CREOLE CULTURE AND CREOLE MUSIC

zydeco is the syncopated musical melange that has resulted from cultural contact between Cajun, Afro-French and Afro-American peoples in south Louisiana over the last 200 years. It is played today at bars, church halls, barbeques, baseball games and anywhere that black Creoles gather for community entertainment on the Louisiana/Texas Gulf Coast from Lafayette to Houston. The Afro-French population that arrived in Louisiana in the 18th century from French West Africa and Haiti, brought with them their religion, languages, foodways, and above all, music. Within the French colonial sphere of the New World tropics, all these traits were modified by European contact. In addition to the 28,000 French slaves that came to the Louisiana colony in the 18th century, a population of free people of color later developed. These usually lighter and culturally more European people in some cases held land and slaves. They were often noted as artisans and craftsmen and contributed to the birth of jazz in urban New Orleans. Many, however, left both the Crescent City and the sugar plantation culture found along the bayous and headed south to what is now the Authentic south Louisiana. This was particularly common after the American takeover in 1803 and the subsequent systematic evacuation of the Coast. On the Coast, from St. Martin Parish westward, the free people of color and the descendants of slaves — now generally referred to as black Creoles — mingled with the original Cajuns, with regional Indians, and other ethnic groups. In rural isolation, and with relatively few class discriminations, a great deal of cultural exchange took place between these groups. In terms of music, the black Creoles accepted the diatonic button accordion — originally a German introduction to the area — and violin, as well as the tunes of Cajun music. At the same time, black Creoles retained the intense syncopation characteristic of Afro-Caribbean dances such as the Bamboula and the Calinda. In addition, the influence of Afro-American culture and music brought African slaves entered the area from the 1820's on. The result is that zydeco, also spelled as “zozidico”, “zorzidico” and “zologo”, in its traditional form, is made up of Creole, Acadian, and African elements, with strong influences in New Orleans tradition.

In the years since World War II as a result of strong impact from mainstream Afro-American culture, zydeco has increasingly drawn on the big beat of rhythm and blues while being sung more often in English rather than Cajun or Creole French. This modern sound is best exemplified by Arthoolee recording artist Clifton Chenier and his great popularity among Gulf Coast black Creoles and Cajuns alike, as well as their kinfolk who have relocated on the West Coast.

The songs

The songs performed here reflect the diverse influences upon zydeco as well as a unique modern sound. He plays the old time button accordion in a staccato style that is syncopated rhythm often over melody; at the same time he plays the more melodic modern soul/blues sound often on a piano accordion. As to the meaning of the term zydeco, Delafose comments: “It’s the old traditional music. We call it “zydeco” when we add a rockin’ beat to just plain Cajun music. The blacks have a rockin’ beat in the music. Zydeco really means “snapbeans” (e.g. haricots verts). In the old days people might say “Tu vas faire zydeco?” and mean “How’s it goin’?” If things wasn’t so good, you’d say, “zydeco pas sales.” That’s the snapbeans then. It was a way to say things wasn’t so good.”

John Delafose was born in Duralde, near Eunice, in 1939. The community was founded in the 1830’s by Spanish Creole Cajuns, and is a unique mixture of color and a maternal ancestor of John Delafose. Today the surrounding area is famous for its Cajun and Creole musicians alike: Dewey Balfa, Nathan Abshire, Cisco Rosado, B.B. Armand, Amedie Armand, Canray Fontenot and Wilfred Latour among others. Delafose recalls making guitars and violins as a boy with window screen wire stretched taut over a board and cigar box. This is not unlike what is sometimes called “the diddley-bow” elsewhere in the South. “Since I can remember I liked music. I would beat sticks when I was six and then at about eight I’d make those stringed instruments. Mama would yell ‘don’t tear that screen!’ but I wanted my music bad. I also played some harmonica. When I was sixteen, I started singing in the church, started singing in the church. I wanted to accomplish something. I wanted to be up on the bandstand with the big men.”

Delafose, who came from a sharecropping family with the andouille (big dogs) of really meaty jambalaya and hoppin’ john. In the old days when the black electric fans, a needed occupation in torrid tropical south Louisiana. He also began to make music on harmonica and accordion with a band called “The Zydeco Sisters” and played with the Delafose brothers, Charles and “Slim”, his current guitar and bass players, in nearby Kinder and they formed a steady band six years ago. Today John says, “The accordion is the heart of the entire band since all the men’s wives show up to dance. Of his wife Joann, a woman with a warm gold-toothed smile, John says, “She meets the people. If she doesn’t come out, people ask for her.”

Today John Delafose and the Eunice Playboys are one of the most popular bands on the Louisiana/Texas Gulf Coast from Slim’s Y-Ki-Ki club in rural Opeilousas to church dances in urban Houston. Recently, they have also played for the Governor’s inaugural festival in Baton Rouge and at folk festivals in Natchitoches and El Paso. They’ve come a long way from their rhythm section is one of the best for dancing. It’s their “hot French music” style that has brought the young crowd back to the Creole dancehalls.

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This is the first LP of John Delafose and his band the Eunice Playboys. Zydeco men all, they represent the re-emergence of the rural bands and the louder dancehalls. They represent the re-emergence of the rural dancehall owner and member of the musical Ar- doin family, comments, “Delafose has a good personality, the Delafose brothers, Charles and Slim. Like the brothers’ on-stage image of constant movement, the number is a free swinging zydeco two-step.

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