

A Short History of Cajun Fiddling

By Michael L. Doucet

The fiddle styles known today as Cajun are the result of a long evolution of cultural influences, all of which have contributed diverse elements in varying degrees.

With the first major arrival of French citizens at Port Royal, Acadie (now Nova Scotia and New Brunswick) in 1624 came bowed string instruments including vielles, fidels, and rebecs. Through written documentation supplied by the accompanying Jesuit priests, we learn that this French secular *paysan* string tradition flourished and eventually included the Italian developed violin along with religious and secular music of the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Baroque Periods.

During their occupation and settlement of Acadie, the five generations of Acadians shared their land and tales with Mic-Mac tribes, the Scots and newly arrived Frenchmen until their dispersment under the British rule in 1755. Few if any fiddles survived this heartless act, but the ballads and the tunes evolved into “*la musique à bouche*” or a “diddle-di diddle-dum” style of singing and humming. The core of Acadian music endured because of this ancient oral tradition.

Within 20 years, most exiled families had acquired land grants in southern Louisiana where the inherent isolation of the terrain would contain the “Nouvelle Acadie.” As the Acadian people began to adapt to their new environment, their music began to show signs of Louisiana multiculturalism. Arriving from the international seaport of New Orleans came African, Caribbean, and a multitude of European people whose cultures would eventually filter down into the Acadian settlements in southwest Louisiana.

Throughout the 1800s French dances along the bayous consisting of twin fiddles were common among the Acadian settlements, although new styles such as the Viennese waltz, Afro-French rhythms, and excerpts from indigenous opera were being assimilated.

The melody was played by the eldest or lead fiddler on the higher strings while the seconder or the “*secondeur*” would follow and play more of a chordal-percussive rhythmic style on the two lowest strings. Frequently when only one fiddler was available, he would then tune his instrument to a chord or “scordatura.” Examples of this style can be heard from the '78 rpm recordings of Dennis McGee with either S. D. Courville or Ernest Frugé seconding (“Tasso,” “McGee’s Reel”). Dennis not only performed two-steps and waltzes, but included ancient reels, contradances, *danses carrées*, cotillions, mazurkas, jigs, blues and *valse à deux temps* in his vast repertoire. Dennis McGee, who died in 1988 at the age of 93, was a carrier of much of the music of the late nineteenth century, not to mention the new music he created in the twentieth century (“Chère Bébé Créole,” “Adieu Roza”).

The introduction and popularity of the diatonic accordion changed this fiddle style. Listening to Dennis accompany Amédé Ardoin on the 1929 recordings (“Eunice Two-Step,” “Madame Atchen”), one can hear the fiddle play the melody and percussive seconding performed simultaneously. With accordionist Angelas LeJeune during the same year, we can hear Dennis seconding the accordion by merely keeping the beat and changing chords.

With the popularity of the accordion heard on Cajun French 1920s and '30s '78 recordings and the growing radio broadcasts laden with country and mountain music, the older fiddle styles that McGee had learned from 19th century musicians gave way to a more polished but melodically reduced, American-influenced style. Leo Soileau, for example, had originally recorded bluesy fiddle/accordion duets in the late '20s but continued evolving his style to fit and encourage the changing ways of popular music in the '30s with his string band orchestras. Other popular fiddlers such as Luderin Darbonne, Oran “Doc” Guidry, and Hector Stutes began establishing new “string bands” and smoothing out the older French repertoire and adding Tin Pan Alley popular tunes, Country and Western hoe downs, and rags to their performances (Alley Boys of Abbeville’s “Macaque sur mon Dos” and “Quel Espoir”).

With the arrival of World War II, many Cajuns went to work at boat-building works and factories along the Gulf coast. These companies not only supplied necessary war goods but also daily performances of popular French bands to keep the workers happy. One of the most famous musicians to come out of this duty was Harry Choates, the King of the Cajun fiddlers! Harry incorporated the popular Texas swing-boogie beat with the older French styles. His version of traditional material such as “Jole Blon” (“Ma Blonde est Parti”) and “Basile Waltz” became regional hits. As the '40s turned into the '50s, Harry Choates’ style prevailed as up and coming fiddle greats Chuck Guillory, Rufus Thibodeaux, Merlin Fontenot, Gib Guilbeau, “Frenchy” Burke, Floyd LeBlanc, and others took up this style and forwarded it each in his own way.

In the late '50s, Doc Guidry became a regular with “Aldus Roger and the Lafayette Playboys,” who performed live every Saturday afternoon on Lafayette’s own televised Cajun music show. Given only a short melody solo by the accordionist, Doc really perfected the combination of old/new styles and created this twin fiddle arrangement. Doc and his seconder (at one time either Tony Thibodeaux, “Sleepy” Houffpauer, or Louis Foreman) developed a higher harmony above the lead fiddle (“Mamou Two-Step,” “KLFY Waltz”). Differing from the traditional contrapuntal style of the McGee era, these fiddlers created a smoother harmonic and rhythmic style which has remained popular today. At about the same time, Doug Kershaw and his brother Rusty were performing their own French music on the Grand Ole Opry. Doug’s raw fiddle

style is extremely driving and retains much more of the older French spirit than his initial C&W influence. His early fiddle-inspired versions of "Cajun Stripper" (Bosco Stomp) and "Diggy-diggy Li" are classics in his style which continue to draw interest to the music of southwest Louisiana.

With the '60s came more of a thorough Americanization of the people and mores of French Louisiana. One family to take a stand were the Balfas, Will, Dewey, Rodney and Burkeman, of Mamou. Dewey and Will shared interchanging lead and lower second fiddles as Rodney held down the rhythm guitar and Burkeman the triangle. Beginning with songs learned from their father Charles and his sisters, the brothers fashioned a unique smooth style string band playing old-time Cajun songs. Will's haunting version of his aunt Una's "Valse des Balfa," along with Dewey and Rodney's rendition of the traditional "Parlez-nous à boire" exemplify the solidarity of the Balfa Brothers' sound, which has influenced so many.

I guess this is where I come in, but someone else will have to write my story. I was fortunate enough to have been able to visit, learn, and develop friendships with some of the greatest musicians and people of our culture. I owe deep gratitude to Dennis McGee, Sady Courville, B  b   Carri  re, the Balfa brothers Will, Rodney, and Dewey, Varise Connor, Chuck Guillory, Lionel LeLeux, Hector Duhon, Canray Fontenot, Luderin Darbonne, Marc Savoy, Edouard Allemand, Doc Guidry, Wade Frug  , Wayne Perry, Austin Pitre, Otto Mouton, and especially my uncle T- Will Knight, who taught me my first Cajun songs and whose fiddle I learned on.

Today there are probably more people playing Cajun music than ever before, including many outside of our culture. In my generation, one had to literally fight to play this music which was put down as being old people's music and un-American. Now it seems to be embraced by all. Mike Seeger, Tracey Swartz, Suzie Rothfield, Will Spires, Jeanie McCleary, Kerry Blesch, and Kevin Wimmer are but a few of the growing number of talented musicians from other cultures who have developed a strong passion for preserving our music and continue to play and inspire others to learn Cajun fiddle songs.

There are many younger Cajun fiddlers about whom we will probably hear a lot in years to come, such as Mitchell Reed whose styles date from the 1930s or before, Beau Thomas who is continuing the swing style of Harry Choates, Steve LeBlanc who writes and plays funky-Cajun fiddle with the "Blue Runners", and Joel Savoy who is learning traditional styles from his father, Marc Savoy, one of the masters himself.

Acadian fiddle music continues to evolve. We must help nurture younger musicians to create new songs as well as remember the older styles that have survived the Acadian odyssey. As the soundpost is the soul of the violin, Acadian fiddle music is the soul of Cajun culture. Let the fiddles sing!

Michael Doucet dit BeauSoleil
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Photo: William Campbell

BeauSoleil, left to right: Michael Doucet, Billy Ware, Al Tharp, Tommy Alesi, David Doucet, Jimmy Breaux