

# Southeast Texas: Hot House of Zydeco

From **The Roots of Texas Music**, forthcoming from Texas A&M University Press

By Roger Wood

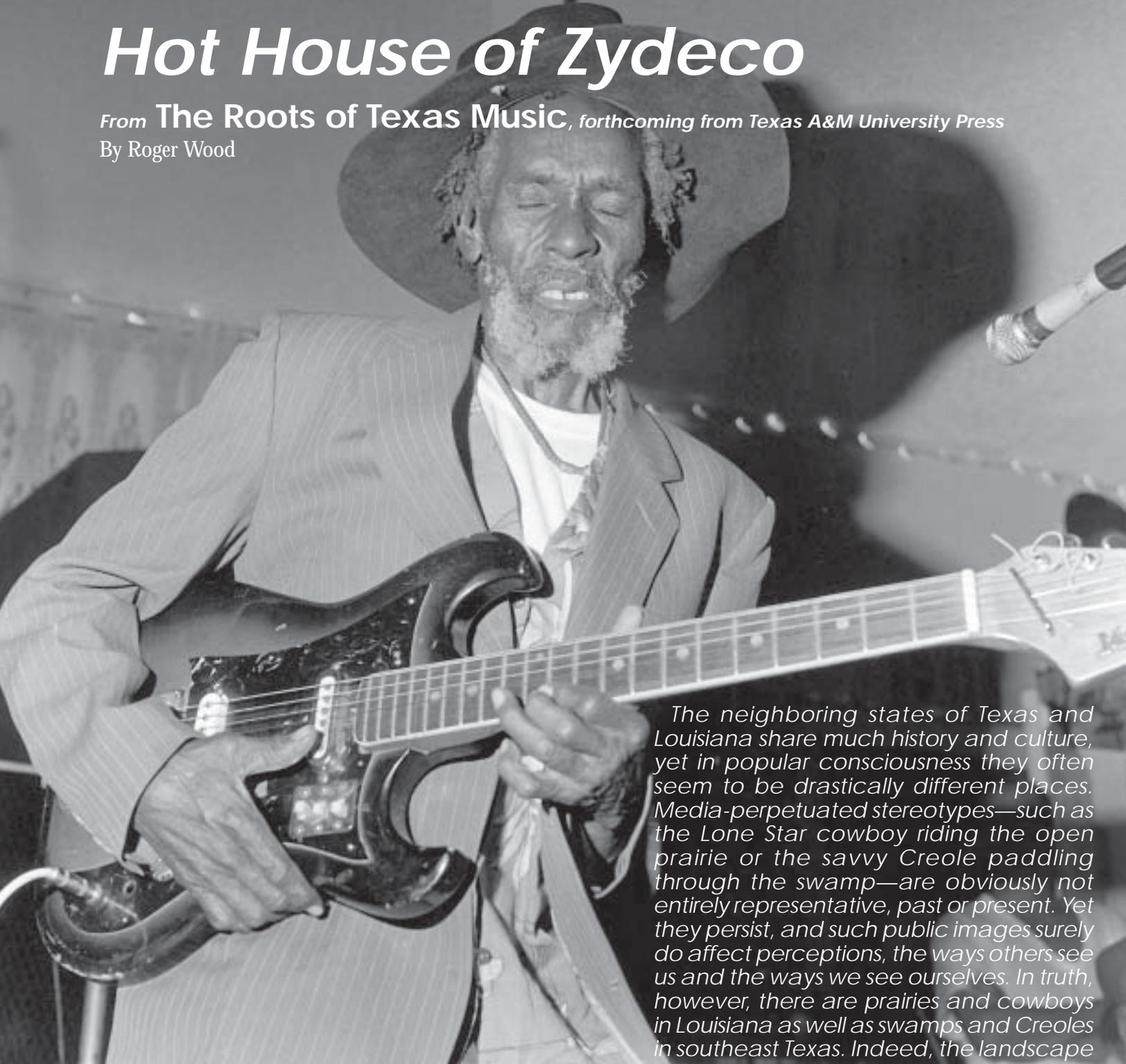


Photo of Little Joe Washington at Miss Ann's Player, Houston, 1998. By James Fraher

*The neighboring states of Texas and Louisiana share much history and culture, yet in popular consciousness they often seem to be drastically different places. Media-perpetuated stereotypes—such as the Lone Star cowboy riding the open prairie or the savvy Creole paddling through the swamp—are obviously not entirely representative, past or present. Yet they persist, and such public images surely do affect perceptions, the ways others see us and the ways we see ourselves. In truth, however, there are prairies and cowboys in Louisiana as well as swamps and Creoles in southeast Texas. Indeed, the landscape*

and the people along one side of the Sabine River often have much in common with those along the other. And interchange across that waterway has occurred since the days of the earliest settlements. But the Texas heritage of one of its most fascinating musical results remains largely unrecognized today.

Over recent decades, popular music has increasingly appropriated the now familiar sound of zydeco. Its signature

accordion-led melodies, plaintive vocals in French and English, and highly syncopated rubboard-based rhythms have enhanced soundtracks of feature films, television commercials, and numerous mainstream recordings. Zydeco CDs and audiocassettes are now regularly stocked in their own category in music stores around the globe. And zydeco superstars have taken center stage at major public spectacles viewed by millions on television.<sup>1</sup>

Like the blues many decades before it, zydeco has evolved from a folk idiom of certain impoverished and isolated African-Americans to become a commercially viable musical genre,

state events (such as the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival) grew significantly in size and number, introducing thousands of visitors to zydeco in the process. Moreover, a frequent theme

---

*For the most part, zydeco has defined itself in an age of ever-pervasive media influence and rural-to-urban mobility, an era in which once-isolated enclaves have had access to popular musical modes, absorbing and syncretizing them with elements from the folk tradition.*

---

complete with its own festivals, crossover hits, living legends, and emerging stars. Moreover, as Lorenzo Thomas points out, it has “contributed to the musical vocabulary of ‘rock ‘n’ roll’ which, in the late twentieth century, is nothing less than the popular music of the world.”<sup>2</sup> For the most part, zydeco has defined itself in an age of ever-pervasive media influence and rural-to-urban mobility, an era in which once-isolated enclaves have had access to popular musical modes, absorbing and syncretizing them with elements from the folk tradition. Thus, modern zydeco tunes often can sound at once exotic and familiar to first-time listeners—part of the basis for the music’s broad appeal to people beyond its primary ethnic group of origin.

But while casual observers and devoted fans alike readily recognize the zydeco sound today, popular consciousness generally misconstrues it to be solely of Louisiana origin and development. On the contrary, the roots of contemporary zydeco grow deep both west and east of the Sabine River—extending approximately one hundred miles from this naturally formed state boundary line in both directions. And though the oldest of the roots—the Creole musical forms known as *juré* and *la la*—clearly sprouted first in Louisiana, those forms subsequently found some of their most essential nutrients and significant cultivation on urban Texas soil, resulting in the eventual flowering forth of zydeco. As John Minton has convincingly argued, despite widespread misconception, zydeco most accurately refers to “a post-war popular music that first made its mark in Texas cities such as Port Arthur, Beaumont, Galveston, and Houston”<sup>3</sup> before spreading back to the Creole homeland in Louisiana, and eventually to the world. In short, this vibrant art form is a doubly syncretized musical import-export from the Lone Star state.

The general public cannot be blamed for miscomprehending zydeco to be a purely Louisiana phenomenon, given the propagation of that notion in various entertainment media, as well as that state’s aggressive (and valid) marketing of itself as a cultural tourism destination with a rich French heritage. Many outsiders discovered the music in the 1980s—around the same time that traditional Creole and Cajun cooking emerged as a national culinary craze, concomitant with a period in which in-

in zydeco songs (as in many other popular forms, such as blues, bluegrass, country & western, Tejano, etc.) is the celebration of an idealized folk past in some bucolic ancestral home from which the singer has been displaced.<sup>4</sup> And the homeland traditionally referenced in most such songs is, of course, Louisiana—where black Creole culture originated in the North American mainland. So it is no surprise that the key role of southeast Texas—as the hothouse for the actual blossoming of the modern zydeco sound—has rarely been acknowledged for what it is.

Yet, it was in Texas, especially in Houston, that Creole immigrants and their descendants first fused old Louisiana French music traditions with blues and urban R&B to create the new sound. And it was in Texas that the two essential instruments for zydeco music—the accordion and the rubboard (*le frottoir*)—were formally adapted in crucial ways to accommodate and make possible that new sound. It was in Houston in the late 1940s that recordings using variations of the word zydeco first appeared. And it was in the Bayou City also that the now-standard orthography and pronunciation of the term were initially established. In fact, as Michael Tisserand has noted, “Although Houston is often overlooked in zydeco history, the city’s relationship to the music can roughly be compared to Chicago’s impact on the blues.”<sup>5</sup>

This analogy is particularly insightful, for just as post-war Chicago became the proverbial birthplace of modern blues, post-war Houston proved to be the incubator in which the contemporary Creole music called zydeco came into being. From the 1920s through the 1950s, both cities were primary destinations for specific groups of rural African-American immigrants in search of jobs and improved living conditions. During this era of increasing urbanization throughout America, thousands of blacks left farms in the Mississippi River region of the Deep South, heading specifically for the place Robert Johnson immortalized as “Sweet Home Chicago.” As has been well documented elsewhere, many of these people took with them the acoustic folk musical idiom known as Delta blues, which soon assimilated other influences and metamorphosed into modern electric blues, the progenitor of rock ‘n’ roll. In a parallel way, during this same time period, members of a unique

ethnic group of African-Americans—black Creoles from southwest Louisiana—migrated to Houston, the nearby home of the suddenly booming petro-chemical industry. As they created and settled in enclaves such as the city’s Frenchtown district, they introduced to Texas an acoustic folk musical idiom known mainly as la la, which soon absorbed other influences and evolved into modern zydeco, the progenitor of that syncopated accordion-based sound that seemed to burst suddenly into media consciousness in the 1980s.

European ancestry, including the ethnic group known as Cajuns). These new Creoles were of mixed race, and their culture represented a vital confluence of heritages, both African and French. Prior to the Civil War, the vast majority of them remained enslaved on French plantations. However, certain others (known as *les gens de couleur libres*: the free colored people) became part of the socio-economic establishment, working as professionals and owning their own businesses—and, in some cases, even their own plantations and slaves.<sup>7</sup> Further

---

*The black Creoles that migrated to Texas from Louisiana—and eventually created the music known as zydeco—mainly have in common a direct or indirect lineage to the old French-African slave class.*

---

As modern musical phenomena, both blues and zydeco first occurred following African-American migrations from specific rural regions to specific industrial cities. Thus, any understanding of the notion of the true “home” for either of these two types of music (and certainly for others as well) is problematized by the reality of ethno-cultural mobility. Where does the blues come to full fruition? In Chicago? In the Delta? Where does zydeco come into being? In Houston? In the part of Louisiana known as Acadia? The answer to all of these questions might be Yes, depending upon how one defines “being.” The facts of movement and syncretism often belie the myth of some idealized cultural purity with timeless roots planted firmly in one particular place. And especially for any people correctly defined as Creoles, understanding the culture—as a means of understanding its music—necessitates an appreciation of mobility, confrontation, assimilation, and change.

What are the implications of the term Creole, and who exactly are the black people referred to here by this label? Initially, this word was adopted in reference to descendants of French settlers in the Caribbean and in post-1699 colonial Louisiana. As Barry Jean Ancelet explains, “Those born in the colony called themselves Creoles, a word meaning ‘home-grown, not imported,’ to distinguish themselves from immigrants.”<sup>6</sup> In Louisiana, this primary definition of Creoles originally denoted members of a privileged class of Caucasian natives based in le Quartier FranVais of old New Orleans and on plantations throughout the region, and this usage of the term persists to some extent today in reference to the socially elite descendants of the old French aristocracy.

But by the later decades of the eighteenth century, miscegenation was occurring as some of these original Creoles procreated with African slaves to produce offspring recognized as *noir*—black Creoles, an identity distinct from that of other Francophones in south Louisiana (such as those of Caucasian

problematizing the common understanding of the term, in the decades since emancipation, many black Creoles have intermarried with people of other races, resulting in an even wider range of skin tones, physical characteristics, linguistic traits, and family histories among descendants. In short, the phrase black Creoles historically refers not to a monolithic class of people but to a variety of syncretic human possibilities, both cultural and genetic.

The black Creoles that migrated to Texas from Louisiana—and eventually created the music known as zydeco—mainly have in common a direct or indirect lineage to the old French-African slave class. Nuances of genetic identity and social class notwithstanding, these people are primarily distinguished from other descendants of African slaves along the Gulf Coast by the fact of their French heritage—and its various linguistic, culinary, religious, and musical implications. But in contrast to groups such as their close neighbors the Cajuns (i.e., the descendants of French Acadians who immigrated from Canada in the late-eighteenth century, and with whom black Creoles share many cultural characteristics), these Creoles have an ancestral connection to Africa. This African-American heritage differentiates them significantly from other French-speaking peoples in the region—and ultimately sets black Creole music apart from other French-based folk forms originating in the New World.

It is clearly established that large numbers of these black Creoles came to Texas after 1920, but some such people may well have lived west of the Sabine River many decades earlier. We know, for instance, that “wealthy aristocratic Creole planters from Louisiana arrived in Liberty County with their slaves in 1845,”<sup>8</sup> though the certainty of mixed-race progeny resulting from that southeastern Texas presence is merely a possibility. (However, the small community of Raywood, located just a few miles east of the town of Liberty, retains to this day a significant black Creole presence.) We also know that in the half-century

following the Civil War, the general black population in Houston alone “increased from 3,691 in 1870, to 23,929 in 1910,” and that many of these “arrived from rural areas in Texas and Louisiana,”<sup>9</sup> suggesting the chance that some black Creoles may have been among those numbers, especially in the first decade of the twentieth century.

The initial major wave of Louisiana-to-Texas immigration was triggered by the discovery of oil in the legendary Spindletop gusher near Beaumont in 1901. As Tisserand notes in his comprehensive history of zydeco, Spindletop gave birth to “the modern petroleum age” and thereby initiated an interstate relocation that would ultimately change American music: “Starting almost immediately, and peaking through the years of World War II, black Creoles migrated to Texas in search of jobs, bringing along their accordions and French songs.”<sup>10</sup> Many of them found work, money, and some measure of improved social freedom in the so-called “Golden Triangle” area of Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange—all located on the coastal plains close to the Louisiana border. In addition to jobs in the oil fields, they labored in the shipbuilding yards, chemical plants, rice farms, and shrimp fishing fleets of the region.

Frenchtown in 1928. As he recalls, “Louisiana people took over this town,” adding that because of their reputation for hard work, “All you had to do was say you was from Louisiana, and they would hire you right there.”<sup>13</sup> Although they worked side-by-side with other African Americans, throughout the 1920s and 1930s the residents of Frenchtown generally maintained their own distinctive cultural identity within the larger black community,<sup>14</sup> facilitated in doing so by their common Creole heritage with its uniquely accented patois, distinctive cuisine, religious foundation in Catholicism, and the unusual music they first called la la.

La la was the most common name of the unamplified, accordion-based black Creole musical form that would eventually undergo a crucial transformation in Frenchtown, and elsewhere in southeast Texas, to evolve into modern zydeco. Analogous to the way the word zydeco functions today, la la can be used as a noun referring variously to either a type of music, a dance step, or a social event at which the music and dancing occur—or as a verb signifying the action of making that music or dancing to it. As longtime Frenchtown resident Clarence Gallien once told historian Alan Govenar, “they didn’t call it

*La la was the most common name of the unamplified, accordion-based black Creole musical form that would eventually undergo a crucial transformation in Frenchtown, and elsewhere in southeast Texas, to evolve into modern Zydeco.*

However, large numbers of black Creoles were drawn a bit farther to the west to the quickly established center of the burgeoning petro-chemical industry, Houston. Starting around 1919 these new arrivals began to concentrate their residency in the area of the city known as Fifth Ward. Located to the east/northeast of downtown on land that had been mostly unpopulated prior to the Civil War, this area had first been settled by freed slaves. It had become the Fifth Ward in 1866 when the city increased its boundaries beyond the four original wards to raise tax revenue and provide aldermen representation for the outlying residents.<sup>11</sup> Within Fifth Ward, the Creoles settled mainly in a neighborhood that became known as Frenchtown. By 1922 when it was formally incorporated, Frenchtown contained approximately 500 hundred residents in an area that Minton defines as “a dozen or so city blocks,” noting also that “as Creole migration increased, especially after the great Mississippi River flood of 1927, the district expanded accordingly, eventually including three times its original area.”<sup>12</sup>

Not far from Frenchtown, black Creole men secured employment at various industries along the Houston Ship Channel, as well as at the nearby Southern Pacific Railroad yards. Anderson Moss was among these early immigrants, arriving in

zydeco at that time [pre-1950s], it was la la. They used to give different la la at the house or at a little cafe. La la was a house dance when thirty, forty, fifty people get together and have a good time. . . . any time anybody plays the accordion, we call it a la la, a country la la.”<sup>15</sup>

The major phase of la la seems to correspond not only with urban migration but also with a period in which many Creole musicians in Texas and Louisiana began to shift away from playing the old-timey single-row accordion, which had been utilized from the advent of the instrument through the early 1930s, and instead adopted the more versatile double-row and triple-row models, which offered expanded musical possibilities more amenable to an eventual syncretism with blues. In the 1930s and 1940s black Creole accordionists playing what they called la la also began to perform more frequently in combinations with other types of instrumental accompaniment, such as percussion (in various forms) and guitars, as opposed to the traditional solo presentation or fiddle accompaniment common in an earlier era.

In fact, pre-dating la la, the earliest related form of black Creole music in south Louisiana involved a type of ritualized singing with little, if any, instrumental support. Known as *juré*



Courtesy of Chris Strachwitz, Arhoolie Records

(pronounced joo-RAY) from the French verb *jurer*, “to testify,” it was a type of gospel chant that sometimes accompanied a special dance. In such cases it is understood to have been “a localized form of the African-American ‘ring shout,’ consisting of a counterclockwise procession accompanied by antiphonal singing and the shuffling, stamping, and clapping of the dancers, occasionally supplemented by simple percussion such as the ubiquitous metal-on-jawbone scraper or its descendant, the washboard.”<sup>16</sup> However, other researchers assert that performance of *juré* by black Creole Catholics in New Orleans was completely a cappella and “most common during Lent, when instruments and dancing were taboo.”<sup>17</sup>

Noted zydeco musician Canray Fontenot defines *juré* as pre-instrumental, improvisational music built originally on nothing more than hand-clapped rhythms—and created mainly for entertainment and dancing. “They used to have that where didn’t have no musicians,” he recalls, adding, “but them old people would sit down, clap their hands, and make up a song. And they would dance on that, them people.”<sup>18</sup> It is easy to imagine that such folks might eventually supplement their hand clapping with the spontaneous incorporation of any object readily available on which they could tap, scrape, and pound in rhythm. Since the typical venue for socializing and musical performances involving poor black Creoles of this era was the house party, kitchen utensils such as spoons, bottle openers, and washboards became increasingly common supplements as *juré*-based traditions began to evolve beyond their religious origins to inspire the more secularized form known as *la la*. But many older black Creoles did not forget where the music began. None other than the late “King of Zydeco,” former Houston resident Clifton

Chenier, located the origin of his music’s characteristic syncopation in the church-inspired *juré*. “The beat came from the religion people,” he once bluntly asserted in an interview, as he sharply clapped his hands in time.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, *juré* is the post-African source for the highly syncopated, polyrhythmic foundation common today in the black Creole music of Louisiana and southeast Texas—a signature trait distinguishing the sound from that of the neighboring white Cajuns, for instance. While the rhythms now are generated by manipulation of metal instruments, they began much more simply. Utilizing the most basic of sonic devices, the voice and the hand clap, the primary role of *juré* in the evolution of zydeco is analogous to that of a cappella “Negro spirituals” in the early formation of the secular music called blues. But the development from the instrumentally limited *juré* to zydeco would not have been possible without *la la*, the crucial link between the seed and the flower in black Creole music of the upper Gulf Coast.

Whereas the turn-of-the-century style called *juré* formally explored the creative potential of plaintive vocalizing over a musical substructure of intense syncopation, the early-to-mid-twentieth-century style known mainly as *la la* marked not only a shift from religious to secular emphasis, but also eventually initiated other distinctly necessary phases in the metamorphosis towards zydeco. Foremost, this music (referred to variously among black Creoles as “French music,” “French *la la*,” as well as just “*la la*”) had introduced the diatonic one-row accordion as lead instrument. Though this most basic push-pull version of accordion would largely be replaced by more musically diverse models (including eventually the chromatic piano-key type), from its first emergence *la la* celebrated the accordion as the

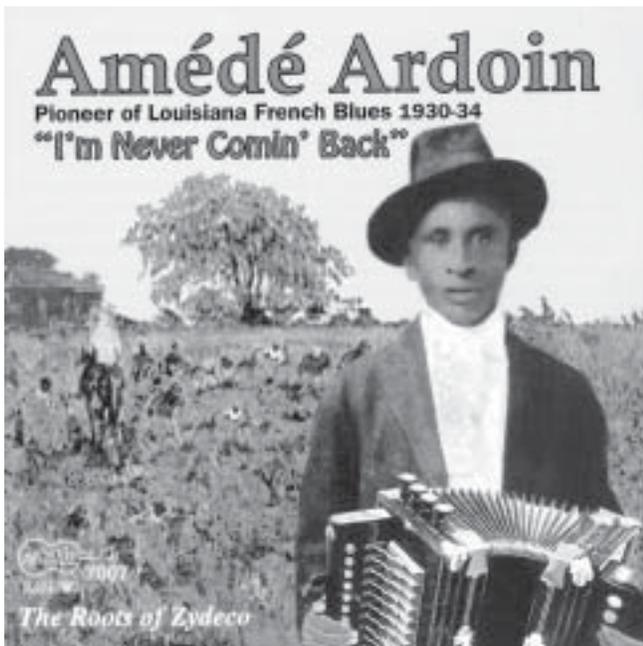


Photo of Lester Herbert & Peter King courtesy of Chris Strachwitz

primary soundpiece of black Creole music. In the early years, it was often the sole instrument backing the human voice, as well as played solo or accompanied by a fiddle. In this respect, la la was undoubtedly influenced by Cajun music, in which both

that I realized Amédé was of African-American background. To my ears, the recordings of Amédé Ardoin did not sound all that different from . . . Cajun accordionists I had heard on records.”<sup>20</sup> Confusing the matter further, many of Ardoin’s recorded

*Singer and accordionist Amédé Ardoin is generally recognized as the most influential figure in the early development of both Creole and Cajun music.*



Courtesy Arhoolie Records

accordion and fiddle were already established as alternating lead instruments. However, fiddle playing in black Creole music is now of minor significance (and non-existent in the more popular contemporary zydeco bands) compared to its continued featured role in Cajun culture.

Singer and accordionist Amédé Ardoin is generally recognized as the most influential figure in the early development of both Creole and Cajun music, two distinct styles which nonetheless have much in common, especially in the years between the two World Wars, when the recording of Southern folk music first became possible. Born in 1898 in Eunice, Louisiana, this small black Creole man had absorbed the elements of Cajun music so completely that many people who heard his seminal recordings (made between 1929 and 1934, including one crucially important session in Texas) did not know he was actually a Creole. Chris Strachwitz, the founder of Arhoolie Records (a key label in documenting zydeco and Cajun music since the early 1960s), recalls his surprise at learning the fact of Ardoin’s racial identity: “It wasn’t until Clifton Chenier told me that ‘Amédé Ardoin was the first colored to make French records’

performances featured accompaniment by legendary Cajun fiddler Dennis McGee in a biracial collaboration that was, and has to this day remained, fairly rare in the history of black Creole music. Moreover, Ardoin sang in a tense, high-pitched voice with a strong, pleading tone in the manner of the classic Cajun singers (as opposed to the open-throated technique more common in African-American vocalizing). His instrument was the traditional single-row diatonic accordion, and his music was based mainly on the popular Cajun waltzes, one-steps, and two-steps. So on first impression Ardoin’s special significance as the patriarch of modern black Creole music might be difficult to grasp. But key indicators of his primary role in that music discretely appear on his recordings, and most obviously so during his one session in Texas.

In downtown San Antonio on August 8, 1934, a small group of recording engineers gathered various folk performers, including Amédé Ardoin, in two rooms of the Texas Hotel to make some records.<sup>21</sup> Despite his stylistic affinity with the white French music of rural Louisiana, the six tunes Ardoin documented that day (for the Bluebird/Victor company) included some distinct differences foreshadowing the future of black Creole music. Perhaps most importantly, the titles of two tracks pointed toward the just-emerging synthesis of traditional Cajun sounds and the primary secular music of African Americans: “Les Blues de Voyage” (“Travel Blues”) and “Les Blues de Crowley” (“Crowley Blues,” named after a town near Ardoin’s birthplace in Louisiana). The latter, in particular, is especially potent in its highly emotive vocal performance, consonant with the rough style of early country blues, but sung in French by an accordion player, and thus anticipating zydeco. Among the thirty-four titles that compose his entire recorded repertoire, Ardoin made specific reference to “blues” only four times, and one half of those references occurred during this single session in San Antonio, a fact that symbolically hints at the role Texas would play in the intermingling of la la and blues for decades to come.

In addition to this emphasis on blues, the Texas Hotel session marks another significant development. Although Ardoin had generally established a reputation for playing in a syncopated style more consistent with his Creole legacy than with straight Cajun music, none of his catalogue of thirty-four recordings

included any percussion instrument accompaniment, still a rarity in white French folk music at this time (with the exception of the iron triangle used in some Cajun bands). Thus, it is especially noteworthy that the six Texas tracks were the first, and only, to highlight on record the organic rhythms of Ardoin's foot tapping, the most fundamental of all percussive effects. As Jared Snyder observes, "Eli Oberstein, who was in charge of the recordings, chose not to damp the sound of Ardoin's foot tapping in time to the music. Foot tapping was a critical part of the performance and was something normally eliminated by recording on carpeted floor."<sup>22</sup> Oberstein's decision resulted in a sound more faithful to what would surely have been heard at an old style house dance, where foot tapping was often not only present but, in a sense, "amplified" by the practice of having the musician stand upon a strong wooden table placed in one corner of a room, a platform that functioned both as an elevating bandstand and as a resonating surface for foot-based percussion.<sup>23</sup> Although Ardoin's clearly discernible foot tapping on the recordings was relatively subtle compared to subsequently developed percussion effects in black Creole music, it suggested (even if only by chance) the

increasingly significant role that rhythmic accents would play in the development of la la.

In the years following Ardoin's Texas recordings, la la would formalize the sophisticated musical adaptation of metal percussion devices (such as spoon scraped on washboard) as the defining source of heavy syncopation at the house dances (and eventually on the first zydeco recordings), no longer depending mainly on hand-clapping or foot-tapping to create the beat. Here black Creole la la diverged remarkably from traditional, European-inspired Cajun music, which was generally far less rhythmically complex and played at a regular, measured tempo. La la, on the other hand,

increasingly came to highlight an "Afro-Caribbean rhythmic framework" in which accents often shifted to various beats.<sup>24</sup> The role of the rubboard or washboard, known among Creoles as *le frotoir* (from the French verb *frotter*, "to rub"), became ever more pronounced, laying the trademark "chanka-chank" foundation over which a featured accordionist would perform. And the repertoire of this accordion-washboard collaboration began to expand beyond the old style French songs to encompass blues, especially as the accordionists started to experiment with the wider ranging musical capabilities of more technologically advanced instrument types.

Early la la music thus represents a confluence of Creole and Cajun musical traditions, best documented by the recordings of Amédé Ardoin (especially those made in Texas). But at black Creole house dances throughout the upper Gulf Coast region, the old style acoustic la la personified by Ardoin began to change even more in the late 1940s as ever larger numbers of Creole settled in Texas cities and witnessed first-hand the vibrant new sounds of electric blues and the polished craftsmanship of R & B.

As the black Creole immigrants to cities such as Houston experienced increasing financial and material advancement (thanks to regular paychecks from the jobs they came to find), it became more and more common for them to socialize with, and be influenced by, non-Creoles beyond enclaves such as Frenchtown. They met and mixed with the general African-American population at work and in entertainment venues such as Fifth Ward's famous Bronze Peacock nightclub or Third Ward's swanky Eldorado Ballroom. In the midst of Frenchtown itself, they crowded into the Creole-owned Johnson's Lounge to dance to big band music and see the floor shows. Although they still kept la la culture alive at private house parties, they discovered big city night clubs to offer an exciting new experience fueled by swing, blues, and jazz. And they absorbed an even wider range of popular music via the medium of sound recordings on juke boxes and broadcast radio. Unlike friends and family members they had left behind in relative isolation back in rural southwest Louisiana, many of the newly urbanized Creoles did not cling to the musical traditions of *juré* and old style la la as much as they began to expand their tastes beyond this root music, and, in some cases, to adapt it into something new, inspired by the dominant musical trends of the day.

African-American music writer Nelson George has provocatively observed that "black music is in constant flight from the status quo."<sup>25</sup> While this sweeping generalization is subject to debate in any given case, it suggests several layers of realities (musical and otherwise) influencing the more progressive players in urban Texas la la culture of the late 1940s, of which Clifton Chenier is the most widely recognized example. By the post-war era, thousands of black Creoles working in the state's southeastern industrial cities had already fled the socio-economic



status quo of their slave-descendant ancestors back on the farms. Guitarist and singer Sherman Robertson (now an established blues recording artist but once a zydeco player with Chenier and others) recalls the situation with his own Creole father, who had been Chenier's childhood friend:

My father was a sharecropper who went off to fight World War II, a man who was driven to be somebody. I was born in 1948, after he had returned from the War in '46. When he came to Houston [in 1949] from Breaux Bridge [Louisiana], he left the mules and the plow hitched. He abandoned his field. Because he had been to World War II, and then to come back and say "I've got to get back in the sharecropping groove," well, he just didn't fit that groove anymore. . . . To my family, Houston offered a way out, a new way to live.<sup>26</sup>

Like the elder Robertson, thousands of black Creoles had moved on mainly in an effort to modernize and improve their living conditions. And they concurrently and enthusiastically had begun to modernize their preferences in music too. Yet if they periodically departed from the status quo of their traditional Creole heritage, they never fully abandoned it, or its music. Like their linguistic idiom, their religion, and their distinctive food, la la composed a major element of their collective sense of self. But, until 1949, it was a musical experience mainly shared only with other black Creoles, not performed for the general public in nightclubs or ballrooms around the city. And by the time it made its presence known in the clubs, people would refer to it as zydeco.

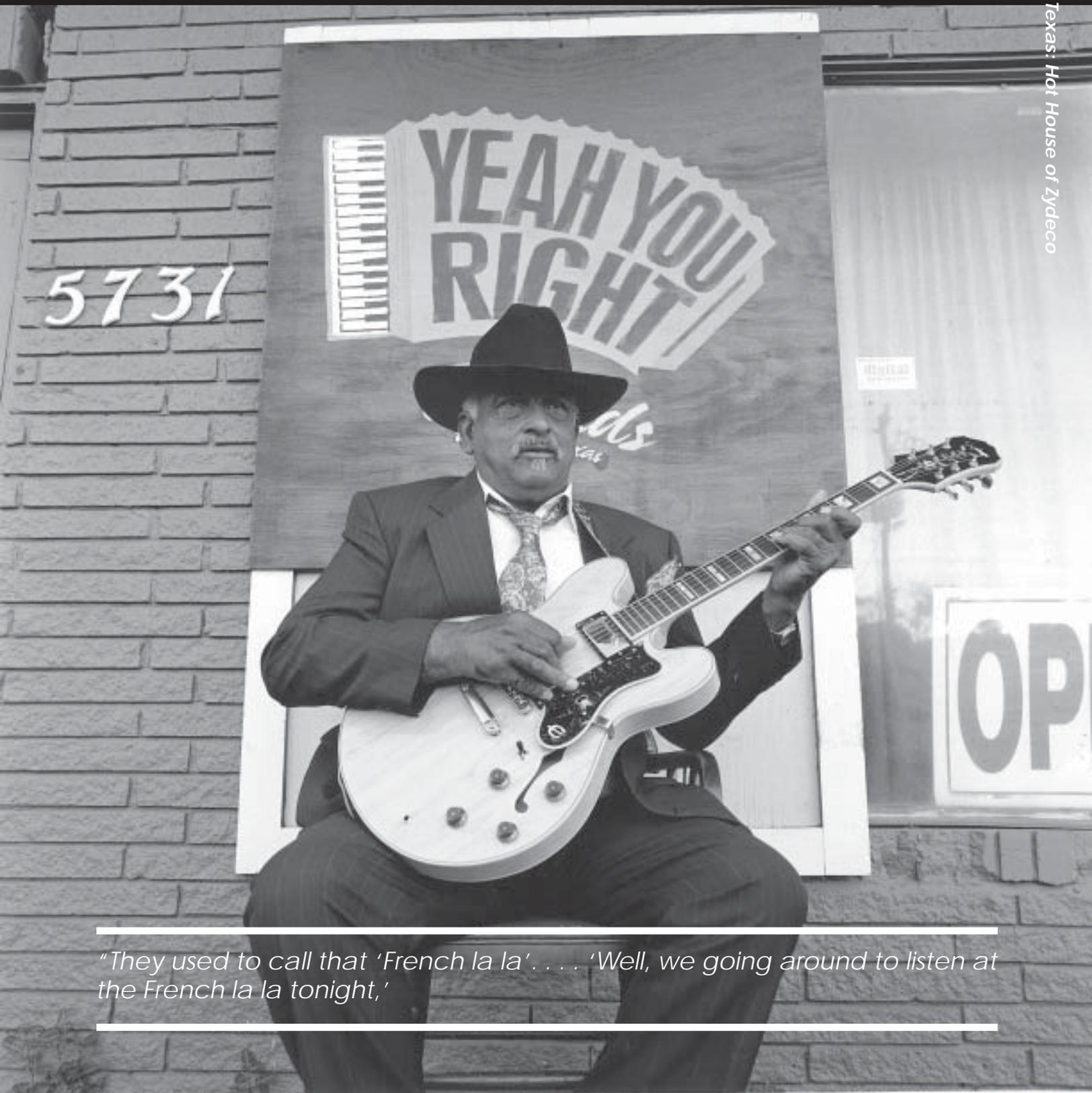
The essential metamorphosis of la la music into contemporary zydeco did not occur suddenly in the urban environment. In fact, it is fair to assume that, throughout the 1940s, much of the black Creole music in Texas cities remained primarily acoustic and folk-based (i.e., casual in its performance at specific social functions, utilizing mainly a traditional repertoire transmitted from master to apprentice, often within the family).<sup>27</sup> But the notion of a backwards-looking French-based repertoire was increasingly being challenged by the ubiquitous sounds of popular black culture.

For instance, Anderson Moss, one of Frenchtown's leading Louisiana-born accordion masters from the 1950s into the 1990s, really began learning and playing his instrument decades after moving to Houston in 1928. Significantly, the first two songs he says he mastered came not from the Creole or Cajun tradition rooted back in rural Louisiana but from contemporary Texas blues in the form of hit records produced in California: "Driftin' Blues" and "Stormy Monday." The former had been written and first released in 1945 by the pianist and vocalist Charles Brown, originally from Texas City; the latter had been composed and first recorded in 1947 by the seminal electric blues guitarist and singer Aaron "T-Bone" Walker, originally from Dallas. Neither these artists nor these songs conveyed characteristics associated with the French Louisiana music

tradition, or even with the rural blues tradition for that matter. Instead, both Brown and Walker personified an urbane, jazzy style of blues. Yet Moss says that after learning such numbers as these hits by Brown and Walker, he soon found jobs in small cafes throughout Fifth Ward playing them on the accordion for predominantly Creole audiences.<sup>28</sup>

This new form of music, though it was played by a black Creole on an accordion, probably did not sound much like the old Cajun-influenced style called la la, a label which increasingly suggested an antique mode to some of the urbanized residents of Frenchtown. In the years following World War II, as their repertoire absorbed more songs from the top blues artists of the day, and as the accordionists and washboard players eventually began to perform alongside other instruments common in typical blues and jazz combos, variations of the word now spelled z-y-d-e-c-o came to signify this distinctively syncretized music (as well as the events at which it was played, and the dance steps performed there), in lieu of the phrase la la. As black Creole guitarist Ashton Savoy, a Louisiana native and longtime Houston resident, explains, "They used to call that 'French la la'. . . . 'Well, we going around to listen at the French la la tonight,' you know. . . . But when they started putting them horns and saxophones and all that stuff in there, well then they started playing the blues, they stated mixing that stuff up then, you know. Well, that's when they started calling it 'zydeco' then."<sup>29</sup>

The origins of the word zydeco have been traced to a lyric that surfaced first in various Creole folk songs in early twentieth-century Louisiana and has recurred ever since: *les haricots sont pas salé* ("the beans are not salted," a reference to the fact that the singer is too poor to afford salt or salted meat to flavor his beans).<sup>30</sup> The name zydeco derives from the first two words in this expression. Following the logic of French pronunciation, with the elision of the Z-sounding terminal s in the definite article *les*, combined with the vowel sound following the silent h in the noun *haricots* (in which the terminal t is also silent), the phrase *les haricots* sounds something like *le zarico*, (with the final syllable stressed) in standard dialect. Among the various attempts at making an English spelling correspond to the Creole pronunciation, z-y-d-e-c-o would eventually win out, thanks to the efforts of Houston folklorist Robert Burton "Mack" McCormick. He formally established the now standard orthography in his transcription of lyrics for a two volume 1959 record album called *A Treasury of Field Recordings*. This compilation included various types of folk music documented around Houston, but the key performance, as far as the future of zydeco was concerned, was by a Creole who had immigrated to the city in the 1940s, Dudley Alexander. He played a bilingual version of Big Joe Williams's 1930s-era classic blues "Baby, Please Don't Go" on concertina (a type of small accordion), accompanied by washboard and fiddle. In addition to the lyrics, Alexander added



---

*"They used to call that 'French la la'. . . . 'Well, we going around to listen at the French la la tonight,'*

---

a spoken-word introduction, in a mix of French and English, in which the word McCormick transcribed as zydeco occurs.<sup>31</sup>

The entire utterance *les haricots sont pas salé* operated originally as a common metaphor for hard times, signifying a poverty so severe that there was no money to buy salt (or salt meat) to season the homegrown vegetables. In this sense, zydeco is a word,<sup>32</sup> like blues before it, that carries connotations of personal suffering based in socio-economic deprivation. But just as blues offered some articulation of, and concomitant creative release from, that hardship, so did this Creole music. And, in both cases, even when that impoverished milieu of a hard rural lifestyle had been left behind by black city dwellers, the old term was evoked to describe the fundamental music of the culture the migrants had brought with them. Not only did the word zydeco harken back to the old line about the beans, but McCormick and others noted that people dancing to the music often engaged in a hand gesture reminiscent of the act of breaking open bean pods, “holding closed wrists in front of the torso and then circling or flicking them in a motion that alludes to someone snapping beans.”<sup>33</sup>

McCormick had initially settled on the word zydeco to describe both the dancing and the distinctive music that he observed among black Creoles in Houston’s Fifth Ward, not as a replacement for the older term *la la* but as a way of differentiating this now doubly syncretized urban style from the traditional music rooted back in rural Louisiana. As Tisserand observes, the Houston folklorist had intended for the term “to apply [only] to the local alloy of Texas blues and French Creole music. . . and he was horrified when the word was sucked back across the Louisiana border,” noting also that McCormick declared, “When I’m talking about zydeco, I’m talking about the music of Frenchtown.”<sup>34</sup>

Not only was the term zydeco first formally established on Texas soil as a multivalent reference to a new type of music, a dance step, and an event, but the first two recordings to use variations on the term in this sense, as opposed to the original French sense referring to a bean, were produced not in Louisiana but also in Houston in the late 1940s. Significantly also, these records were made not by artists playing the accordion or in the traditional Creole style. Instead, the first was issued, possibly as early as 1947, by the very personification of Texas blues, Sam “Lightnin’” Hopkins, and the second appeared in a 1949 recording by rhythm-and-blues performer Clarence “Bon Ton” Garlow.

In the Hopkins song, which Gold Star Records producer Bill Quinn (a New Englander by birth) bewilderingly titled “Zolo Go,” the singer offered a rare performance on electric organ, forsaking the guitar for which he is most famous, in an effort to approximate the sound of an accordion, a sound he knew first hand from his cousin (by marriage), occasional music partner, and eventual zydeco superstar Clifton Chenier. Though structurally the song is a standard eight-bar blues, it began with

Hopkins declaring, “I’m going to zolo go [actually pronounced more like zydeco] for a little while for you folks. You know, the young and old likes that,” and the last lines described a woman asserting the need to go “zolo go” as an escape from hard times.<sup>35</sup> As Chris Strachwitz explains, the Gold Star recordings Hopkins made in the late 1940s were mainly limited in distribution to juke boxes around southeastern Texas, where most African Americans (transplanted Creoles and non-Creoles alike) would easily recognize the sound and the word to which Hopkins alluded on this track.<sup>36</sup>

Clarence Garlow, unlike Hopkins, was of Creole heritage, having been born in Welsh, Louisiana, in 1911. But at age five he moved with his family to the Texas city of Beaumont and spent much of his subsequent life traveling and working between the two neighboring states. As Govenar has documented, Garlow started out playing fiddle and traditional Creole music, but “when he heard the ‘amplified sound’ of T-Bone Walker, his attitude changed. He wanted to play electric guitar.”<sup>37</sup> This inspiration soon culminated with Garlow fronting his own band playing R&B in clubs around Houston and landing a record deal with the local Macy’s label, for which he recorded his signature hit entitled “Bon Ton Roula” in 1949. This song pulsed with a rumba style percussion and opened with the spoken exclamation “Eh toi,” an interjection common in Creole-Cajun music culture. Though the instrumentation included drums, saxophone, piano, electric guitar and bass—not exactly characteristic of the traditional Creole ensemble—the singer identified himself as a “Frenchman” giving advice about how to enjoy oneself in a “Creole town,” with subsequent reference to “crawfish,” “Louisiana,” and “French la la.” But the key moment occurred near the end when he advised people to go to the “zydeco” [indeterminate orthography] to have fun.<sup>38</sup>

The Hopkins and Garlow recordings clearly demonstrate that in the late 1940s the concept of zydeco, however it might have been pronounced or spelled, was current among blacks in southeast Texas, and not as a reference to a vegetable. As blues and R&B artists such as these two men used the term, it was something of a novelty, but it indicated the level of interchange already underway between black Creole musical culture and popular urban modes. However, at the time these records were produced, it was still practically impossible in the nightclubs around Houston to find the real music, whether it was dubbed *la la* or zydeco, played with accordion and washboard and performed by black Creoles. Such presentations remained limited mainly to the house party phenomenon. But by the tail end of the decade, on Christmas Eve of 1949, that situation suddenly changed.

The key event in the movement of black Creole music into the public venues of Houston seems to have occurred by chance. During the same post-war period when popular blues artists such as Hopkins and Garlow were beginning to notice black



Photo of Doris McClendon, owner of the Continental Zydeco in Houston, 1996.  
By James Fraher

Creole music and to appropriate elements from it, a rebirth of French la la was simultaneously occurring, stimulated regularly by new arrivals from Louisiana and rural east Texas. As has been extensively documented by Minton, one of the most respected masters of the old la la accordion tradition was Willie Green, who had moved to Houston as far back as the 1920s, and who became “the first Houston Creole to perform French music in a public venue” by playing an impromptu Christmas Eve gig at Irene’s Café in 1949.<sup>39</sup> From that date until his death in the late 1960s, Green would reign as the king of the la la sound (his instrumentation usually limited to one or two accordions accompanied by a washboard) at Irene’s Café—and at other venues that had soon followed its lead in featuring this music for the entertainment of paying customers. While Green’s repertoire included Cajun-Creole classics such as “Jole Blon,” it also incorporated blues tunes such as “Baby, Please Don’t Go,” and came increasingly to be referred to as zydeco as a result. Yet Green’s music retained the stripped down, primal sound of the old house party la la,<sup>40</sup> as opposed to the more instrumentally diverse, amplified sound of the progressive zydeco bands that would emerge in the 1950s, inspired by the success of Clifton Chenier.

The fact that Green often played with a second accordion led him naturally into a master-apprentice type relationship with a younger player named L. C. Donatto, who had moved to Houston from Louisiana around 1944. In an interview with Minton, Donatto recounts the sequence of events leading up to that first breakthrough performance at Irene’s Café, explaining that he and Green were “just riding around in a car . . . driving and playing that thing and drinking and having fun,” when they stopped at a stranger’s front yard because a man out front with a guitar hollered at them, “Y’all come on the porch and

play.” As they obliged his request, accompanied by an unknown washboard player, they spontaneously attracted a huge crowd, including eventually the proprietress of a nearby cafe, Irene. As Donatto tells it, “she heard that, and she come on ‘round there, her and her husband, and seen all them people, said, ‘Well, why don’t y’all come to the café?’ And we started from that day. Started from that, and Count Basie or Benny Goodman couldn’t draw no bigger crowd than that. . . . And we were the first one played, that’s right, zydeco in Houston.”<sup>41</sup>

The success of this first appearance and subsequent bookings at Irene’s Café benefited not only Green and Donatto, but also other Frenchtown accordionists such as the aforementioned Anderson Moss and his best friend, an important post-1950 figure, named Lonnie Mitchell. Born around 1925 in the Creole community of Raywood near Liberty, Texas, Alfonse Lonnie Mitchell was first inspired to play the accordion around age twelve, after witnessing the skills of a respected oldtimer called Joe Jesse at a house party performance. After moving to Houston (in a year he has given variously as 1946, 1947, and 1950) Mitchell eventually resumed his accordion playing and shared the stage with Willie Green. But Mitchell’s big break came when the owner of Johnson’s Lounge in Frenchtown decided to cease booking the big bands that had been popular in the 1940s and instead to feature live Creole accordion music, following the success of the venture at Irene’s Café. Mitchell’s tenure at Johnson’s Lounge, which would later be leased for five years by the musician himself and called Mitchell’s Lounge following the death of Charley Johnson, and which would then be rechristened the Continental Zydeco Ballroom when the lease reverted to Johnson’s heir, Doris McClendon, lasted from approximately 1951 until Mitchell’s own death in 1995. Over this period of close to four-and-a-half decades, the large red-and-white painted structure at 3101 Collingsworth established itself as “Houston’s premier Creole nightspot,”<sup>42</sup> and Lonnie Mitchell was the dominant presence there, sometimes performing as often as six nights per week and influencing several generations of Houston zydeco musicians and fans in the process. Of additional significance, and unlike his friend and elder Willie Green, Mitchell did not limit his accompaniment to the washboard, as was common in the old la la tradition. As he once reflected in an article Minton published in the *Journal of Folklore Research*, “It makes it sound better, you know, a guitar and drums, to me. . . . I don’t know if I could play now with just a washboard. . . . But you know, when you got a guitar and drums and all that, it just, I don’t know, give more pep to the music.”<sup>43</sup>

One of the black Creoles who came to Texas in the late 1940s and became part of the 1950s Frenchtown scene at Johnson’s Lounge was Lonnie Mitchell’s good friend Clifton Chenier, the man most responsible for eventually taking Texas-bred zydeco, that potent fusion of electric blues with the la la sounds of

accordion and washboard, back to Louisiana, and eventually to the world. Born in Opelousas, Louisiana, in 1925, Chenier had moved in 1947 first to Port Arthur, Texas, where he worked at the Gulf Oil Refinery by day and played music with his older brother Cleveland, performing for tips at quitting time outside the factory gates and in the evenings at area clubs and icehouses. Eventually they would form the Red Hot Sizzling Band that played along the Gulf Coast, traveling back and forth between Texas and Louisiana, from the late 1940s into the early 1950s. As he visited and eventually moved to Houston, Chenier's self-presentation evolved from that of a country-bred Creole to an urban persona distinctly more fashionably hip. On trips back to Opelousas, his old friends noticed the difference at a glance. As Wilbert Guillory once told an interviewer, "He came back from Texas, he was a changed man. . . . He had all kinds of colored clothes, and he had his conked hair. Gold teeth, talked nice, talked proper," an opinion seconded by Louisiana radio deejay Frank Marlborough, who observed, "He brought in a new style, that's what I think it was. Texas was always ahead in fashion."<sup>44</sup>

But the changes triggered by Clifton Chenier's late 1940s/early 1950s Texas experience would not be limited to his personal appearance; they would also influence his music, and eventually make him the undisputed father of the post-1950 modern zydeco sound. Chenier's role is enormous, for example, in affecting the primary instruments used in the rise of zydeco to a popular form.

As a child of a single-row push-button diatonic accordion player back in Opelousas, he had been raised amidst the essence of the old style sound and technique. But for whatever reasons (and as Tisserand notes, the historical facts on this matter are "not clear"<sup>45</sup>), Chenier chose to play the large piano-key chromatic model throughout his adult life, presumably before and certainly after his move to Texas, and there is some evidence, including Chenier's own testimony to Cajun-Creole historian Ann Allen Savoy, as well as to Texas music documentarian Alan Govenar, that he really started playing the accordion only after arriving in southeast Texas.<sup>46</sup> This preference for the relatively newfangled version of the instrument would prove fortuitous once Chenier relocated west of the Sabine River and began to expand his repertoire beyond the rural Creole tradition of his father's generation, experimenting with his accordion's capacity to play blues and R&B. Given the ability to make music in any key, including flats and sharps, the piano-style chromatic model would prove infinitely better suited to performance of any song he wanted to attempt, especially when he played with other instruments (such as the saxophones, organs, and guitars that he would later incorporate in his various bands). Whereas the single-row diatonic models were locked in a fixed pattern of intervals and could play only in one key, obviously limiting their versatility, Chenier's choice of the chromatic accordion liberated him to explore whatever musical synthesis he could imagine



Photo of Wilfred Chenier at the Silver Slipper, Houston, 1997. By James Finher

between the popular blues tunes he encountered in Texas and the more traditional Creole sounds he recalled from back home. Moreover, the piano-style chromatic instrument would make the same note whether it was pushed or pulled, unlike the various previously developed diatonic options.

In Texas, Chenier also discovered "famed accordion builder John Gabbenelli, who had recently moved to Houston from Italy," and who would repair and modify old "junk" piano-key accordions for the young musician,<sup>47</sup> making it easier for him to afford and master the instrument. And Clifton Chenier did just that, influencing zydeco musicians and the genre's fundamental sound for decades to come.

The Chenier brothers' initial tenure in the Lone Star state would also mark a major innovation in the traditional *la la* percussion instrument, the washboard. Just as Clifton would update and diversify the sonic possibilities of the zydeco accordion by using a different model, he and his brother Cleveland would revolutionize the basic form, playing style, and resultant musical effects of the washboard. In short, they invented the modern zydeco frottoir. Instead of continuing to rely on the humble household utensil that had long been adapted for rhythmic accompaniment in black Creole music, they designed a truly unique musical instrument, the frottoir vest. In doing so, they directly affected practically every zydeco band to come after them. Although Cleveland had started out, like most Creole percussionists before him, holding a traditional rectangular shaped small metal washboard and scratching its surface with a spoon, in the late 1940s his brother came up with a radical new idea, which he recalled in a videotaped interview with Chris Strachwitz:

They used to tie a string around it [the washboard], you know, and play it around the neck. So I went on to a white fellow down there at the Gulf Refinery [in Port Arthur]. I told him, I said,

“You got some tin?” He say, “Yeah.” So I got down on the ground, in the sand, and I drewed that rubboard. And I said, “Can you make one like that? You know, with a collar plate?” He say, “Sure, I can make one like that.” And he made one.<sup>48</sup>

The result was a type of curving, single-piece corrugated metal vest worn over the shoulders of the player and covering the whole front of his torso, all the way down to the waist.

This innovation provided a much wider and longer surface for percussive improvisation and freed the player to dance and move with the music, since he no longer had to hold the washboard with one hand or awkwardly manipulate the smaller flat-surfaced traditional model as it hung from a string around the neck. Moreover, this sophisticated new design expanded the musical possibilities for zydeco percussion, for, as Strachwitz points out, “The amount of air the player leaves in back of the instrument (by either standing up straight or bending forward) determines the brightness of the sound.”<sup>49</sup> Cleveland Chenier effectively exploited this technique and also explored other sonic

Creole music to fans of all races, and profoundly influencing the direction the music called zydeco would take in the last two decades of the century. As Chris Strachwitz, the producer of Chenier’s most significant recordings, has written, “Clifton’s success gave all the other Zydeco musicians the impetus to put more blues or rock and roll (as they called it) into Creole Zydeco music, especially in the Houston area.”<sup>50</sup>

A former Chenier protégé, and current stalwart of the Bayou City zydeco scene, agrees: “Clifton was the first one to mix it up. Everything was strictly straight Cajun style music or la la before him,” says accordionist Wilfred Chevis, leader of The Texas Zydeco Band. “La la wasn’t like the zydeco. The zydeco is more exciting. La la was a traditional type of music, mainly just the accordion, laid-back with a slower type of beat. Zydeco has an up-tempo, and more instruments, with a little touch of blues to spice it up.”<sup>51</sup>

However, through the 1970s, at small clubs in Frenchtown and elsewhere, Chenier would still sometimes appear with minimal accompaniment, recalling the stark simplicity of la la. But for the higher profile gigs, he regularly performed with a

---

*The frottoir vest, which is now a fixture in practically every zydeco band playing today (as well as in some Cajun bands), is arguably one of the few non-electronic musical instruments to be created in the United States of America, and by Chenier’s own account, it first came into being in southeast Texas.* 35

---

theories by changing the type and number of hand-held tools with which the metal surface was struck. He eventually traded in the traditional one or two spoons that others had relied on (as the washboard equivalent of drumsticks), and instead he adopted a musical approach based on gripping six church key bottle openers in each hand as he performed, expanding the polyrhythmic effects and creating a richer percussion foundation for his brother’s accordion playing. Given these innovations, the frottoir vest, which is now a fixture in practically every zydeco band playing today (as well as in some Cajun bands), is arguably one of the few non-electronic musical instruments to be created in the United States of America, and by Chenier’s own account, it first came into being in southeast Texas.

The rest is music history. Energized by the lively possibilities of the chromatic piano key accordion and the newly conceived washboard vest, Clifton Chenier’s music, more so than any other player’s, changed the course of zydeco in the latter half of the twentieth century. From his first sessions in the 1950s and up almost till the time of his death in 1987, he would go on to record in Louisiana, California, and Texas and to tour the world, introducing his uniquely realized syncretism of blues, R&B, and

full band offering relatively sophisticated instrumentation. One witness to these alternating modes of self presentation was drummer Robert Murphy, a Texas-born black Creole. He recalls,

I met Clifton Chenier here in Houston. And once I started playing with him, every little squeeze-box in town wanted me to play with them. [laughs] . . . There was just the two of us. . . just accordion and drums. Sometimes Lightnin’ [Hopkins] would come on little jobs that we’d have, like on Sunday afternoons and things. He’d come by and sit in [on acoustic guitar]. . . and the three of us would have a ball! Me and Clifton and Lightnin’. . . Now when Clifton put the whole band together. . . and when we had the electric guitars and horns and all that, it was a different sound.<sup>52</sup>

It was that “different sound,” of course, that pop music discovered in the 1980s, and for most of the final decade of his life, Chenier performed only with large scale units that featured progressive guitar players such as Sherman Robertson, along with a complete rhythm section, keyboards, and horns (often including, on saxophone, his son, C. J. Chenier, who remains a Houston resident to this day).

Clifton Chenier is also credited with spreading the word,



Photo of Big Roger Collins, Houston, 1995. By James Fraher

literally: zydeco. Although Mack McCormick had been the person who formally documented the term and the spelling, most historians agree that Chenier is the individual most responsible for popularizing it. He had first recorded a song for Specialty Records as far back as 1955 entitled “Zodico Stomp,” but it was Chenier’s breakthrough 1964 session for Arhoolie, recorded at Houston’s Gold Star studio by Chris Strachwitz, that gave to the world the classic song called “Zydeco Sont Pas Salé,” in which the producer followed McCormick’s lead, abandoning the French phrase *les haricots* for the potent new word. As Houston promoter Clarence Gallien once explained, “The name changed from *la la* to zydeco when Clifton made the record. . . . Clifton is the man who got credit for changing the name.”<sup>53</sup>

And while Chenier’s impact on the propagation of the word, as on popular music itself, has ultimately been global, he participated in changing the Houston scene in at least one other crucial way that brought the signature music of his ethnic heritage back to its cultural roots. Like many other black Creoles, Clarence Gallien had come to Houston in the early 1940s, where he promptly opened a nightclub featuring live music and dancing. After first affiliating with Our Mother of Mercy Roman Catholic Church in Frenchtown, he later moved his membership to St. Francis of Assisi, where the congregation was exploring ideas for a fund-raising activity. When Gallien suggested promoting a dance for the church’s primarily Creole parishioners, the priest approved, and within weeks Clifton Chenier was drawing huge crowds on Saturday nights to “zydeco” at the church hall. As noted by Robert Damora, Gallien had been friends with Chenier back in Louisiana where they “had worked together cutting sugarcane,” and their church dance concept

rapidly became “so successful in preaching the gospel of zydeco that too many churches began to compete for bands and audiences.”<sup>54</sup> Eventually the Catholic diocese worked out a cooperative plan whereby the major black Creole churches in the area would take turns sponsoring the Saturday night zydeco dances, rotating them on a regular basis with updates announced weekly in the *Catholic Herald*. Not only did this development benefit the church coffers, and Chenier’s local popularity. But also, as Strachwitz has acknowledged, these church-based gatherings appealed to oldtimers and youngsters alike, so “entire families would attend and the Zydeco once again became a communal celebration having come full circle from the old community ‘house dances.’”<sup>55</sup>

Thus, Clifton Chenier epitomizes the paradox of zydeco, a musical cultural phenomenon that simultaneously has moved away from and back to its roots. Having helped transform the music of old-timey rural Louisiana *la la* culture into something bold and new in the cities of southeast Texas, Chenier also took part in re-establishing the communal spirit of the Acadian homeland among black Creoles who had migrated to Houston. Today Chenier, like Gallien, is gone, but the church dances continue as fixtures in the social life of many Creole Catholics living around Houston. And the zydeco played at the dances today, featuring nationally recognized stars as well as up-and-comers, reflects a continual evolution, an ongoing syncretism of elements from the original Louisiana folk tradition and its subsequent Texas transformation with an amalgam of other media-inspired influences.

Though the Houston zydeco church dance tradition has survived into the start of the twenty-first century, all but one of the old Frenchtown zydeco nightclubs is now closed, reflecting the fact that black Creoles in the state’s largest city, like their music, are no longer confined to a single neighborhood in the Fifth Ward. Until the death of longtime proprietor Doris McClendon in November 1997, the Continental Zydeco Ballroom reigned as the largest and most famous place in Texas to hear the music, hosting practically every major artist in the genre. Stephen Harris, who gratefully recalls how McClendon “took me as her nephew” and who worked as the parking attendant at the Continental for twenty-one years, remembers some of the zydeco stars that performed there:

All of them started in Houston right here: “Buckwheat” [Stanley Dural], “Boozoo” [Wilson Chavis], “Rockin’ Dopsie” [Alton Rubin], “Rockin’ Sidney” [Simien], John Delafosse, Clifton Chenier—he played his last gig right here. . . . “Beau Jocque” [Andrus Espre], Paul Richard, Wilfred Chevis, L. C. Donatto, Wilbert Thibodeaux. Lonnie Mitchell, he played his last gig here too.<sup>56</sup>

Although the Continental's historical significance and spacious floor plan certainly contributed to its popularity with performers and fans, McClendon herself was the key to the club's continuous operation. As Harris points out, "A lot of the musicians accepted her, you know, as an auntie. . . . The majority of them that started out young here, they would call her Mama."<sup>57</sup> And McClendon labored diligently to promote the legendary zydeco venue, often appearing on blues and zydeco vocalist Big Roger Collins's early Sunday morning radio show (on KPFT FM) to announce upcoming events, only a few hours

zydeco's most noteworthy Texas landmark.

However, not far from the site of the old Continental Zydeco Ballroom structure, the last of the old Frenchtown zydeco clubs has carried the tradition into the twenty-first century, thanks to the Cormier family. Born in Louisiana, Curly Cormier has actually lived in Houston since childhood, when his father, like many other Creoles of the era, moved to the city to find work. In 1962, after several years in the construction industry, the senior Cormier opened a small club in a shotgun shack on Frenchtown's Crane Street. Known then mainly as Alfred's Place,

*McClendon labored diligently to promote the legendary zydeco venue, often appearing on blues and zydeco vocalist Big Roger Collins's early Sunday morning radio show (on KPFT FM) to announce upcoming events, only a few hours after having closed from the previous Saturday night show.*

after having closed from the previous Saturday night show. Creole musician Ashton Savoy remembers: "Doris was a good woman, and she worked hard at that place, man."<sup>58</sup> He cites her unwavering commitment in spite of recent difficulties, including the dwindling population of older Creoles in Frenchtown and her own health problems. Chevis adds, "She pushed zydeco a whole lot. And she kept it going till the day she left."<sup>59</sup> As such, McClendon perhaps did more to promote appreciation of zydeco culture in Texas than any other non-musician. And the building she presided over, the place that had started out as Johnson's Lounge remains, even in its current state of vacancy, perhaps

it featured live blues and zydeco six nights a week and provided a steady gig for Clifton Chenier for over five years. "Two pieces—just he and the scrubboard," the younger Cormier recalls, was the usual set-up, la la style, in those days. He also remembers Chenier's companion Lightnin' Hopkins frequenting the modest venue to sit in—before the original structure was expanded and remodeled to its present relative spaciousness. Yet Cormier notes, "Even after [my father] enlarged it, it was still the same thing. Just jam-packed."<sup>60</sup>

Following the patriarch's original tenure as proprietor, one of his older daughters had managed the place for awhile, rechristening it The Silver Slipper but maintaining tradition and booking a mix of zydeco and blues. Then around 1973 Curly Cormier, who was already well established locally as a versatile guitarist, assumed operation of the popular nightspot. In continuous operation now for almost forty years, this venue consistently offers, every Friday and Sunday night, bands led by some of the best Texas Creole accordionists, such as L. C. Donatto, Wilbert Thibodeaux, and Wilfred Chevis. And though Cormier reserves one evening a week, Saturday, for his own blues and R&B band, The Silver Slipper is arguably the most historically significant still-operating zydeco house in the Lone Star state.

One of the major changes to occur in zydeco at large during the relatively long lifespan of The Silver Slipper is exemplified by the musicianship of its current owner. Like countless other males of his generation, at an early age Curly Cormier was turned on by the sound of the electric guitar, so pervasive in popular American music of the past half-century. So despite his Creole heritage, he dreamed of leading a band with a guitar, not an accordion, strapped across his chest—and playing blues and R&B, not zydeco.



Photo of Curley & Alfred Cormier at the Silver Slipper, Houston, 1998. By James Fraher

It is easy to understand the guitar-infatuated Cormier's motivation. In early black Creole music, the guitar, if present at all, was mainly relegated to simple acoustic rhythm work, playing behind the accordion but rarely taking the lead. "I didn't like that too much," says Ashton Savoy, a player whose experience parallels Cormier's. "My daddy was a musician who played guitar in backyards and barns and stuff, you know. But T-Bone Walker was the style of playing I would like—him and later, Lightnin' Hopkins."<sup>61</sup> Savoy's explanation is echoed by many of his peers who came of age in the post-war era. Influenced by mainstream African-American music culture, far more than their ancestors were, countless Creole players gravitated toward the guitar, and hence often away from zydeco. However, for reasons both cultural and economic, many of those Texas guitar players have ultimately worked both sides of the zydeco-blues fence, so to speak.

The career of contemporary blues recording artist Sherman Robertson provides a relatively high profile example of many artists' ability to move easily between blues and zydeco. Though this Frenchtown-raised youngster became a local guitar sensation in his early teens, playing mainly blues and R&B, he would achieve his first financial security as a professional musician only by backing zydeco superstars. After a strong performance leading his own blues band as one of the opening acts for headliner Clifton Chenier's appearance at the 1982 SumArts Original Juneteenth Blues Festival in Houston, Robertson accepted the zydeco king's invitation to join the constantly touring Red Hot Louisiana Band as featured guitarist. Over the subsequent three years, Robertson's innovative accompaniment became an increasingly potent element of any Clifton Chenier show. As Robertson recalls,

As we progressed, Clifton would tell me, "You kick me off two [songs] before I come on," and then, "Kick me off three of yours before I come on." He was kind of giving [me] a little bit more room. Made some of the guys angry, in the band, because they'd been with him for years, and he'd never done that with them. But he'd seen I had something to take the load off of him, something fresh to add to his show. On the bandstand, he'd say, "Now we're going to play like B. B. King meets Clifton. When I give you a solo, I want you to do like B. B. do, like he plays it with his big band. Then I'm going to come right after you and play my solo, then the horns going to accent it." Oh yeah, he had it all worked out like he wanted.<sup>62</sup>

Around 1985, Robertson's decision ultimately to part with Chenier, with the intention of reforming his own blues band, happened to coincide with the zenith of zydeco's breakthrough into popular culture. Various bands, formerly obscure groups that had once played only backwoods dancehalls in southwest Louisiana and southeast Texas, were suddenly looking for talented veteran musicians to join them on international tours. The pay was good, especially for skilled guitarists (who were in

---

*The most outrageous is the trick that earned him local recognition as "The Head-Standing Guitarist"—i.e., the ability to flip himself over, upside down, onto a tabletop and brace his legs against a low-hanging ceiling, all while blazing away on a fiery guitar solo.*

---



Photo of Joe James, Houston, 1997. By James Fraher

demand because they played an instrument that mainstream fans could easily relate to, bridging the gap between rock and Creole dance music). Given that reality, combined with financial pressures from a growing family back home, Robertson was prompted to remain in zydeco a bit longer.

I stayed out of work for about two months. Then I started playing with a guy called Terrence Semien, of the Mallet Playboys. And I played with them around, I think, '85 or so. Then there's the time right after that with Rockin' Dopsie; that's on the Graceland record [by Paul Simon]. I played with Terrence from '85 to '86. Then I played from '86 to '88 with Good Rockin' Dopsie and the Twisters. I was still thinking about Sherman and the blues, but I needed money. And zydeco was really ripping then, man—and the phone was always ringing. When they heard I'd left Clifton, it was like, basically, I was having my price. So my wife said, "OK, I know you're thinking about Sherman, but while the cotton is good"—we used that term—"keep picking it." So I went with Terrence, and that was good. I went to northern Africa with him. . . . With Terrence I went further than Clifton could go because Terrence was younger, and the zydeco world was opening up for younger players. But right after that, I quit Terrence—because Terrence was starting to leave too much, like three or four months at a time. Then Buckwheat came to the house, Buckwheat Zydeco. He said, "I want you. I'm leaving for a tour in the morning, got dates booked all over the world." . . . Well, I told him I'd think about it over night, and that evening, that's when Rockin' Dopsie called. . . . And I turned Buckwheat down and never got to play with him . . . because [working with Rockin' Dopsie] was a more reasonable deal for my family at that time.<sup>63</sup>

Although Robertson would eventually return to his beloved blues and, by the 1990s, become an established star of the genre, his Creole upbringing (and consequent musical exposure) made it easy for him to switch to zydeco when it made financial sense to do so. And in the process, his dynamic presence in zydeco bands also further enhanced the evolution of the contemporary zydeco sound,<sup>64</sup> which has continued to draw from both Louisiana and Texas.

Over recent decades various other Texas guitarists of black Creole ancestry have alternated between fronting their own blues bands and working for a zydeco accordionist (where often the pay is better and the responsibilities fewer). The previously mentioned Ashton Savoy, who has made many appearances with his cousin Wilbert Thibodeaux or his good friend L. C. Donatto, is one example. Joe James, an occasional blues band leader while simultaneously a regular member of The Texas Zydeco Band through most of the 1990s, is yet another. Along with adding his distinctive blues-rock guitar licks to the zydeco mix, James has also introduced some of the stage antics he perfected as leader of Joe James and The Flames, a now defunct Houston band.

The most outrageous is the trick that earned him local recognition as "The Head-Standing Guitarist"—i.e., the ability to flip himself over, upside down, onto a tabletop and brace his legs against a low-hanging ceiling, all while blazing away on a fiery guitar solo. Once in that position, he can then shuffle his feet to rotate in a 360 degree circle, the crown of his head as the pivot, while the solo builds to a frenzy. It's a crowd pleaser for sure. And whenever James pulled it off during his years with The Texas Zydeco Band, audiences roared their approval. But whether such over-the-top physical gimmicks are incorporated or not, the point is that guitarists such as James have increasingly shared some of the spotlight previously reserved for accordion players. As such, the rise of the electric guitar in zydeco is yet another way the Texas influence has helped define this still-evolving black Creole music form.

On both sides of the Sabine River, zydeco music continues to change today, especially by blending itself with other musical styles and establishing new contexts for performance. Back in the 1970s the Houston group called the Sam Brothers Five, which Tisserand describes as kind of like "the Jackson Five with an accordion,"<sup>65</sup> initiated the first mainstream synthesis of zydeco with funk, disco, and other post-modern forms. More recently, Fifth Ward-born composer, arranger, and jazz-blues trumpeter Calvin Owens (a former band leader for B. B. King) has collaborated with Creole accordionist Chubby Carrier to create a sound he defines as "big band zydeco."<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, eccentric Third Ward-based guitarist and gritty street poet Little Joe Washington sometimes worked in the late 1990s with an obscure accordion player to improvise a strange fusion of zydeco

39



Photo of Calvin Owens, Houston, 1997. By James Fraher



Photo of Zydeco Lady D, Houston, 1995. By James Fraher

and his own unique stream-of-consciousness talking blues.<sup>67</sup>

Fifth Ward native Katie Webster, the late piano player and singer known as “The Swamp Boogie Queen,” was a successful songwriter and recording artist who sometimes also incorporated zydeco influences into her rollicking music,<sup>68</sup> indirectly introducing the form to many West Coast and Northern blues fans in the process. But while female headliners such as Webster have always been associated with blues and playing the piano, only since the 1990s have women begun to emerge in the traditionally male-dominated field of zydeco. The most prominent of these today would seem to be Louisiana-based Rosie Ledet. Though not as well known as Ledet, females fronting zydeco bands have also been part of the Houston scene for over a decade.

One such example is the old style accordionist who bills herself as “Zydeco Lady D” (Diane Weatherall, not to be confused with Houston-based blues shouter Donna “Lady D” McIntyre). As leader of the Zydeco Tornados since 1994, Weatherall is effectively established as “the Diva of Houston Zydeco,” as she also refers to herself.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps her closest rival for the “Diva” designation, in the Bayou City at least, is actually not another accordionist but a singer, Mary Thomas, the sister of the late Clifton Chenier. Billing herself as “The Texas Queen of Zydeco,” Thomas has worked the southeast Texas-southwest Louisiana circuit with a variety of bands over the past decade. Currently she is backed by Roy Carrier and the Night Rockers, with whom she released the CD *Whiskey Drinking Woman* in December of 2000.<sup>70</sup>

But clearly the most significant Texas-based influence on zydeco of the 1990s (and into the early twenty-first century) is the Houston-originated phenomenon of a new musical hybrid created by a younger generation of streetwise, hip-hop-influenced black Creole bands such as J. Paul Jr. and the Zydeco Newbreeds, Step Rideau and the Zydeco Outlaws, and Lil’ Brian and the Zydeco Travelers. As veteran Wilfred Chevis notes wistfully about the current Houston scene, “Now everybody’s playing accordion but they’re playing a different style. It’s not the same style. You know, putting kind of like a rap beat or new kind of rock-n-roll beat in it. . . . You know, the young generation is really into it.”<sup>71</sup> While some traditionalists might wince at this latest evolution, Chevis himself accepts it as a continuation of a process, recognizing that from la la to zydeco, black Creole music has never really been a static form. And though he learned from and most enjoys the style of the master (Clifton Chenier), Chevis knows that zydeco has been morphing organically for decades, reflecting changing environments and influences among its creators, and especially so in Texas.

Recently no artist has embraced change with more flair than a young Houston-area bandleader named Brian Terry, arguably the face of zydeco’s future. The originator of a sound he calls “Z-Funk,” Terry is appropriately noted in *The Kingdom of*

Zydeco as the first artist—anywhere—to forge a musical link between zydeco and rap.<sup>72</sup>

For Terry, the fusion of Creole accordion dance music and a hip-hop mentality came naturally. Around age 13, he started learning how to play the accordion during visits with relatives back in Louisiana. Lucky for him, the kinfolk include the legendary Delafosse family, one of that state’s major multi-generational sources of zydeco talent. From them he absorbed basic instrumental technique and tradition, which led to bookings at places like the old Continental Ballroom back home in Texas. “Things began jumping for me in Houston around ‘89 or ‘90,” he says. “At that time I was basically playing straight-ahead zydeco. I had envisioned in my head that I wanted to do some different things with my music, but I was kind of sticking to the roots back then.”<sup>73</sup>

But for an intelligent teenager who was also absorbing “Snoop Dogg rap and Tupac,” it wasn’t long before he tried something new. “Growing up around here, I was listening to a lot of different styles of music. And of course I had friends who were definitely not into zydeco. Into other stuff, you know, rap and hip-hop and R&B. So I began really trying to put some funky hip-hop grooves into what I was dealing, you know. Wasn’t nobody doing it but me.”

Terry’s experimentation immediately set his band apart from other zydeco outfits, catching the attention of Massachusetts-based Rounder Records during a talent-scouting fieldtrip by producer Scott Billington. Their collaboration eventually resulted

41





Photo of Mary Thomas, Houston, 1995. By James Fraher

in the 1995 CD *Fresh*,<sup>74</sup> which introduced the world to a unique hybrid of zydeco, funk and rap featuring challenging arrangements and lyrical sophistication far beyond the simplistic norm. On the track “FuNkABlUeSaDeCo,” for instance, heavy bass intertwines with pounding drums and the jingly funk of rhythm guitar. Tight accordion riffs lay down a groove like an MC scratching a turntable. On this track and others Terry makes a major breakthrough, effectively processing hip-hop elements, both verbal and musical, through a zydeco filter. “I was raised up on zydeco. That’s in the blood of my family from Louisiana,” he explains. “But the rap and the hip-hop just give me some room to play around with other stuff, to make it my own thing and mess with the ideas I have going around in my head.”

Terry’s syncretic experimentation continued on his second Rounder CD, 1997’s *Z-Funk*,<sup>75</sup> beginning with the opening song, “H-Town Zydeco,” a tribute to the hometown music scene. Featuring some piercing blues-rock guitar by brother Patrick “Heavy P” Terry, the song climaxes with a bass jam reminiscent of the classic funk band Parliament Funkadelic. Meanwhile, the CD’s title track offers a swaying groove—hip-hop atmospherics fused seamlessly with an eerie accordion line. In a fiercely aggressive manner, Terry recites his rhymes: “Believe it, you know that I’m here / Grew up on that blues and that Clifton Chenier / It appears that a lot of zydeco bands have lost the juice / But Li’l Brian and the Travelers, you know we’re getting loose.” Near the end of each line, the crew shouts out the final phrase. The lyrics flow forth in rapid-fire sequence, culminating each time with the major theme: “It’s the Z-Funk / And I cannot lie / Zydeco is what I know / And zydeco will never die.”

The two Rounder releases, and extensive appearances at festivals and major venues worldwide, have made Li’l Brian and the Zydeco Travelers better known, in recent years, outside of their home base. In particular the band has become popular on the East Coast college circuit. “They hear us and have a good time, tripping out because we adding elements in an original mix. We’re not just giving them a straight-up, repetitious zydeco thing all night long,” Terry says. “They really dig it because it’s zydeco but it connects with their own music culture too.” Ultimately Terry makes no apologies for being progressive. “We ain’t scared to try to push this stuff mainstream, and get it off the back burner,” he says. “Zydeco is definitely in the heart and in the blood. But I just feel like we must acknowledge rap. We must not box ourselves in.”

Houston’s Step Rideau seems to be following Terry’s lead. Though he still performs and records many traditional sounding tracks and plays the old style button accordion (as opposed to the more “modern” piano key model popularized by Chenier, and also utilized by Terry), Rideau also has experimented with the melding of zydeco and rap. On his fourth CD, the 1999 release *Im So Glad*,<sup>76</sup> Rideau made his boldest contribution yet to the ongoing evolution of the form.

Perhaps the most unusual track, in terms of the wedding of old and new styles, is called “Bayou Swamp Thang,” which combines the seemingly antithetical elements of waltz and hip-hop. It also features a chorus of vocal harmonies rarely encountered in zydeco, the kind of group singing one might expect to find in traditional gospel or R&B. However, the most progressive compositions are those featuring guest rappers. On “If U Don’t Use It, U Gonna Lose It” Rideau delivers some classic R&B style testifying, complemented by the slick poetry of a hip-hop poet known as “Swift Haywire,” moniker for Houstonian Vonnie C. Dones III. Following two lengthy verse-chorus cycles led by Rideau, “Haywire” takes over, seamlessly building on the song’s nostalgic theme of learning from the elders and holding on to what you’ve got. It’s an energized yet mellow sequence highlighting the value of paternal wisdom.

Though he was initially a bit wary of the producer’s suggestion to weave rap into the mix, Rideau now delights at the song’s “inner message” as well as the impressive synthesis of disparate musical styles. “People don’t understand what a lot of rappers be saying,” Rideau says. “And then what they be saying is usually a lot of negative stuff.” Dones, however, was up to the challenge of keeping it accessible and positive, and Rideau soon realized that “this is the key to the rest of the puzzle.”<sup>77</sup> On another track, “Keep On Doing It,” rapper John Calvin Henry, aka “Dirty Red,” contributes an equally impressive series of verses. However, Rideau asserts that the hip-hop wordplay and funky beats are not the defining elements of his music. “Now I’m not fixing to go total rap,” he says. “It’s all about spice. That’s how this rap thing got to be part of my work; it’s just a spice that adds to the flavor of what I’m serving up. . . . We’re all for zydeco. But we’re open minded, and anything is possible. . . . This new way of music is just part of who we are, here and now.”

Being true to “who we are, here and now” is arguably the subtext of all zydeco history, and especially that sizable portion of it based in the Lone Star state. Despite the fact that popular consciousness will likely persist in imagining zydeco to be a uniquely rural-Louisiana-based sound, some people are beginning to recognize the importance of urban Texas as the locus for some of the genre’s most significant development. For instance, the Zydeco Hall of Fame was established in 1998 by the National Zydeco Society, a Houston-based organization.<sup>78</sup> And southeast Texas remains a creative center of zydeco culture, which is fitting, it being the place where la la and modern blues initially fused to form the new sound, where the defining word itself first formally appeared on record and in print, where the genre’s signature instruments were adapted in crucially progressive ways, where the classic sound established by Clifton Chenier first underwent subsequent metamorphosis to incorporate influences ranging from disco to rap, and where many black Creoles continue to thrive today. ■

## Notes

1. Among the many examples of zydeco's mid-1980s breakthrough into popular culture are Paul Simon's zydeco-inclusive best-selling album *Graceland*, which won the 1986 Grammy for Album of the Year; rock star Eric Clapton's 1987-1988 affiliation (in the recording studio and on tour) with Stanley Dural, the artist known as "Buckwheat Zydeco"; the soundtrack to the 1987 box office hit film *The Big Easy* directed by Jim McBride; and numerous television advertising campaigns (especially in the 1990s) for major corporations from Toyota to the makers of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. Musical performance by Stanley "Buckwheat Zydeco" Dural was featured also at the globally televised closing ceremonies of the Summer Games of the twenty-sixth Olympiad in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1996.
2. Lorenzo Thomas, "From Gumbo To Grammys: The Development of Zydeco Music in Houston," in *Juneteenth Texas: Essays in African-American Folklore*, eds. Francis E. Abernethy, Patrick B. Mullen, and Alan B. Govenar (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 1996), 139.
3. John Minton, "Houston Creoles and Zydeco: The Emergence of an African-American Urban Popular Style," *American Music* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 487.
4. See Minton, 505: "Both as a musical and linguistic idiom, zydeco is distantly tied to a culture approximating the ideal 'folk society' . . . In reality, though, as both a musical genre and a generic term, zydeco was coined by urban wage earners, more specifically by professional musicians . . . not in rural Louisiana—the 'back home' of the zydeco ethos—but in urban Texas."
5. Michael Tisserand, "Zydeco Beat," *Living Blues* 131 (Jan.-Feb. 1997): 74.
6. Barry Jean Ancelet, "Cajuns and Creoles," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, Vol. 2, eds. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 38.
7. *Ibid.*, 40.
8. *The Handbook of Texas Online*, 1999 ed., s.v. "Liberty County," by Diana J. Kleiner.
9. Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, eds., *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 88.
10. Michael Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco* (New York: Arcade, 1998), 15.
11. Bob Tutt, "Houston's Historic Wards Work to Reverse Fortunes," *Houston Chronicle*, 4 August 1996, 37(A).
12. Minton, 492.
13. Quoted in Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 76.
14. Beeth and Wintz, 89.
15. Alan Govenar, *Meeting the Blues: The Rise of the Texas Sound* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 151.
16. Minton, 490.
17. Grace Lichtenstein and Laura Dankner, *Musical Gumbo: The Music of New Orleans* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 220.
18. Quoted in Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 14.
19. Quoted in Govenar, 155.
20. Chris Strachwitz, co. booklet for *Zydeco: Volume One, The Early Years, 1949-62* (Arhoolie CD 307, 1989), 5.
21. Jared Snyder, "Amédé's Recordings," in co. booklet for *Amédé Ardoin: The Roots of Zydeco* (Arhoolie CD 7007, 1995), 12-13.
22. *Ibid.*, 13.
23. *Ibid.*, 13.
24. Nicholas R. Spitzer, "Zydeco," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, Vol. 3, eds. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 348.
25. Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Plume, 1988), 107, 108.
26. Sherman Robertson, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 19 January 2000.
27. Thomas, 146.
28. Moss identifies these two titles as the first songs he learned, and the key to his early popularity among Houston Creoles, in Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 77.
29. Quoted in Minton, 503.
30. While numerous scholars have documented the etymology of the word zydeco, perhaps the definitive discussion of the issue occurs in Tisserand's opening chapter (entitled "What's In a Name?") in *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 9-21.
31. This album was released on the label called 77 Records in England. For more on McCormick's role in creating the now common spelling, see Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 17-20.
32. Like alternate pronunciations, alternate spellings have persisted over the years on signs promoting black Creole musical events in south Louisiana and southeast Texas, including zodico, zordico, zologo, and many others; see Spitzer, 347. And for more on a possible West African cognate and the etymology of the word, see Barry Jean Ancelet, "Zydeco/Zarico: Beans, Blues, and Beyond," *Black Music Research Journal* 8 (1988): 33-49.
33. Govenar, 141.
34. Tisserand, 20.
35. This song, originally recorded on 78 RPM disc, is now available on CD: *Lightning Hopkins, The Gold Star Sessions, Vol. 1* (Arhoolie CD 330, 1990).
36. Chris Strachwitz, interview by author, tape recording, Jonesboro, AR, 16 April 1998.
37. Govenar, 151.
38. This song, originally recorded on 78 RPM disc, is available on CD: *Zydeco: Volume One, The Early Years, 1949-62* (Arhoolie CD 307, 1989).
39. Minton, 496.
40. Field recordings of four songs, including the two titles mentioned here, performed by Willie Green at Irene's Café in 1961 are included on the CD, *Zydeco: Volume One, The Early Years, 1949-62*, cited above.
41. Minton, 496.
42. *Ibid.*, 497.
43. John Minton, "Creole Community and 'Mass' Communication: Houston Zydeco as a Mediated Tradition," *Journal of Folklore Research* 32, no. 1 (1995): 1-19.
44. Quoted in Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 95, 97.
45. Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 93.
46. Minton cites the Savoy reference in "Houston Creoles and Zydeco," 506-507. In an interview with Chenier, Govenar quotes him as saying, "I learned to play in Lake Charles and in Texas, Houston mostly. . . . I never picked up an accordion until 1947," 155.
47. Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 102-103.
48. This interview is documented in the videocassette *Clifton Chenier: The King of Zydeco*, dir. Chris Strachwitz (Arhoolie, ARV 401, 1987).
49. Strachwitz, Booklet for *Zydeco*, 7.
50. *Ibid.*, 10.
51. Wilfred Chevis, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 18 August 1999.
52. Robert Murphy, interview by author and James Fraher, tape recording, Houston, TX, 3 October 1997.
53. Quoted in Govenar, 151.
54. Robert Damora, "Houston Zydeco: From Churches to Clubs," *Living Blues*, no. 116 (August 1994), 44-47.
55. Strachwitz, Booklet for *Zydeco*, 10.
56. Stephen Harris, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 7 January 1998.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Ashton Savoy, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 14 January 1998.
59. Wilfred Chevis, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 15 January 1998.
60. Curly Cormier, interview by author and James Fraher, Houston, TX, 8 January 1998.
61. Ashton Savoy, interview by author, Houston, TX, 11 November 1995.
62. Sherman Robertson, interview by author, Houston, TX, 19 January 2000.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Perhaps the best documentation of Robertson's impressive on-stage collaboration with Clifton Chenier is found in the videocassette *Clifton Chenier: The King of Zydeco*, cited above (c.f. note 48).
65. Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 318.
66. See the track "Take Me to the Zydeco" on the Calvin Owens CD *Stop Lying in My Face* (Sawdust Alley Records, 2000).
67. While Washington's bizarre innovations have yet to be recorded for public release, they have occurred from time to time in Houston nightclubs and are documented on an untitled self-produced audiotape cassette, CD duplicates of which he sometimes sells from the bandstand.
68. Perhaps the best single example of Webster's fusion of zydeco and blues is the track "Zydeco Shoes and California Blues" on her 1991 CD *No Foolin'!* (Alligator Records CD 4803).
69. Diane Weatherall, telephone conversation with author, notes, Houston, TX, 30 July 2001.
70. Thomas sings lead vocals on ten of the eleven tracks on this self-produced disc (no label information available).
71. Wilfred Chevis, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 18 August 1999.
72. Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 319-320.
73. Brian Terry, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 9 September 1999. (All subsequent quotations from Terry are documented in this same interview.)
74. Rounder CD 2136.
75. Rounder CD 2146.
76. Bridge Entertainment CD BEZ 2004-2.
77. Step Rideau, interview with author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 28 September 1999. (All subsequent quotations from Rideau are documented in this same interview.)
78. Roger Wood, "Zydeco Hall of Fame Inaugurated," *Living Blues*, no. 142 (Nov.-Dec. 1998), 12.