

Unpacking the Louisiana Ballad Tradition: Cajun and Creole Songs of Love, Loss and Drink
on the West Texas Stage
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Modern Cajun music, Creole music, and Zydeco are often grouped together at festivals and dance halls throughout Louisiana and around the world. These music styles are considered distinct by scholars and fans, yet they are all the result of related generations of Creolization; the product of the variegated host of older localized styles created and impacted by patterns of immigration beginning in the eighteenth century. General audiences, from outside the Southwestern Louisiana area, experience this music as “traditional”: seemingly a closed style, particular to the people from that region and social culture. This perception, which has been both intentionally and unintentionally fostered over generations, has worked in a culturally exclusive fashion, creating stereotypes and socio-cultural barriers to understanding. These barriers can be mitigated, however, through performative study of the music, especially that of one of its integral genres, the ballad. Although ballads are not the first genre that most listeners associate with this region, as dance music by and large reigns supreme, songs with stories primarily of love, loss, and ameliorative drink form a notable backbone throughout this repertoire.

Our Cajun Ensemble, part of the World Music Ensemble at Texas Tech University, is also part of the Texas Tech Vernacular Music Center, the mission of which is: “research, teaching, and advocacy.”¹ As such, we study the music of the southern Louisiana regions, effectively deconstructing it with students and audiences to better illustrate the richness of its origins. Oral transmission is the privileged pedagogic method used to honor the indigenous traditions of the region. Historical and field recordings, such as those recorded by the Lomaxes (1934), and interviews with musicians and collectors found in University of Texas Folklore Center Archives inform our work.² Performances underscore the migrations of ballad material throughout different related American subcultures: both through an emphasis on regionally diverse repertoire that involves Cajun/Acadian songs, Anglo-Appalachian Ballads, and Creole dance music, and through comparative performance that showcases a single tune as it moves through discrete cultural manifestations, changing texts, languages, styles, and instrumentation.

Student musicians perform the ballads and connections are drawn both during instruction and performance to better illuminate the diversity of these traditions. This allows a stronger connection for many students that does not seek to negate that which is unique to the Louisiana French song repertoire, but does permit them, even as “outsiders” to better perceive some of the cultural negotiations that have allowed this music to survive, flourish, and speak for the vibrant transnational culture of the region.

¹ The TTU World Music Ensemble is led by Dr. Thomas Cimarusti, who also led the Zydeco unit for these ensembles. The TTU Vernacular Music Center is led by Dr. Christopher J. Smith; for more information, please see: <http://www.vernacularmusiccenter.org>.

² While the recordings collected by John and Alan Lomax in the summer of 1934 around the southwestern parishes of Louisiana have been available through the Library of Congress, recent work by Joshua Caffery has made them more widely available through his study *Traditional Music in Coastal Louisiana: The 1934 Lomax Recordings* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013) and his website: www.lomax1934.com.

Definitions & Ballads

The music of Louisiana comprises a matrix of some of the strongest vernacular traditions in North America. Many scholars have considered this region and its culture in terms of complexities and tensions between classes, races, languages, and traditions.³ The diversity of musical styles reflects those tensions, but has also been understood to form a bridge that allows for creative adaptation and collaboration. In his study of Texas Creole music, John Minton argues that the qualities that can be understood to musically mark or define these styles are, in fact, slippery, and that it is easier to define, in this instance, zydeco, by what it is not, more than by what it is.⁴

In simplistic terms, the differences between Cajun and Creole musics are understood to spring from their contrasted ethnic origins, as Michael Tisserand recently opined in an interview with *Zydeco Crossroads*, “The difference between Cajun and zydeco music is zydeco music reflects the Creole origins of its performers, heavily influenced by African Caribbean and African music. Cajun music reflects the Acadian white Cajuns coming down from current day Nova Scotia.”⁵ In the music and musical choices these distinctions manifest in terms of instrumentation, rhythmic patterns, idiomatic instrumental and vocal techniques, harmonizations, and increasingly, over the course of the 20th century, through linguistic difference. Outsiders who hope to understand or perform these repertoires must be sensitive to these various musical characteristics, an ability that comes from experience, which can be acquired through repeated listening, videos, practicing and performing the music. Although from our position in West Texas, this listening must be done primarily through recordings—historical, archival, and contemporary live performances available across the Internet—this is not as artificial as it may seem, and does connect with a pedagogical tradition that reaches back at least to the workshops and Smithsonian Folkways Festivals of the 1960s.

Although many scholars discuss the music of southern Louisiana, relatively few consider the ballad as a vehicle for understanding these traditions.⁶ Certainly dance music is of primary interest, but dance and lyrics are not mutually exclusive. Speaking of the importance of voice to dance in this repertoire, the respected Cajun music practitioner and historian Ann Savoy has remarked that, “the voice sound is important in Cajun music because the music is used to move to (dance).”⁷ The voice, regardless of its text or story is perceived as an important component because it functions both semantically—in terms of

³ Some of the many publications include those by such figures as Barry J. Ancelet, Shane Bernard, Ryan Brasseaux, John Broven, Joshua Caffery, Mark DeWitt, John Minton, Ann Savoy, Michael Tisserand, and Roger Wood. The most recent study to reconsider these issues is Sara Le Menestrel, *Negotiating Difference in French Louisiana Music* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

⁴ John Minton, “Houston Creoles and Zydeco: The Emergence of an African American Urban Popular Style,” *American Music* 14 (Winter 1996): 516.

⁵ Michael Tisserand interview for *Zydeco Crossroads*. <http://zydecocrossroads.org/2015/01/crossroads-creole-cajun-musicians> (accessed 1 September 2015).

⁶ A notable exception to this is Ron Emoff, “A Cajun Poetics of Loss and Longing,” *Ethnomusicology* 42 (Spring 1998): 297-8.

⁷ Ann Savoy, *Cajun Music A Reflection of a People*, vol. 1, 3rd ed. (Eunice, LA: Bluebird Press, 1984), 56.

text—and also kinesthetically, in terms of dance dynamics. A common modern misconception concerning the wider ballad traditions of Europe is that they were only meant for passive, listening audiences. While this is likely the case for epic ballads, a large number of popular ballad tunes beginning in the early modern period (c. 1500-1700) are short and rhythmically active in a manner that could allow for dance; indeed many ballad tunes were published without lyrics as dance tunes for the emerging *contredance* traditions.⁸ Another misconception concerning ballads is that the narrative must be a lengthy or elongated one, as is often the case in the relatively well-known Anglo-Appalachian tradition, but this need not be the case. While some of the Louisiana ballads are longer (upwards of eight stanzas), some are as short as one or two stanzas, and still manage to effectively tell stories that are quite poignant:

J'ai passé devant ta porte,
J'ai crié, 'bye-bye, la belle.'
'Y a personne qui m'a répondu!
Oh yé yaille! Mon coeur fait mal...

*I passed in front of your door.
I cried good-bye to my sweetheart.
No one answered me!
Oh, it hurts! My heart hurts...*

The specific story is not as important as the message underlying it and the quality of its sound and language. This inclusive view of the ballad allows it to be more widely recognized across repertoires as it moves through different stylistic choices.

Our Experience

As our West Texas ensemble is removed from the primary regions of Cajun and Creole musical production, it was important for us as an ensemble to first take stock of our resources. We are fortunate to have on faculty a highly-skilled musician and music educator from the Lafayette, Louisiana area, Dr. Susan Brumfield. Brumfield advised a range of resources, including song collections, video documentaries, and recordings, and provided guidance with language and dialect questions, as well as instrument procurement. Song collections provided a valuable addition to recorded materials as they especially helped to provide lyrics, which were often indistinguishable to non-native Cajun French speakers.⁹ The highly-acclaimed documentary *J'ai Été au Bal*, was also part of the required viewing and background work for the ensemble members.¹⁰

Moving from background and theory into the repertoire, the ensemble leaders—with input from the ensemble itself—began to identify a diversity of possible works that would represent at least a sampling of the richness of the repertoire. Understanding that in

⁸ There is an ongoing scholarly discourse about the origins of the word “ballad” from the Italian term “ballare,” thus implying a dancing tradition associated with the music.

⁹ The most valuable collections include Savoy, *Cajun Music* and Raymond E. François, *Yé Yaille, Chère! Traditional Cajun Dance Music* (Ville Platte, LA: Swallow Publications, Inc., 1990).

¹⁰ Les Blank, Chris Strachwitz, Maureen Gosling, and Brazos Films, *J'ai été Au Bal: (I Went to the Dance); the Cajun and Zydeco Music of Louisiana* (El Cerrito, CA: Brazos Films, 1990).

addition to songs about love and leaving, part of the Cajun diasporic experience (both in the 18th century and in the early 20th century), there were also drinking songs, lullabies or *fais do-do*, children's games, songs about food and celebration (especially Mardi Gras), and laments, we endeavored to find examples with these different texts. Also part of our consideration was an effort to feature pieces that varied musically, so waltzes and two-step songs stood beside the older French ballad tradition, next to a drinking song, followed by a children's game song.

The following are some selected reflections and musical choices for some of our repertoire. In the older French ballad tradition of unaccompanied vocal performance we performed pieces such as "Isabeau s'y promène" and "Sept ans sur mer." Love and loss, death and exile, are clear topics, and musically we tried to create arrangements, based on our archival and recorded models, of vocal types and harmonic combinations, including drones reminiscent of hurdy gurdies, that reflected these harsh themes. "Belle," a ballad recorded from Mr. Bornu in the 1934 Lomax collection, represents a different, later sound, with its fast *valse à deux temps* dance rhythms. Similar to earlier ballads, the piece features a story of travel and return, sickness and poverty but with a urban, almost jazz-like feel. In the true Cajun waltz tradition, featuring fiddle, accordion, and percussive triangle, is a piece like "J'ai passé devant ta porte." Musically, the emphasis is on dance, but the unornamented vocal style and lyrics are undeniably powerful. Even for modern audiences, many of whom arguably no longer understand Cajun French lyrics, the outcry: "Oh yé yaille!" is evocative of the main character's suffering.¹¹



Texas Tech Cajun and Zydeco Ensembles performing "Grand Texas/Jambalaya" at the Spectrum Concert, TTU School of Music, Hemmle Hall, 20 October 2013. From left: Dr. Thomas Cimarusti, Charles Olivier, Adam Smith, Catherine Burris, _____, _____, and Dr. Stacey Jocoy (front row). Photo courtesy of Tiffany Holmes.

¹¹ Interestingly, even modern audiences responding to the Balfa Brothers' recording on Youtube respond passionately: "like a knife in the guts," says one respondent and, "I cry every time I hear it," writes another. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GNpgNtYGR_w (accessed 10 September 2015).

In conjunction with another part of our ensemble, which focused primarily on Zydeco music, we essayed several related pieces to emphasize both for ourselves and our audiences the differences amidst clearly similar tunes structures. The most direct version of this was a back-to-back version of “Grand Texas” performed in Cajun French with *tit fer*, fiddle, and guitar, followed immediately by a Zydeco-styled “Jambalaya” primarily sung in English with keyed accordion, *rubboard*, electric guitar, and piano. Despite the fact that the two tunes are nearly identical, with minor strophic variations, the difference was palpable. Two singers brought out the respective vocal styles: the higher-pitched, straight-tone of the Cajun French, and a more guttural, almost bluesy vocal style for the Zydeco “Jambalaya.” Both versions sounded complete in themselves, yet radically different, evoking contrasting feelings: loss in “Grand Texas” with its familiar “Tu m’a quitter” refrain, and overt celebration in the Zydeco. Yet even in the heart of the “Bon temps rôler,” there still resided a sense of longing—nostalgia for an idealized bayou community. In this, despite their audible “distinct culture sense,”¹² the lyrics of the ballads, supported by their respective indigenous instruments and vocal styles, conveyed a compatible message. Attempting to perform these works with respect and sensitivity to their distinct characters, even as “outsiders,” similar concerns surfaced from this music, which conveys an unflagging love for the idea of the land of their people—the voices of deracination—displaced, repressed immigrant populations, longing for a true sense of home.

¹² EMOFF, 289.