-pwahr ay kehl ahv-neer may mwahzh puh
 ah-vwahr?)

Translation:

Pretty blonde, pretty girl,
 Dear little one, pretty heart
 You left me to go with someone else, dear little girl
 In the Louisiana country, unhappy one.

Oh, pretty heart, what you did to your papa.
 You left me, dear little one, me all alone, unhappy one
 What hope and what future can I have?