

# Michael Doucet

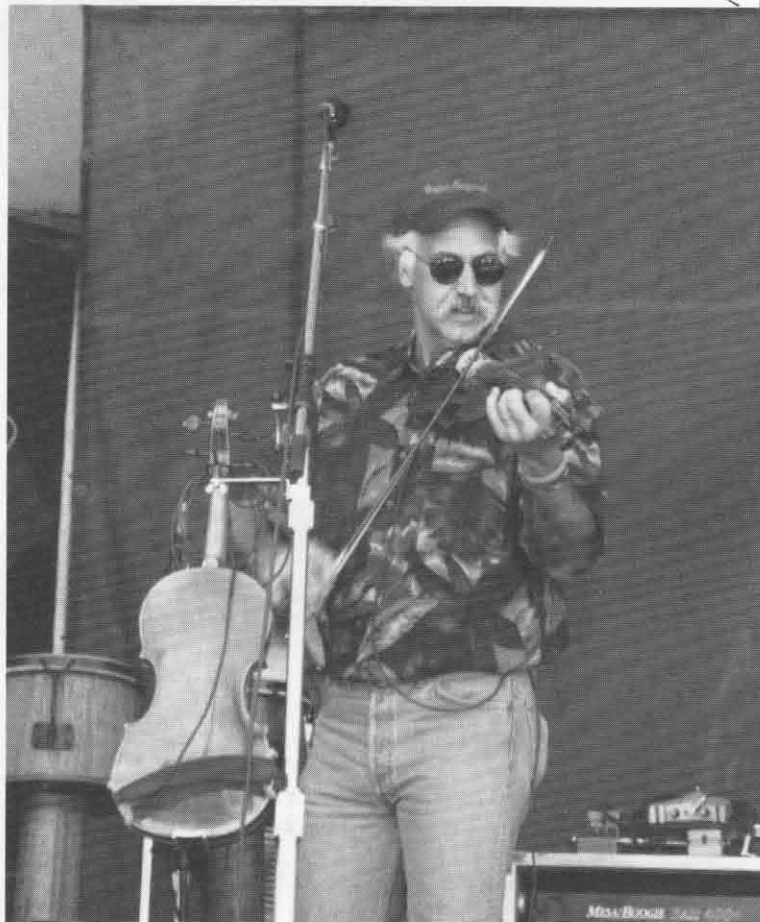
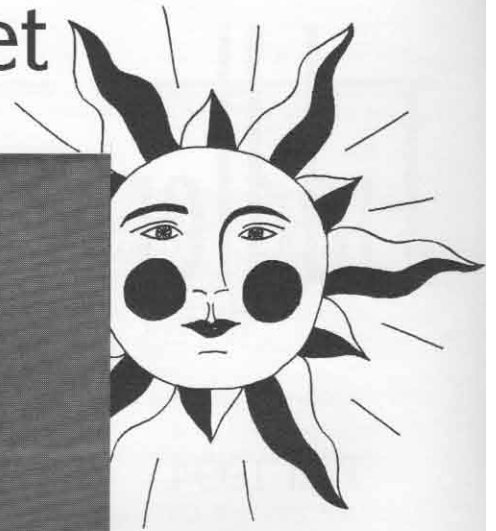


Photo: Jack Tuttle



## *Hot Cajun Fiddle!*

By Niles Hokkanen

Michael Doucet has a metaphysical mission in life: to absorb, understand and *grok* the entire spectrum of Cajun and related music, past and present, and its relation to the culture which spawned it, and then, with that firm foundation, to add his own contributions to it. While getting his fiddle chops together, Doucet sought out the most important Cajun fiddlers of the previous generations to learn from directly. Forming BeauSoleil in 1976, Michael has been the driving force which has made it *the* premier Cajun band of recent history. Through various personnel changes and record labels (Swallow, Arhoolie, Rounder, Rhino), BeauSoleil has sought to present a total Cajun music experience, performing unaccompanied ballads, old obscure fiddle tunes, accordion-driven rave-ups, zydeco smokers, and so on.

Even if you don't have any of their albums or haven't gone to one of their shows, you've probably heard Mike or the band, either on

Prairie Home Companion, or backing Mary Chapin-Carpenter on her hit "Down at the Twist and Shout," or on the new Maalox TV ad which uses the title track of the *Hot Chili Mama* album. "Zydeco Gris-Gris" was used in the opening of the movie "The Big Easy," and Mike and the band provided the entire soundtrack for (and appeared in) the film "Belizaire the Cajun." The uninitiated may want to start listening with the classic *Parlez Nous A Boire* (Arhoolie), the most recent *La Danse de la Vie* or compilations *Bayou Deluxe: The Best of Michael Doucet & BeauSoleil* (Rhino) and (for earlier stuff) *Déjà Vu* (Swallow).

Though Michael prefers playing/performing over teaching, he has done both video and audio instruction tapes for Homespun Tapes. The six-hour cassette package, *Learn Real Cajun Fiddle*, is excellent, in-depth and is recommended to anyone investigating Cajun styles.

### **Tell me about your fiddles.**

One is a 1988 copy of an old fiddle (which I don't bring on the road anymore). It was made by Jon Cooper, a really great guy up in Maine. I met him on the road in Portland and he said, "You shouldn't be playing that fiddle in this bar! I'll make you a copy, and if you don't like it, that's fine." I've been playing it ever since. The second fiddle is a French fiddle; it's a copy of a Maggini by Aubry. They're good Cajun-sounding fiddles. My bow was made by Eric Paulu, who lives down the street from me! For strings I use Dr. Thomastik Dominant.

### **Do you keep them both in low (F-C-G-D low to high) tuning?**

No, I tune to standard.

### **You didn't used to.**

Well, we sing a lot in D and it's just less of a problem to bring one fiddle on tour instead of two. When you play in F, you don't have that many drone strings, but overall, it's just easier in the long run. Jimmy Breaux plays both D and C diatonic accordions. I like to sing in D. Nowadays in modern Cajun music, the young groups

want to sing in B flat so they can hit the high notes, but to me that doesn't sound like "it." All the old guys played in D and that's what we're doing, bringing it back to where it should be. I know it's high, but hell, I sing bass and I can still hit those notes! I think some songs should be in B, others in C; you just make a compromise.

### **Do you think that the whole step down from standard tuning has any advantages?**

It's a smoother tone, I think, more for zydeco, which is definitely C or F material which sounds great with that low F note. It's like having a 5-string fiddle. I think it sounds better on the bluesier stuff.

### **When you were tuning low, did you think in , say, "C concert" or did you think of your notes as "D major"?"**

I was thinking in D. You were just playing the notes that went along with the song or the C accordion. When I originally started playing and didn't know anything about the fiddle or music, that's how the old-timers showed me. →

*"My uncle had a fiddle, and in high school I could play three songs on it. But that was 'rub-a-dub-dub.' It wasn't until I was about twenty-one that I decided I was going to play fiddle ..."*



*BeauSoleil at the 1994 Strawberry Festival, left to right: Al Tharp, Michael Doucet, Billy Ware and Jimmy Breaux.*

*Photo: Jack Tuttle*

**Do you still use the G-D-A-D (low to high) tuning, which was what you used on “Valse du Vacher” (“Cowboy Waltz”)?**

The one with the high string dropped down? Every now and then. On shows it just takes a while to tune and retune. I used it on one song on the new album with Marc and Ann [Savoy]. If I’m going to use it, it might be for some of Dennis’ [McGee] stuff; I played some reels like that. If you’re only playing solo fiddle, doing some waltzes or something, it kind of makes it sound more like two fiddles.

**Was that McGee’s usual tuning?**

Dennis played that tuning, and he used some other tunings besides. I definitely learned some tunes from him in that tuning. I think in the real old days they did the A-E-A-E thing, to get that resonance and that double string sound. But Dennis played a lot of stuff in just standard tuning; he played a lot in C position, which a lot of people didn’t play before. The positions he’d play (even though he might have his fiddle tuned low) would be G, C, D, A, and minors — Am, Em. I think he even played a song in F position. He went through the whole gamut of stuff.

**You started playing fiddle relatively “late,” at least the classical people would say so.**

I was basically in my early 20s. My uncle had a fiddle, and in high school I could play three songs on it. But that was “rub-a-dub-dub.” It wasn’t until I was about twenty-one that I decided I was



Photo: Jack Tuttle

Michael demonstrates his “air fiddle” at the Strawberry Festival.

going to play fiddle. I went to France and came back and then kind of played/practiced eight hours a day or whatever it took ... got really serious about it. But it just came naturally.

**You went out and studied with a lot of the older players, maybe that was a function of your adult mind. Let’s go down the list and maybe you could say what particular thing(s) you learned from each. ... Will Bolfa [Balfa Brothers]?**

Will Bolfa was the “seconding” and the rhythm. He had the best accompaniment — it was just so smooth. Will would hardly ever use his little finger, just the first three. He emphasized the rhythm with his fingering of his left hand rather than with the bow. He’d slide into the notes.

Hector Duhon [Dixie Ramblers] was the rhythmic thing, too. Hector was the first, study-wise. He would really show how to “second.” Now Will would second a lot lower — under the first fiddle; Hector seconded (played backup) as the sole fiddle in his band. He could really squeeze into the notes and use accents and slides. He used a lot of slides in the middle chordal positions.

**Dewey Balfa ...**

He had so much ... The bowing, a really smooth bowing. He had a real nice tone. I think Dewey was just the smoothest and perhaps the easiest to learn from because he could verbalize as well as analyze what he was doing.

**Varise Connor ...**

Oh, talk about *smooth!* My God, “Mr. Glass.” Varise was definitely the bow arm. He had the most amazing bow arm. He really showed me about which direction to play a note. There’s a way to play across strings, kind of a shuffle that goes over a three-string chord. Stuff like that. How to really bow, and intonation. Varise had *the* intonation.

[Sadly, Varise Connor died on June 19, 1994, at the age of 87.]

Lionel Leleux would play in standard tuning and accompany a C accordion. He had that down and he had a real good bow, a great violin, and a deep tone.

**Canray Fontenot and Bébé Carrière? And keep going ...**

Bébé was the blues. Canray — definitely the rhythms and just wildness and making the fiddle speak and getting sounds out of it to represent your emotions ... how to make a violin cry.

Rufus Thibodeaux carries the finesse of country and swing. Rufus played a lot like Harry Choates. From him, the country/swing aspect of being improvisational and the clarity of the notes and getting the most sound out.

Doc Guidry was chordal. Doc really played the chords well, but he also kept the rhythm with the bow. Like I was trying to explain how Hector and Will Bolfa kept the rhythm with their left hand fingers, Doc kept the rhythm more with the bow.

## And, of course, Dennis McGee.

From Dennis, it was *everything*. With Dennis, it was to relearn how to play Cajun music because those songs were so old, predating electricity and cars and gasoline engines. It went back to a different rhythmic time. With Dennis, you had to relearn everything because he played it so differently. His rhythms were so different; it could be the same song I'd learned from somebody else, but it might be in a different key or a different way of bowing it. It would go against the grain if you didn't play it (with him) the way he played or with the same rhythm.

And from Dennis, it's also the repertoire. He had heard the first people doing these songs — he was not one to learn those things off of records! (Laughs.)

**That's a big "Who's who" of Cajun music there! Looking back, is there anybody that you didn't study with that now you wished you had?**

Yeah. "Cheese" Reed. He showed me one song, "Jig Français" [recorded on *Bayou Deluxe*]. We only sat down one time. But then he died. That's the only person I didn't spend a lot of time with. I still wish I spent more time with everybody. But Cheese played country & western and I was then more interested in old French stuff. But I wish I had known him better because he was an incredible player and a great singer and I would have learned a lot more.

**Cajun music has various styles within it. Could you talk about the major sub-styles, and if those are from different geographical areas, etc.?**

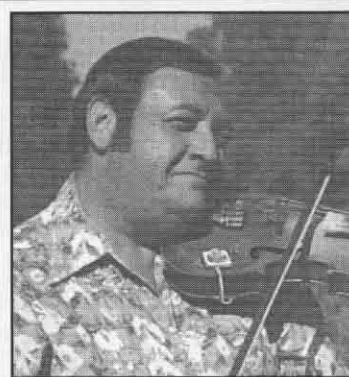
This is going to be tough. First, what you have now is not what you would have found ten years ago, which is what you wouldn't have found ten years before that, and ten years before that. You find remnants of earlier styles.

Let's do this thing historically. If you have the *Beau Solo* CD, there's a song on that called "Valse Acadienne" — that is what Acadian music sounded like; that's the earliest stuff — very droney, no accordion. It's in A-E-A-E tuning. Dennis [McGee] would come under that style. That died out with Dennis as far as I'm concerned; true players, though — maybe Wade Frugé might play something like that.

Then let's go to a Luderin Darbonne [Hackberry Ramblers] or string band style. That was in the '30s. That was from west Louisiana and anytime you're closer to Texas, you pick up a lot of that influence. Some of those Texas waltzes are Cajunized, as are some of those two-steps or polkas from those Bohemian or Czech or whatever bands they had out there. Now, to follow through with that even more would be Harry Choates ... much more western swing. So western Louisiana tended to be more swingy, country influenced.

Then Eunice, which is the head or capital of the prairie. Eunice let's say would be more accordion-influenced and that would

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change the fiddle styles. Also, at the same time, that's where you had Amédé Ardoin and a lot of black players who play *Cajun* music, who don't play what we call zydeco and don't play rhythm & blues, but rather play old-style music. People like Bébé Carrière, Calvin Carrière; they play along with the diatonic accordion but that style is another kind of thing ... more bluesy.

Then you have a Lafayette style which is a mixture. You have Doc Guidry who played early with Happy Fats, played country style, but still Cajun, a lot of rhythmic things. Another player who rose up from him is Rufus (Thibodeaux); he is the best known.

Now Doug Kershaw, he's from that area of Mermentau, close to Texas. I really love Doug's early stuff — it's so funky and earthy. Just wild and raw.

### What about the Balfa Brothers?

The Balfas learned a lot from accordionist Nathan Abshire who came from Kaplan. They said they learned a lot from their father. That really neat waltz, "Valse A Balfa" is actually a ballad that Dewey learned from his aunt or one of the sisters. A lot of their style came from ballads. Now the straight-ahead fiddle sound — that's unique, but that's a fiddle sound of twin playing, which kind of goes back to ... they heard a lot of Harry Choates, The Hackberry Ramblers, and probably The Dixie Ramblers. So everyone after that, including the Balfas, was definitely influenced by



records, by '78s. The early Balfa style, what you hear on that record *The Balfa Brothers Play Traditional Cajun Music*, which is my favorite, is a lot of accordion songs played on fiddle.

So it's not the regions — it's the people. You have to go by "the heads of state," or people who may have had bands. It might not have been just the styles from them, but they are good proponents. The people created the style; the style is from the region. But the region may have a lot to do with what those individuals around whom the music evolves were exposed to.

**I would assume that the western Louisiana players near Texas would play in a lot more keys, because the other influences didn't tie them down so much to the C accordion.**

Most of these people, except for Doc Guidry and Rufus and Leo Soileau, didn't have to play in other keys. These were guys who played different kinds of music. Anytime you have guys playing different kinds of music — swing or whatever — they knew more music. Luderin Darbonne can play in C, G, D and A. A few people play in F, but the more popular music you played — 'cause you're influenced by country and jazz, etc. — the more keys you play in.

Now when you get straight-ahead, just droney, danceable Cajun music, you just play in the open keys. So yeah, that might be what you'd find in the center of the prairie because it won't be a "professional"; it'd be a farmer or somebody who just played along for Saturday night dances. But there are always exceptions.

**So how varied or traditional are the influences which go into your own playing?**

I don't incorporate anything that wasn't here before. Everything I play is learned from Louisiana. I went back in time — not only to French music, but to blues, jazz, popular music, Irish music, whatever was there. As more old recordings are brought to light, you can see these influences and what a hotbed Louisiana was.

If you listen to early New Orleans music, clarinet and violin played about the same thing, so you can listen to early New Orleans clarinet players and get fiddle lines. This is before Sidney Bechet. A. J. Piron was a great New Orleans violin player and he played along with Lorenzo Tio who was a great clarinetist. I met an early '20's style jazz fiddle player, Bradford Gordon from Opelousas, and he said, "Oh yeah, I showed this guy Leo Soileau how to play fiddle. Ever heard of him?" He played all this swingy, jazz stuff. So, my influences are the spectrum of Louisiana music.

There are some songs that you just want to play as close as you can [to the way you learned them], and that's the way it is supposed to be. There's no variance, no improvisation, because the song is so powerful in itself. Then, there are the skeletons of songs that lend themselves to reworking, that you can do in different styles.

What I find satisfying is to try to write new songs. On the last two albums, I've done some writing in the style, but it's not copping licks. It's writing new songs but doing so in the language that you

learned how to play the stuff in in the first place, where maybe only the old people can really understand what you're doing and saying. I know, through these songs, I'm talking to these guys who died; I'm talking to this society, through 300 years of hardship, from being an Acadian. Writing a new song within the style — that takes some time.

You can look at the music; the music is simple. But what about the feeling, and why do you play this thing in a certain way? Is it a certain person that you have heard, or am I being something different? Is something else coming through? This way, since I'm not copying anybody ... I'm not trying to be Dewey Balfa or Dennis McGee or whoever, but all those are there because I've experienced so much, and the experience was French.

The experience was being put down, being told, "Oh man, you don't want to play that stuff." Remember what the music was like in the '60s and early '70s when it was just played in bars and sometimes out of tune and in a party atmosphere ... the whole stereotype. But, at the same time, it was great. And to go out and find that beauty and to find people like Varise Connor, who hadn't played in thirty years, who asked, "Why are you interested in me?" And I said, "Because you're an incredible fiddle player!" (Laughs.)

It's the experience, it's not just the notes. It's hard to get that when you just listen to commercial records, whether they are field recordings or not, although they are good. But you are just "hearing" it; you're not understanding what kind of environment this thing came from, 'cause it's *so different*.

**You like to present variety on your recordings.**

There's so much stuff in Louisiana. We could do so many different records of music, so many different styles. Most of the records that we've done, you can find a ballad, a fiddle tune (probably from Dennis), some old songs, whatever. But that's our [BeauSoleil's] own tradition; we're the only ones that do that. If I'm going to make a record, there are the categories that it should have, which is what I've been doing for over twenty years. You could take some pretty cool songs, other (non-Cajun) songs, and Cajunize them (we did that before), but why? I don't have to do that now. You mature, you're within this culture and understand it and the new stuff shouldn't be from somewhere else; it should be from you.


Or I think about uncovering old songs. Back then, we were the only group doing it. It's harder now because now a lot of other groups are doing it; there are fewer songs. BeauSoleil is going to have a new CD out soon on Rhino called *L'Echo*. It has forgotten pieces and songs from the '20s and '30s — older songs that haven't been recorded, or if recorded, really old stuff. On this one, we don't do everything with the "big band" BeauSoleil sound, though there's some of that. Some songs have an acoustic sound with steel guitar, going back to the string band sound of the '30s when it was fiddle and guitar and a little accordion and maybe some percussion. There's some accordion songs, and a ballad and some bluesier songs.

Didn't you do a track for the Thompson tribute? And you were recording live at the Birchmere with the Savoy-Doucet Band.

I guess there's the "big label" Richard Thompson tribute album coming out, though we did our track "Valerie" three years ago. Did it with James Burton.

Arhoolie is putting out a CD with some old live stuff of me and Dennis McGee playing. There are also some tracks from a recording project David [Doucet] and I started but never finished off and some other things Chris [Strachwitz] dug up. It's called "Mad Reel." There's also a live album with Marc and Ann Savoy [Savoy-Doucet Band] called *Coast to Coast*, also on Arhoolie. There's some live BeauSoleil stuff that's going to be out on the Music of the World cassette label.

#### Any interesting "outside" projects?

I played on one track on Mark Knopfler's new album; took eight hours. And I played on a couple of tracks on a recording of a Madagascar band that Henry Kaiser was producing. I think his name was D'Gary; we got in and jammed. That'll probably come out on Shanachie. I also produced the album by Mitchell Reed and his band Tasso. Reed is a young guy who plays in a Dennis McGee style, which is good to hear. He'll be doing the new Masters of the Folk Violin tour with me, and Kenny Baker, Brendan Mulvihill, Claude Williams, Natalie McMaster .... We do a set of Midwest and East coast shows in November (11-21) and then a West coast tour in March of '95. I'm also going over to Norway this summer with Marc and Ann Savoy, and my wife Sharon, my daughter Melissa and I are doing a children's program in London. 

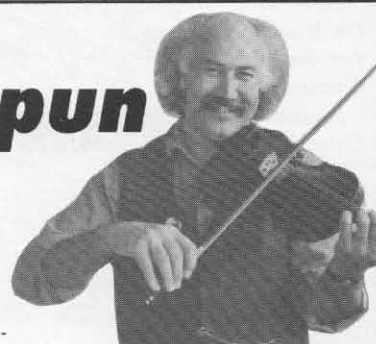
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# Two-Step d'Ambrose

By Ambrose Thibodeaux, Transcribed by Jack Tuttle from Michael Doucet's Beau Solo album (Arhoolie 321).

Ambrose Thibodeaux is the master at creating new segments to older songs by taking chances with different ideas. This music has his timeless edge stamped on it. — *M. Doucet*

This is a light, bouncy tune with a strong rhythm. Doucet plays this tune with the D string tuned up to E but it will work fine in standard tuning as long as you cover both the A and D strings with your first finger for the B and E double-stops as in the 2nd line. Notice the syncopated rhythm each time the E chord occurs. — *Jack Tuttle*

The musical score is written in G major (two sharps) and 2/4 time. It consists of eight staves of music. The notation includes various chords (A, B, E) and techniques such as double-stops (V), triplets (3), and a D.S. al Coda section. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The score includes a first ending bracket and a D.S. al Coda section.

# La Bétaille

By Varise Connor, Transcribed by Jack Tuttle from Michael Doucet's Beau Solo album (Arhoolie 321).  
Lyrics transcribed and translated by Sharon Arms Doucet.

This is from the Cajun harmonica (musique bouche) player from Mamou, Isom Fontenot, the predecessor of Cajun blues. — M. Doucet

## La Bétaille

O, la bétaille  
Elle a monté dans le 'tit arbre,  
Eil a tombé sur la hache,  
Ella a fait du mal.

## Wild Thing

Oh, the wild thing,  
She climbed up in the little tree,  
She fell on the axe.  
She hurt herself.

Du mal à 'tite bétaille,  
'Tite bétaille à cheveux rouges,  
'Tite bétaille à yeux bleus,  
Dis "bye-bye," chère bébé.

Hurt the little wild thing,  
Little wild thing with red hair,  
Little wild thing with blue eyes,  
Say "bye-bye," dear baby.

This is a haunting Cajun waltz played in a modal scale. Doucet plays it with his fiddle tuned down a whole step but it's written here as if it were played in standard tuning. Don't overlook the new key signature in the second part. — Jack Tuttle

The musical score for 'La Bétaille' is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. The piece is a waltz. The score consists of seven staves of music. The first staff begins with a 'V' (vibrato) marking and a first ending bracket labeled 'A'. The second staff starts with a 'D' chord and includes a triplet of eighth notes. The third staff features a 'G' chord and a first ending bracket labeled '1 A'. The fourth staff has a second ending bracket labeled '2 A' and an 'Em' chord. The fifth staff continues with 'G' and 'Em' chords. The sixth staff has a 'G' chord and a first ending bracket labeled '1 A'. The seventh staff concludes with a 'G' chord and a second ending bracket labeled '2 A'. Fingerings (0, 4) and articulation (accents, slurs) are indicated throughout the score.



# Gigue d'Acadie

By Edouard Alleman, Transcribed by Niles Hokannen from Michael Doucet's Beau Solo album (Arhoolie 321).

This is perhaps the purest form of Acadian fiddle music to have survived the journey to Louisiana, thanks to the tenacity of Edouard Alleman of Bayou Lafourche. The fiddle is still the voice of choice over the accordion in that isolated, watery mainstay of Acadianism. Edouard raises turtles there and is not interested in winning any races. In his spare time he is a champion at pulling ancient sounds out of a fiddle. — M. Doucet

The musical score for "Gigue d'Acadie" is presented in six staves of music. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The music is written in treble clef. The first two staves are primarily melodic lines with some chordal accompaniment. The third staff introduces a double bar line and includes a four-measure rest marked with a '4' below it. The fourth and fifth staves continue the melodic development, with some triplet markings (indicated by a bracket and the number '3'). The sixth staff concludes the piece with a final four-measure rest marked with a '4' below it. Chord symbols are placed above the notes: D, A, D, D7, G, D, G, and G.