

CAJUN BREAKDOWN

The Emergence of an American-Made Music



Ryan André Brasseaux

Cajun Breakdown

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To Jessika Ducharme Brasseaux and to our two children,
Anne Elise and Joseph Emile Brasseaux—
tenth-generation Cajuns.
Toujours dans mon coeur.

America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. Our fate is to become one, and yet many . . .

—Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*

We didn't have a radio or record player when I was growing up so jukeboxes were really important to me. I could hear Cajun things by Harry Choates, country singers like Ernest Tubb, and big band stuff by Glenn Miller. And I learned to play it all. I still love to play "Stardust." You know, there were no labels on the jukebox—it wasn't country or jazz or Cajun—it was just music.

—Doug Kershaw, *Fiddler Magazine*

Preface

Adaptation is a hallmark of the Cajun survival strategy. From the time the first Acadian refugees—the Cajuns’ ancestral stock—set foot in the Louisiana Territory, the group began to improvise in accordance with the challenges of a new terrain and new reality. Louisiana’s Acadian communities diversified as individuals adapted their lives and expressive culture through sustained interaction with neighboring groups. Musicians freely experimented with arrangements, translations, lyrical embellishments, phrasing, and syncopation with traditional materials and song styles derived from those external sources that filtered into the Bayou Country. In short, if it sounded good, Cajuns made it their own. This openness to outside stimuli thus broadened the possibility of musical expression within the community.

Some terms appearing throughout the text need clarification. The term “Cajun” is an English corruption of the French *'cadien*, a contraction of *Acadien* (Acadian in English). The roots of the Cajun community extend to 1604, when a group of French settlers established Acadia, the first colony in New France presently centered in Nova Scotia. Over time, the European transplants developed a distinctly North American identity and mentality, in part through extensive intermarriage with local Mikmaq Indians during the first few decades of colonization.¹ Great Britain gained control of the settlement after a series of political and military disputes between the French and the British extending from the early seventeenth to the early eighteenth century. In 1755, British military forces deported approximately 6,000 of the region’s estimated 15,000 Acadians during several waves of an ethnic cleansing exercise commonly known as the *Grand Dérangement* (Great Upheaval).

After a period of wandering and migration, some exiles found a new home and new cultural landscape along south Louisiana’s intricate labyrinth of waterways and vast, open prairies. Between 1764 and 1900, Acadian culture evolved through interpersonal interaction, cross-cultural

borrowing, transculturation, and intermarriage with other local ethnic groups. Between 1803 and 1877, this cultural fusion transformed the ethnic composition of Louisiana's Acadian community so markedly as to change the group's identification. The internal transformation from "Acadian" to "Cajun" demarcates the exiles' departure from predispersal Acadian culture, a metamorphosis that differentiated south Louisiana Acadians from exiles who sought refuge in other parts of the world.

Recorded Cajun music reflects and partly constitutes the historical influences that stimulated this behavioral change as well as the complexity of the Bayou State's cultural landscape. Folklorist Barry Ancelet describes the genre's cultural DNA through a genealogical reference that also asserts the process of transculturation at the heart of Cajun musical expression: "a blend of German, Spanish, Scottish, Irish, Anglo-American, Afro-Caribbean, and American Indian influences with a base of Western French and French Acadian folk traditions."² "Cajun," then, is a synthetic New World product—an amalgamation of the cultural influences that converged to varying degrees in south Louisiana.

Dewey Segura's rendition of the "New Iberia Polka," recorded in New Orleans on December 16, 1928, is perhaps the best-documented example of the interactive cross-cultural exchanges driving Cajun music's evolution. Segura was of Spanish ancestry, played the German diatonic button accordion with a distinctive syncopated style influenced by African and Afro-Caribbean musical traditions, sang in Cajun French (a North American French patois, based on seventeenth-century European grammatical structures and vocabulary), and recorded a polka, a decidedly Old World song style, for a major American record label. The Segura family immigrated to south Louisiana during the eighteenth century from Malaga, Spain, but by the twentieth century, the family participated as full members of Cajun society.

Assimilated members of other ethnic groups infused new ideas, customs, and surnames as they freely intermarried with people of Acadian ancestry. By the early twentieth century, south Louisianians considered such names as Abshire, Ancelet, Clark, Courville, Greely, McGee, Miller, Romero, Schenyder, Veroni, and Walker as legitimately Cajun as such authentically Acadian surnames as Babineaux, Duhon, and Thibodeaux. Working-class Cajun women who married "outsiders" ensured that their children embraced the community's values and the French language—until the emergence of mandatory education regulations in the early twentieth century. These cultural dynamics continued to evolve at an exponential rate with the introduction of mass media and a nationwide communication infrastructure.

Between 1764 and 1950, Cajun music varied significantly in terms of instrumentation, language, vocal delivery, repertory, and stylistic mode, ultimately resulting in a remarkably diverse tradition that grew increasingly complex over time. By the early twentieth century, a musician's repertoire could easily range from a cappella ballads to French interpretations of Tin Pan Alley compositions, from accordion-based dance tunes

to Cajun swing, hillbilly, and blues numbers. Because the genre thrived on oral transference among family members, neighbors, acquaintances, and professional colleagues and the constant influence of mass culture, Cajun music is identified throughout *Cajun Breakdown* as a vernacular expression. Working-class musicians by and large were not “formally” trained musicians who paid for lessons from instructors or professors. Hence, many previous studies have labeled Cajun music as a “folk” expression. Yet, because of the cultural baggage attached to traditional conceptualizations of vernacular music within folklore studies, I have opted not to deploy the loaded academic term “folk,” unless I am explicitly referring to traditional folk models.

The genre’s commercialization and commodification and the broad spectrum of Cajun musical expression make its connection to “folk” ideology tenuous at best. Cajuns who entered the recording studio had to negotiate on a variety of cultural fronts, including song titles. I have used the original song appellations as printed on record labels to project more accurately the historical context in which Francophone musicians and Anglophone record producers negotiated French titles. Those tunes offered by local musicians, however, could range from European-derived melodic structures and French lyrics to English-language interpretations of contemporary popular music. Because the breath of the repertoire played by south Louisianians is so diverse, Cajun music is defined in this study more by ethos and social context than by a delimited set of stylistic features. Cajun musical ethos is characterized by the group’s ability to interpret and selectively adapt specific cultural information—a French North American survival scheme rooted in pragmatism and openness to change. The disposition, character, and fundamental values of Cajun music are grounded in improvisation, an adaptive cultural mechanism at the very heart of the Acadian experience. In predispersal *Acadie*, the ethnic group negotiated its way through constant governmental shifts between France and Great Britain, the natural hurdles posed by the unruly maritime topography, and the ethnic cleansing operation of 1755. Like displaced African slaves who encountered a world in Louisiana completely removed from the one they left behind, Acadian refugees traversed a new cultural landscape when they arrived in Bayou Country—adapting musical ideas and stylistic traits into their repertoire. This experiment led to the development of a new regional musical form as the Acadians became acquainted with south Louisiana’s cultural fabric.

Cajun musical ethos also refers to the emotional qualities of compositions born of grinding poverty and an agrarian, working-class lifestyle. Rural musicians experienced first-hand the incapacitating heat and grueling toil necessary to sustain a successful south Louisiana farm. They suffered like other Southern farmers under the weight of crop liens, the sharecropping system, and falling cotton prices during the first half of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, the transition between premechanized farming and the birth of Louisiana’s industrial economy introduced new stresses and complications to the Cajun experience. These

contextual scenarios are the root of the Cajun sound as working-class Cajun recordings artists cultivated a vernacular language that gave voice to these conditions.

Cajun Country, the Bayou Country, and Acadiana are used synonymously to refer to the 22-parish region that has traditionally served as the Cajun homeland in south Louisiana. The geographically diverse territory—which stretches as far east as Lafourche, St. Charles, and St. John the Baptist parishes, as far north as Avoyelles Parish, and as far west as Calcasieu and Cameron parishes—features coastal and brackish marsh along the southern coastal plains, open prairies to the west, and a complex web of bayous, streams, rivers, the expansive Atchafalaya river basin, and the Mississippi River to the east. Commercial centers such as Lafayette, Opelousas, New Iberia, Abbeville, Crowley, and Lake Charles emerged within the bounds of this territory and played important roles in the evolution of Cajun music. Despite conventional attitudes, New Orleans, which exerted a considerable cultural influence on Cajun music, is not part of Cajun Country. Rather, New Orleans has long been a Creole city.

Many New Orleanians considered their city the cultural heart of Louisiana. The city's white population in general, and upper-crust socialites in particular, maintained a condescending attitude toward provincial customs. These attitudes stymied relations between rural Cajuns and their urban white Creole counterparts. Meanwhile, steamboat commerce, and later the railroad, brought New Orleans culture and music west. That is, in part, how Cajuns stayed in tune. The city was also the state's largest commercial hub, a place where country folks could sell their wares and crops and acutely experience the pressures of marginalization and denigration. The city's character began to shift during the first half of the twentieth century when working-class Southerners left their farms in unprecedented numbers because of crop liens, poor yields, mechanization, and weak agricultural markets. These workers found employment in factories, warehouses, and new wartime industries in New Orleans. By the late 1930s and 1940s, rural transplants frequently patronized honky-tonk clubs all along Magazine Street, where the familiar strains of agrarian music thrived. This was the world where a young Cajun accordionist named Iry LeJeune would leave his mark—the interactive milieu where the urban and agrarian fused. Throughout this text, the local moniker Crescent City is used synonymously with the Creole municipality that left such an indelible mark on Cajun music.³

The term “Creole” is derived from the Latin *creare*, meaning “to create.” During Louisiana's colonial period, “creole” translated as created or “born in the New World.” The term applied to whites of European descent (*créole blanc*) and slaves born in Louisiana (*nègre créole*), and after the Civil War former free people of color adopted the moniker Creole of Color to distinguish themselves from those bondsmen freed by the 13th Amendment. I use the term “Afro-Creole” here as an umbrella term for Francophone Catholics of African decent, which includes both *nègres créoles* and members of the Creole of Color population. Afro-Creole juxtaposes the ethnic

label African American, which in this study refers to Anglophone Protestants of African ancestry.⁴

I use “mainstream” American music, somewhat reluctantly, as a synonym for broadly disseminated commercially driven mass culture that gained wide acceptance in American popular culture. Of course, the “mainstream” shifted as fluidly as popular attitudes and popular culture, from styles including minstrelsy, ragtime, jazz, and Tin Pan Alley to country-and-western and rock ‘n’ roll. I use this terminology as a vehicle to discuss the sorts of mass culture available to, and consumed by, Cajun audiences throughout the Americanization process.

“Americanization” occurs frequently throughout the text. While the term carries significant historical and cultural baggage, it is necessary to make the distinction between Americanization and the Americanization *process* regarding its application here. The former refers to the concerted efforts of an American nationalist movement during the first quarter of the twentieth century to assimilate the unprecedented number of immigrants in the United States. Rooted in notions of white Anglo-Protestant exceptionalism, Americanization for middle- and upper-class English-speaking whites translated as the forced enculturation of “inferior” cultural communities into the mores and values of nondenominational Protestantism, republicanism, and the English language. Progressive-minded activists such as Jane Addams and Frances Kellor diligently set out to initiate immigrants into an idealized vision of American culture and society. Striking parallels exist between the working-class Cajun encounter with Louisiana’s social reformers and the experience of other minority and ethnic groups during the Progressive Era. Those parallels emerged from a common progressive agenda that sought to undermine “foreign” linguistic traditions, worldviews, and folkways in the name of the proverbial American “melting pot.” For instance, prohibition advocates in the Bayou Country tried their best to pass legislation to dry up some of the wettest, and often most densely populated, Cajun districts in south Louisiana. Likewise, civic-minded educators stringently enforced Louisiana’s 1916 Compulsory Education Act, under which Cajun students forcibly learned English at public schools.⁵

Although the Americanization movement promised to ensure some sense of cultural homogeneity and national unity in the United States, individuals from different cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds interpreted and rearticulated “American culture” in accordance with their own agendas and worldviews. In essence, the Americanization *process* transpired unevenly within ethnic communities. And yet, discernable adaptations generated by sustained exposure to new technologies, industrialization, Progressive Era education, and mass culture profoundly changed the Cajun community. Group cohesiveness and an elastic ethnic identity, as historian Lizabeth Cohen has observed among other ethnics, guarded against complete cultural reorientation. By selectively interpreting and adapting cultural traits from the mainstream, Cajuns could reconcile both their French Catholic ethnicity and their place in the American national project. Moreover, the Americanization process afforded Cajuns

more independence and a broader vocabulary to express themselves and their culture.

To be sure, even disenfranchised ethnics were not completely helpless at the mercy of those controlling the distribution of resources. Rather, individual agency distinguished the Americanization process from “Americanization.” Ethnics quickly learned to appropriate American culture and make it their own as a means of subverting Americanization’s oppressive policies and practices. Harlem’s evolution is perhaps the best illustration of a diverse urban ethnic population remaking America in their own image. Some of the same principles of appropriation and adaptation hold true among rural Cajuns who selectively, and unevenly, engaged neighboring groups and various forms of mass media. Far from becoming a homogeneous whole, the intricate and complex cultural transactions that reshaped the Acadian, and later Cajun, community and the whole of America over time developed in such nuanced ways that a superficial summary here would be insufficient. Instead, I systematically discuss these themes and issues over the course of these essays that have, for the past five years, completely engrossed my imagination.

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I am indebted to a long list of individuals who contributed to my understanding of Cajun music and the cultural currents affecting those traditions. This book would never have materialized without the encouragement and support of Judy McCulloh, who approached me after my first presentation at Nashville's International Country Music Conference in 2003 and planted the seed for this book in my mind. Her contagious enthusiasm spurred my writing. My father, mentor, colleague, and friend Carl Brasseaux, Director of the Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, opened his enormous personal primary source database to me, from which I was able to locate sources and materials for this book. He generously gave of his time reading dozens of drafts and offering suggestions. Likewise, my frequent collaborator Kevin Fontenot of Tulane University opened to me the exciting world of country music scholarship, a rich field of study that not only openly acknowledges Cajun music as a subcategory, but also provided a contextual framework from which to construct an argument about the currents acting on the genre. I extend many thanks to Kevin for freely sharing his resources and expansive knowledge of America's vernacular musical traditions and for profoundly shaping my thinking regarding Cajun musical traditions. Thanks to Kevin also for suggesting the title for this volume, *Cajun Breakdown*, and for generously allowing me to muse publicly about his "Honky Tonk Corridor" idea. My dear and longtime friend Erik Charpentier gave constant encouragement, numerous readings, and insight about the Cajun-American experience. His view of south Louisiana's connection to larger cultural phenomena helped provide clarity to some of the arguments featured here. I also tip my hat to James Akenson, cofounder of the International Country Music Conference. His amazing capacity to bestow compassion, unwavering intellectual support, and constant encouragement has provided the model of professionalism and friendship that I strive to emulate.

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Lafayette, Louisiana, from 2000 to 2004. My association with the Michot family band blossomed into a lasting friendship and professional collaboration with guitarist/accordionist André and fiddler Louis Michot of the Grammy-nominated Cajun band Lost Bayou Ramblers. Their insights into early commercial Cajun music and Cajun swing have been invaluable to this project. I also thank the staff at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's National Public Radio affiliate, KRVS 88.7 FM, which granted me the opportunity to explore on air some of the ideas put forth in these pages during my weekly radio broadcast, the *Cajun and Creole Hour*, between 2000 and 2004.

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My deepest heartfelt thanks go out to my family. My mother Glenda Melancon Brasseaux, who tolerated innumerable “business” discussions between my father and me at family functions, taught me to love Cajun music. I cherish my childhood days when I danced on her feet in the kitchen listening to French music on the transistor radio. And finally, to my strongest support, my loving companion, confidant, and best friend Jessika Ducharme Brasseaux and our two children Anne Elise and Joseph Emile, who made this book worth writing. Jessika, Ani, and Joe make me laugh from the bottom of my belly. They give me wings to explore the heights of my dreams and aspirations, and pull me back down to earth if I float too far away. They challenge me, nourish me, and make me proud to be a part of their lives.

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Cajun Breakdown

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Introduction: Framing Cajun Music

Cajun music is woven of many strands. Like Ralph Ellison's *America*, this synthetic musical idiom is the product of worlds in collision. Cajuns filtered the cultural and musical systems—overlaid for centuries in Louisiana—into an intricately nuanced and wholly creolized expression that eludes stringent categorization. In the words of Cajun fiddler Doug Kershaw, it was just music: the melodic voice of a dynamic, heterogeneous, and largely invisible ethnic group. The narrative that follows spotlights the development of Cajun music, the musicians who created the art through time, and the sociocultural contexts shaping musical expression in Cajun Country to draw the genre out of the shadows of mainstream media.

I began this project as an attempt to reconnect with the soundtrack of my youth. My mind's ear can still hear the thin, processed sound of Cajun music broadcast by a local French-language AM radio station in my maternal grandfather's Chevrolet pickup truck as we traversed the gravel byways surrounding his home in rural Acadia Parish. He annotated the broadcast with tales of dancing to Lawrence Walker, Harry Choates, and Iry LeJeune, yarns that both captured my imagination as a youth and sustained my interest throughout this project. Like my grandfather, I came of age sweating and dancing all night to the latest Cajun music in poorly ventilated in south Louisiana dance halls. Indeed, my fascination with Cajun music stems directly from a personal crusade to better understand the world from whence I came.

This book is in many ways a corrective. It stands in stark contrast to previous studies of folk music in general and Cajun music in particular. My goal with this study is to expand the horizons of vernacular musical scholarship and American cultural history by presenting working-class Cajun music through a close reading of the social contexts and cultural processes driving changes in the tradition. I acknowledge the broadest scope of musical expression to emerge within the community and the

mutual dialogue maintained between the ethnic group and their Anglo-American counterparts. *Cajun Breakdown* explores the heterogeneity defining Cajun society and culture. Widespread interaction among disparate groups, and the liberal consumption of cultural information disseminated from outside of the community shaped the group's perceptions and behaviors over time, and, indeed, the very contours of south Louisiana's cultural landscape. The evidence presented here suggests that Cajuns were not wholly isolated and disconnected from regional and national trends, as some scholars have argued. Rather, Cajuns were in tune with the latest developments in American popular culture, from the nineteenth-century civic brass band movement to Cajun interpretations of jazz and Broadway numbers. Many individuals, especially musicians, maintained a keen awareness of the latest mainstream trends and selectively recontextualized those cultural traits and musical styles that satisfied their fancy, values, and local aesthetics. Cajuns balanced traditional meanings and cultural production while engaging the Americanization process that transpired unevenly, even on the most basic levels, across the community at large.

America always spoke through Cajun music. In addition to local traditions, musicians were openly conversant in mainstream compositions, styles, and genres that suited their artistic sensibilities and audiences' demands. Fiddlers, singers, accordionists, and their musical colleagues encountered, selectively absorbed, and adapted American mass culture as long as it could function within expressive settings entirely of their own making. Indeed, the Bayou Country represented what anthropologist William Roseberry considers a matrix of "intersecting histories characterized by differentiation, heterogeneous cultural relations and values, and relations of power that encompass contradictions and tensions."¹ This interpretive process did not erase the ethnic community's lines of demarcation. Rather, sustained interaction compelled the group to constantly reconfigure its cultural boundaries under the weight of interethnic tension. Cajuns negotiated how and why to confront the mainstream, while being discerning about which resources to engage—a relationship characterized by "transculturation": a phenomenon, as Mary Louise Pratt suggests, that transpires when "subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture."² This interactive middle ground between Cajuns and American popular culture facilitated exchange while highlighting the asymmetrical relationship between working-class Cajuns and Anglo-Americans.

A Synthetic Music

Cajun Breakdown investigates the cross-cultural discourses that gave birth to, and encouraged the evolution of, Cajun music through 1950. This vernacular Gulf Coast expression germinated across generations through interaction and adaptation. Cajun musicians drew inspiration from, and built upon, musical principles derived from their European and Canadian

lineages, while readily adapting and translating a varied complex of American influences into a Franco-Southern idiom that accommodated the ethnic group's concerns, worldview, and cultural orientation. Francophone singers reframed traditional British and Anglo-American tunes such as "Billy Boy," "My Good Ole Man," and "The Butcher Boy" into French expressions that translated, respectively, as "Billy Garçon," "Mon bon vieux mari," and "Je m'ai mis aller voire une jolie brune."³ With the rise of mass media during the course of the twentieth century, Cajuns reinterpreted and rearranged popular songs disseminated via record and radio by the likes of hillbilly crooner Jimmie Rodgers, Western swing bandleader Bob Wills, and seminal New Orleans jazzmen. Musicians performed this heterogeneous repertoire in an assortment of musical contexts that coexisted simultaneously: house dances, fairs, weddings, funerals, barns, wagon yards, taverns, dance halls, recording studios, and festivals.⁴ The resulting musical amalgam often blended individualism and collectivism, propriety and carnality, vernacular and commercial idioms—a set of paradoxical combinations that reflected the complexity of the Cajun reality as the community navigated and engaged the American contexts in which they lived.

Cajuns confronted America on many fronts. Contrary to popular depictions, they were not an isolated curiosity scraping out a meager existence in a Gulf Coast backwater, but rather full participants in American culture. Individuals engaged on their own terms the varied indigenous and imported strains of cultural information circulating in south Louisiana. By the twentieth century, Cajun musicians—especially recording artists and professional entertainers—served as local culture brokers. By perching on the cultural margins of their communities, their livelihood necessitated fluency in contemporary musical trends to accommodate audience demands. Their work began in the evening, after the labor in the fields was through, on a bandstand that distinguished entertainers from the mass of dancers who patronized local dance halls. Beyond the honky-tonk, artists indulged their interest in regional and national popular music by attending performances, buying records, and listening to radio broadcasts produced hundreds of miles away from Louisiana. This collective experience united diverse individuals through the common language of music. Musicians established a social infrastructure, forming cohorts, networking, and collaborating to land higher paying jobs. They toured local dance hall circuits, and later honky-tonks and bars in east Texas after the region's petroleum boom in 1901.

As the agrarian American South mechanized and industrialization proliferated, thousands of Cajuns left their depreciating farms to work on railroads and derricks and in refineries and shipyards.⁵ Here, in this new milieu, they encountered a world of differences as well as sociocultural parallels. Interchange transpired most uninhibitedly where compatibility felt familiar. During the first half of the twentieth century, well-established traditions such as Cajun dance music migrated beyond the confines of Acadiana as musicians sought work in dance halls, recording studios,

and radio stations, locales that encouraged musical discourse. Over time, dance halls gave way to ballrooms, locally owned and operated independent labels such as Gold Star, Opera, and Fais Do Do emerged to meet the demands for locally produced records, and small-market radio stations such as Shreveport's KWKH became media giants syndicating such programming as *The Louisiana Hayride* to a national audience. These arenas opened the conduits of cultural communication and encouraged intercourse between well-established regional traditions such as Cajun music, Western swing, hillbilly, and blues. Dance hall circuits, record contracts, and radio programming formed foundation of the increasingly dense communication networks within the region—labeled in this book as the Honky-Tonk Corridor—that seared Cajun music into the national imagination.

The most famous song in Cajun history, “Jole Blon,” catapulted to the top of the national Billboard charts and influenced generations of American musicians. The song’s ascendance from an obscure French-language B-side to a novelty song embraced by Roy Acuff, Waylon Jennings, and Bruce Springsteen only came to pass when these transregional media outlets interfaced immediately after World War II. The narrative that unfolds in the pages that follow catalogues the many cultural exchanges that collectively fostered a distinctive American-made expression: Cajun music.

Cultural exchange does not mean without hostility, reservations, or misgivings. To the contrary, Cajuns navigated a complicated bilingual world that too often subjugated and denigrated the community. Cajuns were one of America’s poor, uneducated, agrarian underclasses. Catholicism, their “foreign” tongue, and French customs, compounded by the many individuals who worked only to satisfy their *besoin*, or immediate needs, rather accumulating material wealth, confounded and disgusted their more affluent neighbors.⁶ When Acadian refugees first settled in Louisiana, they confronted the region’s Francophone elite—*les Créoles blanc*. Some immigrants embarked on an upwardly mobile trajectory toward accommodation and assimilation; the rest felt the brunt of Creole prejudice.⁷ Following the Civil War, northern Anglo-Protestants who relocated to the South, either as carpetbaggers or visitors passing through, reminded those Cajuns they encountered for decades of their social, political, and economic position as a vanquished population.⁸ Even Anglo-Protestant southerners in their vicinity, namely, east Texas, who also left the cotton belt for the oil patch, directed some of the most acerbic venom toward their Francophone rivals. And yet, in the face of vilification, Cajuns continued to engage, interpret, and adapt Anglophone cultural information without compromising their cultural integrity or ethnic identity.

Blue-collar Cajuns danced to the tempo of American life alongside impoverished Southerners and so-called white ethnic immigrant groups who experienced similar forms of subjugation. Suspended somewhere between blackness and whiteness, both the Anglophone and Francophone elite measured their subjugated neighbors against a white ideal exemplified by economic and political power in addition to physical characteristics.⁹

When eighteenth-century French expatriate Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur famously mused in 1782, “What then is the American, this new man?,” the answer was resoundingly clear.¹⁰ The new “American” was a white masculine American, to be sure, whose Protestant adherence further reinforced the notion of exceptionalism and divine purpose. Acadians and other white ethnic immigrant groups—racialized as Celts, Slavs, Nordics, Iberics, Hebrews, and Latins—threatened to destabilize Anglo-Saxonism’s dominance in the United States by radically altering the nation’s demographics.¹¹ Foreigners in America’s “New Jerusalem” vexed the country’s Anglo-Protestant establishment. Nativism rang from all corners of the Northeast. Even such celebrated American intellectuals as Benjamin Franklin proclaimed, “Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our language or customs any more than they can acquire our complexion?”¹² The sheer volume of immigration rose from mere thousands per year in the 1820s to hundreds of thousands in the 1840s. By 1920, America’s white foreign-born immigrant population numbered more than 13.5 million, making progressive-minded Americans ever more reactionary.¹³

Progressive Louisianians sought to whiten both Cajuns and recent immigrants by “teaching the arts and habits of civilization,” which translated as forced enculturation into the mores and values of nondenominational Protestantism, republicanism, and the English language.¹⁴ To be sure, schools emphasized Progressive middle-class American values, not indigenous wisdom. After the 1916 Louisiana Compulsory Education Act, the state’s “off white” children suffered the same fate as Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and other prepubescent ethnics throughout the United States who, by law, were obligated to attend English-only schools where cultural annihilation was standard policy. Blue-collar Cajuns selectively internalized some tenants of Americanization policy—including the English language, patriotism, and elements of republicanism (particularly libertarianism)—but refashioned and rearticulated them according to their own cultural codes. The group actualized a synergy that allowed them to be at once recognizably American and distinctively Cajun, a sociocultural phenomenon that ultimately impeded assimilation. Indeed, American mass media certainly continued to note the difference.

Anglo-Americans constantly reminded Cajuns, particularly rural working-class denizens, that they represented the “Other” in English-only classrooms, in east Texas oil fields, and later, in movie theaters. Feature and documentary films produced in accordance with the popular American perception of the group and released between the late 1920s and the 1950s suggest that Cajuns had not succumbed to assimilation. Filmmakers ascribed ethnic stereotypes in their depictions of the group by romanticizing and highlighting “exotic” traits of Cajuns and their picturesque homeland. Directors Raoul Walsh’s 1919 and Edwin Carewe’s 1929 adaptation of Longfellow’s epic poem *Evangeline*, pioneer documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty’s 1948 film *Louisiana Story*, and the feature film *Thunder*

Bay (1953) starring Jimmy Stewart all stereotypically portrayed Cajuns as markedly different from their Anglo counterparts, indicating that America unquestionably viewed the ethnic group as the Other. The trend continued well into the late twentieth century. Adam Sandler's picture *Water Boy* racialized the ethnic group by mismatching cultural symbols, exaggerating local accents, and feigning ignorance in an effort to give the comedy a "Louisiana feel."¹⁵ In addition, the dramatic growth of Louisiana's cultural tourism industry before Hurricane Katrina, based largely on promoting the uniqueness of Cajun culture under the slogan "Come as You Are, Leave Different," also points to the distinctive character of the region's cultural landscape and musical traditions.¹⁶

The people and cultural processes that nurtured Cajun music's development are best understood through a nexus of relations. Musicians crafted their art via exchange and cultural transaction while performing for dancers or simply among themselves through private discourse. Local entertainers forged interactive networks linking individuals, rural neighborhoods, and the broader community at large well before they first stepped into the recording studio or stood in front of a live broadcasting microphone in a radio station. These relationships took form as early as 1764, the year the first Acadian refugees set foot on Louisiana soil.

Life before the Record

The precommercial era (1764–1927)—which I further subdivide into phase I (1764–1830), phase II (1830–1880), phase III (1880–1927)—represents Cajun music's formative and yet least understood period.¹⁷ The historical contours and cultural processes driving change before the emergence of commercial Cajun recordings are fundamental to understanding the sequential development of the genre during the twentieth century, which serves as the primary focus of this study.

Empire sewed the seeds of Cajun music. New France clashed with New England and wrestled with New Spain in the geopolitical contests for territorial control in North America. Positioned at the crossroads of empire, Acadia and, later, Louisiana buffered the French interest on the continent.¹⁸ The Louisiana territory became a vibrant contact zone variously blessed and cursed with porous borders through which American Indians, Africans slaves, European administrators, soldiers and sailors, merchants, smugglers, refugees, and pioneers circulated and cohabitated. Amid this global contest, musical traditions from three continents—Europe, Africa, and North America—collided in the Bayou Country. Those musical customs, which amalgamated in varying degrees within the confines of those ethnically diverse communities dotting the Gulf Coast landscape, ultimately stimulated the genesis of an indigenous form of musical expression unique to Louisiana.

Traditional Acadian music formed the rudiment of Cajun music's precommercial era. The genre's gestational stage—phase I—began when the

first boatload of Acadian exiles reached the shores of Louisiana in 1764. Presumably, the refugees who established the initial Acadian settlements in the territory relied on a cappella compositions for their musical entertainment before cross-cultural exchange animated Cajun music's embryonic development. The pedigree of French ballads collected by folklorists during the twentieth century suggests that predispersal *Acadie* boasted a large repertoire of Old World compositions.¹⁹ Yet, this argument by analogy presumes, through lyrical analysis, that Cajun musical traditions traced their roots to those European locales that boasted similar compositions in their oral repertory. The only substantiated documentation regarding Acadian music in the first years of resettlement in Louisiana, however, alludes to the popularity of the fiddle and clarinet among the immigrants. Aside from these obscure references, there is virtually no documentation of postdispersal Acadian musical traditions or repertory in Louisiana before the nineteenth century.

If data regarding the symbiotic relationship between musical development and sociocultural change during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is any indication, the formative components of Cajun music presumably began to synthesize between 1764 and 1830 as newly arrived Acadian refugees interacted with peoples maintaining European, African, and North American cultural ties. Some upwardly mobile Acadians began to engage the region's plantation economy and acquire slaves, thereby stimulating fragmentation and diversification within the community. Historian Carl Brasseaux maintains that the Bayou Country became a "highly stratified multicultural society in which culture and language provided the basis for social distinctions. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, class lines and cultural boundaries coincided in rural south Louisiana."²⁰ As part of the *nouveau bourgeoisie*, genteel Acadian planters espoused formal musical training, in part, to associate with Louisiana's white Creoles and French upper classes. Their high cultural musical tastes differed significantly from rural aesthetics maintained by the region's underclasses, which are the primary focus of this book.

The music of the Cajun working classes, who originally settled Louisiana as *petits habitants* (yeoman farmers), maintained a separate and distinctive dance culture at *bals de maison*, or neighborhood house dances, from their more affluent counterparts. The first descriptions of the social setting in which working-class Cajun amusements transpired stem from phase I of the precommercial era. In 1803, French immigrant and travel writer C. C. Robin witnessed the festivities at a house dance along the Bayou Lafourche. His fascination with local customs generated a lively description of the intricate social interaction among friends, family, and dancers.²¹ Customs such as dancing and musical performance would evolve slowly after Robin's visit until the onset of the Civil War, when frequent violent encounters dramatically altered the dynamics of local entertainment in rural districts.

The Americanization of south Louisiana began in earnest in 1803, following the Louisiana Purchase, when the region's Francophone population

became subject to American law. In 1946, geographers Walter Kollomorgen and Robert Harrison concluded that “since 1803 [the Cajuns’] destiny has been fully identified with the destiny of our nation albeit the still common usage of the French language. They are therefore American in every sense of the word.”²² Their assertion acknowledges that Cajuns became part of a larger equation governed by American politics, economics, and law, despite the ethnic group’s linguistic and cultural distinctiveness.

Louisiana’s cultural landscape began to shift dramatically following the Louisiana Purchase. In 1803, the Bayou Country boasted seven times more Francophones than Anglophones in the region’s free population. At the time of Louisiana’s admission to the Union in 1812, an influx of Anglo-Americans moved into the territory and considerably altered that ratio, as French speakers outnumbered English speakers by only three to one. This Anglo-American invasion thus accelerated the complex cultural exchanges that transpired over the course of the nineteenth century.²³

Americans began to exert a significant cultural influence on south Louisiana during the second phase of the precommercial era between 1830 and 1880. Life in antebellum Louisiana, the ravages of the Civil War, the virtual collapse of the American South’s economy, the rise of sharecropping, and the increased interaction between the ethnic group and their black neighbors outlined the shifting cultural and social climate of the period. The combination of these forces forever altered the course of the group’s sociocultural and musical landscapes. During phase II, the intrinsic nature of the Acadian community shifted in dramatic fashion that led to the emergence of splinter group that assumed the appellation “Cajun.”

A number of travel reports from the mid- to late nineteenth century offer a snapshot of the musical contexts flourishing in south Louisiana. *Bals de maison* continued with great frequency, and fiddle music prospered. Phase II also witnessed the introduction of two cultural institutions that profoundly affected the sounds and social contexts associated with Cajun music. Dance halls—which eventually supplanted house dances during the twentieth century—first emerged sometime around the Civil War and expanded the space allotted for dancing and courtship. In step with the widespread violence introduced by war, *bals de maison* and dance halls became dangerous scenes of bloodshed and mayhem. The widespread dissemination of the diatonic accordion also transpired in the years following the Civil War.

Cajun music’s character assumed a new attitude and feel between 1830 and 1880 as Cajuns had increased contact with their black neighbors. Historian Carl Brasseaux notes that cross-cultural interaction was common before emancipation, and that Francophone yeomen disrupted the divisions of power dividing white planters and black slaves:

American sugar planters generally viewed the Acadian small farmers and the far less numerous *petits habitants* (subsistence farmers possessing no slaves) as nuisances who “demoralized” their slaves. Not

only did the small farmers' comfortable existence persuade blacks "that it was not necessary for men to work so hard as they themselves were obliged to," but the Acadians frequently hired slaves to do odd jobs, paying them with "luxuries" their masters did not wish them to have.²⁴

Over time, communication between Acadians and Afro-Creoles and African Americans extended to musical interaction, particularly after the Civil War, when poor whites worked alongside their black neighbors as sharecroppers. Syncopation, call-and-response, rhythmic patterns, emotive vocals expressed with full-body release, and even repertoire became essential components of the Cajun dance music.²⁵

In the wake of the Civil War, grinding poverty became a widespread reality for many Louisianians. The South's sharecropping system redistributed the ethnic components of Louisiana's population and ultimately changed the demographic complexity of the Acadian community. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers moved frequently to find work or to improve their lot with landowners who offered more congenial business arrangements. Working-class Acadian culture felt the brunt of this economic crunch as evidenced by behavioral shifts. For the first time since their arrival in Louisiana, Acadians began to practice general exogamy and absorbed portions of the region's poor white population, including Anglos, Germans, Creoles, Italians, and French. Acadian society consequently evolved from a fairly homogeneous population into a heterogeneous group that diversified within the Bayou Country's socioeconomic classification system under a common Louisiana French *lingua franca*.²⁶ As the group's social and cultural dynamics evolved, so did the group's moniker in accordance with their evolving character.

During the late 1860s and 1870s, Anglophone writers began to label this cultural and linguistic assemblage with a phonetic appellation '*cadien*, derived from the French *Acadien* or Acadian. English corruptions appeared in print as "cagian," "cajen," and in 1879, "Cajun."²⁷ The term Cajun was pregnant with meaning. As early as the 1840s, Anglo attitudes toward the Acadian population disintegrated from contempt to disgust, a disposition that coincided with the nationalistic pressures leading up to the Civil War and with increasing American xenophobia following the large influx of Irish and German immigrants and competitive socioeconomic struggles between these factions. Not only did Cajun refer to the evolving ethnic group, but the term carried a negative stigma that endured until the 1960s. It translated as backward, ignorant, French-speaking peasants whose laziness and refusal to assimilate were contradictory to mainstream Anglo-Protestant mores. In response, Cajuns retorted with the slur *Américains*, meaning swindler, meddlesome, and haughty. Like other poor whites in the rural South and Appalachia who endured the term "hillbilly," Cajun music came under the influence of American popular culture despite overt tensions between these conflicting Franco-Catholic and Anglo-Protestant worldviews. Contrary to popular belief, Louisiana's ever-changing Acadian

population was no more isolated than any other rural Southern group during the nineteenth century.²⁸

Phase III of the precommercial era spanned the years between 1880 and 1927, during which new technologies such as the railroad and steamboat propulsion further connected the ethnic group to American cultural trends, and outside cultural forces altered Cajun music's dynamics.²⁹ By the twentieth century, the emergence of a national communications network, the development of Louisiana's petroleum industry, the state's improved road system, and the increasing availability of mass media technology profoundly shaped the discourse between Cajun and American cultures. The widespread popularity of American popular entertainment, namely, minstrelsy and musical/theatrical performances, penetrated the Bayou Country through the same channels connecting communities throughout the American South.

Popular entertainment infiltrated Cajun Country during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, first by rail and waterways, and later via automobile, tents, town civic centers, opera houses, and theaters. Traveling entertainers, minstrels, vaudevillians, circus performers, and the like toured throughout the South, including the Bayou Country, spreading American popular culture and music en route. Itinerant minstrel troupes were among the first such performers to arrive following the establishment of the railroad system in southwest Louisiana in the 1870s.

Anglo-Americans disseminated to Cajun audiences a particular brand of white humor, a familiar acting style, and a specific, albeit diverse, repertoire behind their burnt corked masks. One of the earliest references to black-faced performers in Acadiana dates to April 28, 1860, when a West Baton Rouge newspaper advertised the arrival of the "Banjo Minstrels."³⁰ By the turn of the twentieth century, troupes with names like Richard & Pringle's Famous Georgia Minstrels, Lew Tigner's Minstrels, Mahara Colored Minstrels, and Faust's Minstrels filled the playbills and provided regular entertainment at local opera houses and theaters.³¹ These black-faced musicians and actors exposed south Louisianians to the same songs and stereotypes that forever changed popular culture in the United States (figure I.1).

Traveling entertainers encouraged, even facilitated, this cultural transaction by inviting local talent to share the stage. On January 27, 1877, the Morgan City *Attakapas Register* advertised a show featuring the Welch Minstrels and "three young men of this place, whose musical abilities and faculty for creating mirth are well known to our citizens."³² Within a 20-year period, homegrown minstrel troupes had taken center stage. In 1896, the Lafayette Minstrels and orchestra entertained their fellow townsfolk at Falk's Opera House. In nearby Opelousas, residents presented the Dixie Blackbird Minstrels in the elementary school gymnasium, a troupe with local actors featuring Cajun surnames such as Comeaux, Hebert, Fontenot, Barilleaux, Guilbeau, and Castille who worked under the direction of Atlanta native Maibelle Cooks.³³

South Louisianians loved minstrel shows and liberally patronized revues. In 1934, Thibodaux's *Lafourche Comet* newspaper hailed a local production

Figure I.1. Locally produced minstrel shows became an annual affair at the Arcade Theatre in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Frazar Memorial Library, McNeese State University.



sponsored by the city's Catholic Daughters civic organization as nothing short of a triumph. The *Comet* applauded the professionalism of the performances, which included song recitation, tap dancing, and harmonica music. The reviewer was especially taken with the costuming. "Mr. Phil. J. Naquin, as the make-up artist," the newspaper extolled, "could not have gotten the girls' faces blacker or shinier, if he had taken them to the Kongo Free State of Africa and transformed them into African negroes."³⁴ These Cajun interpretations of the Anglo-American and African-American minstrelsy traditions illustrate one of the Americanizing cultural undercurrents that shaped artistic expression in the Bayou Country. Minstrelsy proved such an influential factor within south Louisiana that locals organized school plays and little theater performances well into the first half of the twentieth century. As late as the 1960s, Judice Elementary School sporadically sponsored local minstrel productions featuring Cajun recording artists to raise funds for their facility.³⁵ Meanwhile, as field recordings collected in the late 1960s illustrate, working-class Cajun musicians absorbed portions of the common American minstrelsy repertoire and performed tunes at performances and at home for amusement.³⁶ Soon after the first black-faced performers captivated local audiences on land, showboats conveniently delivered outside entertainment to communities living along the region's rivers and bayous.

"Steamboats on the river a coming or a going/Splashing the night away/Hear those banjos ringing, the people are singing/They dance til the break of day" go the lyrics to the jazz standard "When It's Sleepy Time Down South," a song that serves as a sort of lyrical snapshot of the tremendous impact that steamboats and, more important, showboats had along the American South's waterways. Dramatic entertainment, singing, and instrumental arrangements exposed curious individuals living along water routes to new compositions and the latest trends in entertainment. Traditional trade routes such as the Mississippi River and bayous Lafourche and Têche became information highways trafficking mercantile and cultural wares from northern ports to southern landings.

Showboats radiated music. Every aspect of the floating cabaret centered on a melody, from the floorshows to the boat's main marketing scheme. Piercing steam-driven strains of minstrel, ragtime, and Broadway tunes, such as "Oh Dem Golden Slippers," "Turkey in the Straw," "Dixie," "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy," "Goodbye, My Lover, Goodbye," "The Blue Alsatian Mountains," and "Out of the Wilderness" whistled from the boat's calliope and bellowed across the water far inland, announcing the arrival of show.³⁷ From the instant the lilting strains of the calliope reached Cajun ears, the thought of the forthcoming entertainment stirred the Bayou Country's landing communities into a commotion. Cajuns may not have had the chance to enjoy this popular form of entertainment without the technological advances in propulsion that allowed showboats to creep through the murky silt-laden waters of Cajun Country.

Beginning in the early 1830s, flatboats modified into small theater settings traveled south from northern ports along the Mississippi and Ohio valleys during the spring in high-water season, stopping to perform at metropolitan ports before terminating the voyage in New Orleans. Early showboats relied on river currents for propulsion, leaving captains with little choice but to sell their vessels for scrap lumber in the Crescent City, before retreating upstream to their northern headquarters to repeat the circuit the following year. By the late nineteenth century, showboats had become tremendous and ornate theaters towed or tugged by smaller transport vessels, offering captains the necessary mobility to explore unexploited markets along smaller tributaries. Governing locomotion granted showboats the freedom to ply bayou waters in search of new audiences.³⁸

In 1882, Captain Augustus Byron French towed his showboat the *Sensation* to the Pittsburgh area just long enough to hire a team of actors, rehearse his new acts, and restock his boat. The *Sensation* traveled down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers entertaining locals until Captain French reached Cajun Country. The showboat discovered a lucrative market along the densely Cajun-populated Bayou Lafourche, where an anxious audience with cash in hand from sugarcane and cotton harvests eagerly paid for their chance to catch a glimpse of the entertainment featured on the boat. Though the slow-moving bayou could be treacherous for steamboats, the captain "had discovered the finest showboat territory in the whole country."³⁹

Four years later, French returned to the Lafourche region and then headed north along the Bayou Têche.⁴⁰ Every night, the showboat's auditorium filled to capacity with curious Cajuns interested in an amusing evening, much to the chagrin of the actors and musicians on board. Historian Philip Graham explains:

Performers on the stage began complaining that excessive talking in the audience was interfering with their acts. Spectators persisted in grouping themselves in excited little knots instead of remaining seated in the new opera chairs. Captain French employed special ushers to secure quiet and order. Then it was discovered that each of the

noisy little groups had its interpreter, who was translating the words spoken in English on the stage into the *cajun* of his fellows. . . . They were watching the action on the stage and getting the words through their more gifted brother.⁴¹

Captain French promptly edited subsequent performances by replacing spoken word with musical interludes and exaggerated action to bridge the language barrier between Bayou Country's Francophone audiences and the Anglophone actors.

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, Cajuns flocked to vaudeville performances and circuses, where, like most forms of contemporary public entertainment, music was an integral part of the show. Imaginations ran wild as such exotic animals as zebras and elephants paraded down town streets and trapeze artists hurled their bodies in death defying leaps through the thick Louisiana air. On November 16, 1901, the Campbell Brothers Great Consolidated Shows presented their circus in Lafayette. In addition to an "open den of ferocious lions," the performance included two brass bands performing an assortment of popular tunes and the "Finest Steam Calliope in America."⁴² Adept local musicians absorbed popular melodies from these outside sources and learned to translate them onto the available instrumentation, shaping the sounds of Cajun music.

Evolution of Instrumentation

The introduction of new instruments within local arrangements also signaled shifts in musical direction and the extent to which Cajuns interacted with extraneous influences. Although the calliope did not become a standard feature in Cajun music, the precommercial era witnessed significant changes in instrumentation over time. The earliest material evidence regarding Acadian musical culture dates to a secession record filed in 1782. The document acknowledges that at least one Acadian refugee owned a fiddle and clarinet.⁴³ A second reference to an Acadian multi-instrumentalist who played the fiddle and clarinet appears three years later in a letter written by Attakapas District commandant Alexandre DeClouet to Louisiana's Spanish Governor Estevan Miró. On October 8, 1785, DeClouet explained in his correspondence that he was attempting to locate a renowned Acadian musician named Prejean, who lived somewhere in Baton Rouge. Prejean's remarkable skill with both the fiddle and the clarinet captivated the imagination of the region's top administrators.⁴⁴ For approximately 75 years after DeClouet's correspondence, descriptions of music in the Bayou Country slip into obscurity before reappearing during the mid-nineteenth century, when travel writers began to document their experiences there.

The fiddle remained at the heart of Cajun music, while the sound of the clarinet slipped underground and faded from the vernacular musical landscape.⁴⁵ The violin had indeed emerged as the dominate instrument