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Putting Cajuns on the Map: Music's Role in Popularizing Louisiana's Bayou Culture

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By

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ABSTRACT

Southern Louisiana witnessed a grassroots Cajun cultural revival whose most active years stretched across three decades in the latter half of the twentieth century. While important local and world events created conditions favorable to its development, actors and events within the Cajun musical sphere specifically, and the establishment and use of iconography within that sphere, played integral roles in sustaining the Cajun renaissance into the 1980s. Activist efforts that recast long-held negative tropes about Cajun culture ensured modern-day Cajuns had access not only to cultural traditions but to the same spaces created to help keep those traditions alive. While those efforts took place across broadly diversified fields, cultural activism accomplished specifically within the Cajun musical realm produced avenues for the mass of ordinary Cajuns to acknowledge, celebrate, and ultimately commodify culturally authentic signifiers, which was of central importance to sustain a renewed cultural pride.

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This thesis coalesced in fits and starts over several years and is therefore the product of a number of important introductions and collaborations. Dr. Court Carney must be thanked first, as he was not only responsible for redirecting my academic interests from English to history ten years ago but, as my committee chair, for profoundly shaping the content and clarity of my thesis. His academic expertise and incredible insight added a level of scholarship I could not have attained on my own.

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provided during that small window of time redirected the content of my thesis for the better. Also, John Sharp, assistant director for research at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Center for Louisiana Studies, and the center's entire staff.

Of course, my partner in life, Jacob Barnhill, is deserving of more thanks than I can give. He was blessed to be privy to a number of emotional breakdowns as well as personal triumphs during my years in graduate school and months writing this thesis. His sense of humor and continued pride in me was a constant and necessary respite from not only the general rigors of writing but also the relentless obstacles that the global nightmare of 2020 wrought.

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INTRODUCTION:

Contextualizing the Cajun Musical World

Few Lafayette residents seemed to bat an eye when, in the early 1960s, the University of Southwestern Louisiana's football coach Russ Faulkinberry began referring to his team as the "Raging Cajuns."[1] He coined the nickname (which began being used in print interchangeably with "Ragin' Cajuns" soon after) to allude to the fact that ninety-five percent of athletes on the team were from the Acadiana area, yet its usage had deeper implications.[2] Although it was

[1]Since its establishment late in the 1800s, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette has experienced several name changes. An 1898 legislative act first founded the school under the name Southwestern Louisiana Industrial Institute. By 1921, it had outgrown its industrial role, and the word was consequently dropped from the name, making it just the Southwestern Louisiana Institute. Its offerings and enrollment numbers increased exponentially over the next 30 years, and in 1960, it was renamed the University of Southwestern Louisiana. Many fought, and ultimately lost, to name it the University of Louisiana during the 1980s. However, in 1999, a persistent university president, Dr. Ray Authement, signed an order renaming it the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, to which it is still referred today; "The University," University of Louisiana at Lafayette, accessed October 24, 2020, https://louisiana.edu/about-us/history/university#:~:text=UL%20Lafayette%20was%20originally%20named,the%20school%20on%20July%2014.

[2]I use the terms "Acadiana" and "southern Louisiana" interchangeably throughout this thesis. Acadiana is a triangular region in the southern half of Louisiana comprising 22 of the state's parishes. It is bordered on the south by the Gulf of Mexico and on the west by the Texas state line. It stretches east to Lafourche Parish and north to Avoyelles Parish. Neither Baton Rouge nor New Orleans fully reside within Acadiana. A more detailed map can be found on the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Center for Louisiana Studies' website; "Acadiana Parishes," University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Center for Louisiana Studies, last accessed October 24, 2020, https://louisianastudies.louisiana.edu/node/164.

not to be the university's official mascot until the early 1970s, "Raging Cajuns" quickly became a beloved moniker for the team and an effective tool for inciting school pride. By 1964, the term had even been emblazoned on school paraphernalia (Figure 0.1).[3] It was "cool" now (or so one advertisement alleged) to take pride not just in the university's team but in the very term "Cajun," which had for many years carried with it negative implications. The nickname's quick public acceptance evidenced the early stages of a mid-century Cajun renaissance. By that point, efforts by grassroots and state-level activists had been growing in force and sought to reverse some of the detrimental effects of wartime Americanization, including erasure of the native Cajun-French language. Scholars of southern Louisiana history have left little doubt that such a cultural revival took place, but the specific cultural contexts that bore out that change remain elusory. This thesis argues that actors and events within the Cajun musical sphere—and the establishment and use of iconography within that sphere—played integral roles in sustaining the Cajun renaissance into the 1980s. Music provided a realm for Cajuns to explore their own culture's authenticity, to agree upon cultural signifiers, and to eventually commodify and diffuse those

[3]An advertisement for the "Raging Cajuns" spirit shirt was printed in the September 10, 1964, edition of the Lafayette *Daily Advertiser.*

signifiers to external cultures.[4] Each of these acts was an essential part of creating a lasting cultural renaissance that would elevate Cajun culture to national and international recognition.

Figure 0.1: An advertisement in the September 10, 1964, edition of the Lafayette *Daily Advertiser* for "Raging Cajuns" shirts.

[4]My use of the term "signifier" as it relates to culture denotes any material item that has been attached cultural meaning. An everyday item becomes a sign when it is imbued with cultural significance and is thus given culturally connected meaning through spoken or unspoken consensus by those within the culture. I provide a more in-depth look at the creation of cultural signifiers in my Introduction and scattered throughout my thesis, but when I use it, I am referring to any real-world item that has been deemed culturally significant and imbued with relevance specific to the culture. As an example, crawfish exist in other U.S. states, but the image of a crawfish is not used to represent other cultures as it is used in southern Louisiana to represent Cajun culture. To form my understanding of signifiers, I referred to linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's writings on semiotics and the study's use of the terms "signs" and "signifiers." By contrast, an icon is an artistic rendering of a cultural signifier, so when I speak of iconography, I speak of the use of cultural signifiers in art and other visual mediums to represent the culture; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics,* ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986).

Modern Cajun pride rests chiefly on histories surrounding a shared heritage of displacement. Louisiana's present-day Cajuns, or Acadians, are largely descended from French immigrants who were expelled by the British from Nova Scotia, or L'Acadie, in 1755. The French first settled the island off the eastern coast of Canada in 1604 to establish a fur-trading post. Although countries sought the land and resources L'Acadie promised, the Acadians successfully remained neutral through nearly a decade and a half of inter-imperial strife. Neutrality proved no match for imperial pursuits, and on the brink of the Seven Years War, the British overtook the island, deporting small groups to existing British colonies and ultimately scattering thousands of other French Catholic families across the world.[5] While some ended up back in France and others in Saint Domingue and along the eastern seaboard, thousands made their way to Louisiana by way of the Gulf of Mexico and settled within the state's bayous throughout the following decade.[6]

Defining Cajun culture has been difficult even for modern-day scholars. Folklorists, linguists, and historians have seized upon the differences between

[5]John Mack Faragher, *A Great and Noble Scheme: The Tragic Story of the Expulsion of the French Acadians from their American Homeland* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), xvii; Christopher Hodson, *The Acadian Diaspora: An Eighteenth-Century History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

[6]Hodson, *The Acadian Diaspora*, 5.

Creoles, Cajuns, and Acadians in an attempt to define “Cajun” while simultaneously acknowledging the intimately close link it shares with the term “Acadian.” Semiotic differentiation is complicated by the fact that the term “Cajun” is a derivation of the word Acadian, only entering the lexicon after a multi-century cultural evolution that precipitated social fragmentation among bayou residents.[7] To present-day Louisianans, the two terms are interchangeable. However, in the first half of the twentieth century, “Cajun” was used explicitly to deride poorer white residents of southern Louisiana while “Acadian” designated all others within the white community who were not white Creoles. As French scholar and Louisiana folklorist Barry Ancelet explained in his book, *The Makers of Cajun Music,* even in Louisiana in the 1980s, “French-speaking whites generally call themselves Cajuns, though some maintain the traditional distinction by calling themselves French Creoles. French-speaking blacks ordinarily call themselves Creoles.”[8] These self-ascribed designators were of course “frequently overlooked by outsiders, who lump all groups together as ‘Cajun.’”[9] Even taken outside of socioeconomic contexts, the differences between Creole and Cajun or Acadian

[7]Barry Ancelet and Elemore Morgan Jr., *The Makers of Cajun Music* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 16.

[8]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 16.

[9]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 16.

can be hard to spot precisely because these groups often intermarried and intermingled. Ultimately, perception played more of a role than reality in cultural ascription for Acadians when the group first settled in southern Louisiana. This fact would have future implications for how Cajun cultural perception would exist within the culture and be written about by outsiders.

Ethnographer James Dormon best analyzed the process of ascription that took place in Cajun society in his book on Cajun ethnohistory.[10] In *The People Called Cajuns: An Introduction to an Ethnohistory*, Dormon studied the ascription of traits to Cajuns by outsiders and the reality of those ascriptive traits in everyday Cajun life. Cajun culture came to be defined by the fact that "most elements of the Cajuns' traditional culture fell under the powerful, even pervasive influence of cultural diffusion."[11] Southern Louisiana was a true cultural melting pot, or as most Cajuns prefer to describe it, a "cultural gumbo."[12] The reality of Cajunism is that it "changed in form and shape and content as the Cajun people incorporated outside elements through contact and acculturation," from food to dance to music and religion.[13] This is a paradox of Cajun culture: its incredible

[10]James H. Dormon, *The People Called Cajuns: An Introduction to an Ethnohistory* (Lafayette: The Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1983).

[11]Dormon, *The People Called Cajuns,* 37.

[12]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music,* 22.

[13]Dormon, *The People Called Cajuns,* 37.

distinctness is indebted to its immense adaptability. The Grand Derangement, or the French expulsion from Canada, persists today as a point of solidarity, unifying modern Cajuns in a painful shared past. It is also an incredibly myopic tale, reducing a culture with ties to several continents to one singular expulsion story. Cajun culture is as historically permeable as it is exclusive—to be Cajun in the twentieth century was to be unique in a highly homogenized world. It was to lay claim to an "otherness" only made possible through decades of cultural exchange with nearby groups.[14] Regardless of its narrowness, Cajuns' continued recitation of this diasporic origin story points to a trait embedded in the overall culture—members' belief in their ability to overcome by banding together. Naturally, this belief became the heart of the mid-century revival movement.[15]

[14]"Other" and "otherness" are sociological terms that relate to the formation of social identities and the use of social categories as binary opposites. A basic, modern example would be the gender binary, in which gender is thought to be either distinctly male or female. The terms are used in historical texts (primarily cultural histories) and throughout this thesis to describe the creation and recognition of cultural distinctness between groups. Otherness is often ascribed to a group by external forces but can be subverted by the ascribed group to create positive associations or reclaim varying levels of cultural agency. For more on sociological understandings of identity formation, see George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. Charles Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

[15]For detailed and comprehensive studies on the early Acadian peoples and the historical development of their traditions and communal culture, see Carl Brasseaux's books, *The Founding of New Acadia: The Beginnings of Acadian Life in Louisiana, 1765-1803* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); and *Acadian to Cajun: Transformation of a People, 1803-1877* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992).

The French language became a powerful feature of, and in many ways a catalyst to, this same Cajun renaissance precisely because it crossed ethnic boundaries. Cajun French was different from its ancestral language because it developed through a mixing of French diaspora groups who settled in southern Louisiana.[16] What's more, despite a cohort of other ethnic groups already settled in the area, it eventually became Acadiana's dominant language. French exiles "had so firmly established themselves as a people" within just one generation of settlement "that they became the dominant culture in South Louisiana and absorbed the other ethnic groups around them."[17] This included absorption of "French Creoles (descendants of earlier French settlers), Spanish, Germans, Scots-Irish, Afro-Caribbeans, and Anglo-Americans," all of whom "eventually adopted the traditions and language of this new society which became the southern Louisiana mainstream."[18] Acculturation was not a one-way street, however, and "the Acadians, in turn, borrowed many traits of these other cultures, and this cross-cultural exchange produced a new Louisiana-based community, the Cajuns."[19] Despite reciprocal adoption of cultural traits between

[16]Philip Gould and Barry Jean Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), ix-x.

[17]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 20.

[18]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 20.

[19]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 20.

ethnic groups, French became and remained the dominant regional language. It proved itself resilient in the face of change and for this reason became of central importance to combating early twentieth-century Americanization.[20]

A feature of the twentieth-century Americanization Movement was an emphasis on English as a primary language, which French-speaking Cajuns faced increasing national pressure to adopt.[21] Compelled by Americanization, state legislators revised the Louisiana constitution of 1921 and effectively banned Cajun French in schools, bringing the language—a variety of French based on older versions—to near extinction. Though ousted from schoolrooms, Cajun French remained spoken in homes, and as late as the beginning of World War II

[20]Shane K. Bernard, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), xvii-xviii. Bernard notes that Americanization is the process by which immigrants or culturally diverse groups are acculturated into the American mainstream by choice or through hegemonic forces. In the context of Cajuns, this predominantly happened during the decades surrounding the first and second World Wars as nationalistic rhetoric sought to unify United States citizens under one pure American ideal. This meant discouraging, attacking, and at times outright banning anything deemed "foreign," including all languages other than English.

[21]The terms "Acadian" and "Cajun" existed for some time as interchangeable terms until the first hints of Americanization beset nineteenth-century Louisiana. The group began to splinter into separate factions linked specifically to wealth and language. Ties to French customs through crafts, food, and music continued in nuanced ways, but Acadians increasingly conformed to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americanization efforts more readily than Cajuns, which included the adoption of English as a primary language. This language-based delineation played out mostly through political and social avenues. Acadians gained social rank by assimilating to Anglo-American customs late in the 1830s and 1840s while Cajuns remained laborers. According to ethnographer James Dormon, Cajuns had never quite been able to shake negative outsider perceptions formed during their earliest years of settlement, including poverty, lack of ambition, and illiteracy. Dormon notes that, of the ascriptive traits catalogued by early ethnographers, material poverty combined with a certain lack of ambition and enterprise and an unwillingness to adopt the aggressively materialistic values of the Anglo-Americans were particularly notable; Dormon, *The People Called Cajuns*, 35.

remained the primary language of 75 percent of prospective Cajun service members.[22] Around the same time, some of the first whispers of cultural protection and revival efforts could be heard:

> As early as the 1930s, individuals working in the academic community had laid the groundwork for cultural self-preservation. Louise Olivier developed a local version of the Works Progress Administration, through the Louisiana State University Agricultural Extension Service, which encouraged the maintenance of traditional culture by attempting to create a market for the folk arts. In 1939, one of the Lomaxes' first contacts in Louisiana, Irene Whitfield, published her LSU master's thesis, *Louisiana French Folksongs*, still a definitive collection of Cajun and Creole folk music. In the 1940s, Elizabeth Brandon included numerous ballads in her Université Laval (Quebec) dissertation on Vermilion Parish, and William Owens recorded folksongs under the guidance of Miss Whitfield.[23]

Though not equal in power to its mid-century iteration, an oppositional force arose early in the twentieth century primarily in academia that attempted to undo what the oppressive forces of Americanization wrought on southern Louisiana's culture. This academic response would be an important first step in pre-revival efforts because it cataloged those traditional folk materials to which musicians and cultural activists would later refer in their revival efforts.

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[22]Bernard, *The Cajuns,* 5-7; James Harvey Domengeaux, "Native Born Acadians and the Equality Ideal," *Louisiana Law Review* 46, no. 6 (July 1986), 1155; Roger K. Ward, "The French Language in Louisiana Law and Legal Education: A Requiem," *Louisiana Law Review* 57, no. 4 (Summer 1997), 21.

[23]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 29.

State-sanctioned revival endeavors began in earnest in the 1960s, fueled in part by a growing national folk revival movement that undergirded local efforts. In 1968, state legislators created the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) with the objective of developing, utilizing, and preserving the French language for the cultural, economic, and touristic benefit of the state. The council sought to restore competence in French by reinstating it as a second language in schools and improving the legal and social status of Louisiana's French language and culture. Council members worked to remove the constitutional ban on French and the shame of being Cajun.[24] The formation of CODOFIL was one of the first statewide, legislative initiatives to reestablish pride in aspects of southern Louisiana's culture. James Harvey Domengeaux, CODOFIL's first chairperson, focused first on political maneuvers and language education. Soon, however, he became convinced of the importance of language preservation, taking language education beyond the schoolroom and into everyday life.[25] Acadiana's culture was, for possibly the first time since Acadians' expulsion from Canada, acknowledged by the state and by extension legitimized

[24]Domengeaux, "Native Born Acadians and the Equality Ideal," 1155.

[25]Domengeaux, "Native Born Acadians and the Equality Ideal," 1155.

among its people. This legitimacy led to a cascade of events celebrating Cajun culture that endured more than forty years.[26]

A first step toward successful multi-decade revival efforts was the establishment of Cajun cultural signifiers. Dick Hebdige's work on subcultures and their use of style, as well as Warren Susman's book on the patterns by which historians may comprehend and write about culture, are ideal texts through which to begin locating Cajun culture in juxtaposition to parent or outside cultures. Through the texts, we can contextualize the establishment of Cajun cultural signifiers before exploring how the authenticity of certain figures, like fiddler Dewey Balfa, led to successful public reception and mass commercialization of those signifiers. As Susman explains, identifying the assemblage of cultural signifiers allows us to "discover the forms in which people have experienced the world—the patterns of life, the symbols by which they cope with the world."[27] Both texts assist in fleshing out ways the Cajun revival relied on a specific set of characteristics determined to symbolize the root of the culture's aesthetic. Cultural adherents create these signifiers often first on a subconscious level, through an evolution of responses to life experiences.[28] Once established, a

[26]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music,* 31.

[27]Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003), 185.

[28]Susman, *Culture as History*, 193.

cultural movement must command this “set of images, symbols, and myths with most meaning for the bulk of the [sic] people" to succeed.[29] For Cajuns, language and landscape imagery—scenes of placid bayous and marshland critters—as well as allusions to simple living became these self-same identifiers.

Language evokes perhaps the strongest response of Cajun pride precisely because of its vilification through harsh, wartime nationalist rhetoric that led French-speaking Louisianans to be punished legally and persecuted socially for not speaking English.[30] Because “notions concerning the sanctity of language are intimately bound up with ideas of social order,” and because Cajun French was a main identifier of Acadiana for outside cultures, a first step in the mid-century Cajun revival was to combat this linguistic small-mindedness.[31] In Hebdige’s language, this meant a specific form of rebellion against the parent culture, where cultural styles become “symbolic forms of resistance” and “symptoms of a wider and more generally submerged dissent,” which for Cajuns “characterized the whole post-war period.”[32] Louisianans addressed this first through legal means—legislators worked to remove and rewrite state laws from the 1920s

[29]Susman, *Culture as History*, 1.

[30]Bernard, *The Cajuns,* 16-18.

[31]Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 91.

[32]Hebdige, *Subculture*, 80.

banning the use of French in schools—but this also meant rewriting how Cajuns interacted with their own culture. Existing as both cultural producers and disseminators, musicians became a first line of defense in reestablishing positive responses to cultural signifiers. During the war years and through threat of punishment, Cajun musicians continued to sing French ballads in tucked away dance halls and on creaky front porches. Coupling language with bayou imagery, Cajun musicians offered a non-political route for Acadians to disconnect from a post-war cultural homogenization and reconnect with cultural roots. First, signifiers of this root culture had to be established.

Hebdige's discussion of the bricolage concept assists in contextualizing the creation of cultural symbols. On its most basic level and in terms of culture, bricolage is how the "non-literate, non-technical mind of so-called 'primitive' man responds to the world around him."[33] That is to say, the mind of someone not caught up in the world of cultural production but who is producing culture simply by existing within and engaging with it. To construct cultural signifiers, adherents engage in a subconscious type of symbolic nest building, wherein each "carefully and precisely orders, classifies and arranges into structures the minutiae of the physical world."[34] For Cajuns, the images of everyday life bore out this

[33]Hebdige, *Subculture*, 103.

[34]Hebdige, *Subculture*, 103.

"minutiae," which became inextricably tied to Louisiana's rural landscape—in the scenes of grasslands, marshlands, and bayous strung endlessly together along stretches of highway and back roads as Cajuns traveled to work, to church, or to family homes. For many, immersion within landscape imagery was all in a day's work. According to the 1940 U.S. Department of Commerce census, of the more than 771,000 people employed in the state that year, over 246,000 worked in the agricultural, forestry, and fishery industries.[35] With only state census totals to go by, it is difficult to know how this labor ratio specifically translated to southern Louisiana, but given the amount at the state level, the proximity of southern cities to the gulf suggests a significant number would be engaged in maritime trades.

Outside of work, bayou imagery pervaded home life. Staples of Cajun cuisine included crustaceans dug up from the soft earth and fish caught in the gulf or off the side of a pirogue. And they were not picky—if something moved, Cajuns didn't seem to be above frying it. Reptiles became a sort of southern delicacy, with lumps of alligator meat flung into gumbos or frog legs ripped off and fried as an appetizer. This meant even individuals who didn't work in the maritime and agricultural industries still engaged with Louisiana's flora and fauna daily, crowding around tables to break bread and dismember beasts of the

[35]"1940 Census of Population: Volume 3. The Labor Force. Occupation, Industry, Employment, and Income," United States Census Bureau, accessed October 28, 2020, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1943/dec/population-vol-3.html.

bayou. These objects were then "reassembled in the distinctive subcultural ensembles [and] 'made to reflect, express and resonate … aspects of group life.'"[36] Images became tied to specific communal meanings, and those meanings coalesced into cultural signifiers.

Slowly, these signifiers, bound up in language and landscape imagery, seeped into Cajun music, infusing notions of cultural authenticity into the practice and performance of cultural sound. Cajun music became the literal "'noise' (as opposed to sound)" of disruption, forcing an "interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media."[37] Music—through both lyrics and original, authentic styling—allowed Cajuns to halt the slow absorption of their enclave into the postwar homogenized American society by capturing the attention of folk activists unearthing authentic folk cultures in an effort to combat Americanization's negative effects. The music forced a national parent culture to acknowledge the subculture's difference. The creation of Cajun signifiers thus merged with an American folk popularization movement that took hold in the first half of the twentieth century. Built on a decades-old academic approach to folklore and understanding, the twentieth-century revival reached a magnitude previously unfelt—its success in part a

[36]Hebdige, *Subculture,* 114.

[37]Hebdige, *Subculture*, 90.

result of tactics developed in the advertising and marketing boom of the same era.

John and Alan Lomax are considered the fathers of this folk movement. In 1933, their expedition across the south forever shifted academic and public approaches to musical traditions. The father-son pair, through their efforts to unearth roots music and link the present to an American past, formulated a template for popularizing little-known subcultures. They were the “cultural workers” required for musicians to enter “into the public memory … the middlemen between folk and popular culture who rediscover performers, reinterpret their early recordings in relation to subsequent musical trends, and redefine the artists as folk forefathers and foremothers.”[38] The Lomaxes developed methods first to record unheard roots music, "the disembodied nature of [which] allowed for a kind of intimacy that demanded stillness as the listener absorbed song’s emotional impact and relative privacy," and then to sell it.[39] They created historical posterity for a type of music either shunned or disregarded nationally before folklorists harnessed its emotive powers. The 1933 Lomax tour "would lay the groundwork for an American folk music revival,” but

[38]Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 7-8.

[39]Ann Powers, *Good Booty: Love and Sex, Black & White, Body and Soul in American Music* (New York: Dey Street Books, 2017), 65.

perhaps most lastingly, through it the Lomaxes developed criteria for recognizing folk music as well as methods for navigating and selling authenticity.[40] Cajun activists and other subculture promoters built close relationships with the Lomaxes, specifically Alan, and would adopt these methods, detailed below, in future decades during their campaign to combat a national bigotry against their perceived "otherness."

The Lomaxes toured the South in the interim between the two world wars and were "the first to use 'actual folk' to promote a coherent vision of America's folk music heritage."[41] They shifted focus away from the music to the musician, relying "not on a popular interpreter of folk songs but on exemplars from the folk culture itself."[42] To do so, "they enlisted the full array of mass media—newspapers, radio, movie newsreels, concerts, and records—to transform rural folk musicians into celebrities. In effect they spread their vision of American music by integrating folk into mass culture."[43] Intense bouts of a federally sanctioned disdain for anything un-American bookended their folk revival efforts. In order for their revival to succeed, they were forced to prove that their artists

[40]Filene, *Romancing the Folk,* 48.

[41]Filene, *Romancing the Folk,* 57.

[42]Filene, *Romancing the Folk,* 57.

[43]Filene, *Romancing the Folk,* 57.

represented an authentic American ideal. Thus, they went to work crafting guidelines for selling culture in its purest form.

The Lomaxes' success in reviving roots music lay in their ability to market specific qualities that appeared to link a musician to a shared American origin story. They "produced a web of criteria for determining what a 'true' folk singer looked and sounded like and a set of assumptions about the importance of being a 'true' folk singer. In short, they created a 'cult of authenticity,' a thicket of expectations and valuations that American roots musicians and their audiences have been negotiating ever since."[44] They needed specific people—outcasts untainted by a pervasive American mainstream culture. Because "revival audiences yearn to identify with folk figures, but that identification is premised on difference," the Lomaxes had the difficult job of proving these individuals were both authentically different yet part and parcel to an authentic American ideal.[45]

The Lomaxes' handling of Lead Belly's popularization played a major part in the creation of this cult of authenticity.[46] They constructed an idea of

[44]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 49.

[45]Filene, *Romancing the Folk,* 63.

[46]Lead Belly was an African-American blues and folk singer and guitarist born in Mooringsport, Louisiana. In 1988, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame for his early influences on the genre; and in 1970, he was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame. Arguably, his influence on American folk and rock music would not have been realized without his discovery by and assistance from the Lomaxes. That reality speaks less to Lead Belly's skill set and more to early twentieth century racial realities, of which I do not have the space nor ability to uncover fully here. For an extensive look at Lead

authenticity by blending audience expectations with only those cultural characteristics that would sell Lead Belly's work as authentically pure then forced him to play within those parameters. However, as "the folk revival tried to use idealized conceptions of authenticity to achieve its dreams of reaching mass audiences," problems arose when "tensions in this agenda left performers like Lead Belly caught in limbo between folk and popular culture."[47] The concept of authenticity evolved with the folk revival, recast in light of public response. The Lomaxes had to acknowledge that authenticity is not determined by some silent nod among the cultural collective, but rather is crafted through an interchange of ideas between the collective and outside bodies. What Lead Belly's career taught them, and what they would later correct via Muddy Waters, was the important part nostalgia played in linking outsider cultures to the public collective.

This is what Cajun revivalists had to contend with as the musical sphere became of central importance to the Cajun revival movement. In smoky dance halls and lively family gatherings—essentially in the most authentic of Cajun spaces—Cajun fiddler Dewey Balfa and his ilk drafted a blueprint of Cajun authenticity that revivalists had to present to both those inside and outside the culture. This began in dance halls, which catered predominantly to locals but

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Belly's career and deeper analysis of his place and significance in the blues/folk canon, see Benjamin Filene's *Romancing the Folk*.

[47]Filene, *Romancing the Folk,* 73-74.

whose entertainers were as influenced by the lingering effects of Americanization as they were by a new national fascination of the “other” seeping out of the folk movement’s resuscitation. That is to say, Cajun musicians juggled national pressures to conform with a growing tourist base intent on exploring the various worlds of the “other.”

Clinging to concepts of rural small-town communalism and ties to the French language, Cajun musicians helped establish cultural signifiers in dusty, cramped dance halls that activists would later link with ideals of cultural authenticity. Not only did these developments assist in reimagining the very characteristics once used to vilify Cajuns, like their ties to simple living, but it connected Cajuns to a national folk revival that lent power to its efforts. The success of Cajun music’s presence at a national level and acceptance in sweeping reformist ventures like the folk revival movement gave way to the creation of local cultural celebrations, namely Festival Acadiens. The creation of such a distinct and diverse celebratory space helped promote and expand the commercialization of Cajun sound and monetize cultural signifiers. Drawing upon a post-war mass consumption ethos, record producers increasingly borrowed those signifiers for use on Cajun album covers, in turn distributing them to wider, more diverse audiences as the century wore on and reimaging a public consciousness that at one time connected Cajun culture with negative perceptions, like illiteracy and backwardness. This thesis aims to analyze and

show how this lineage of music-based successes kept Cajun culture alive in the public eye and allowed actors and events within the Cajun musical realm to contribute significantly positive forms of progress to the Cajun renaissance.

CHAPTER ONE:

Dewey Balfa and Authenticity in the Folk Revival Era

Few of those in the crowd of roughly 17,000 people could claim to know Cajun musician Dewey Balfa as he walked on to the 1964 Newport Folk Festival stage. Presumably draped in a neutral-toned, tucked-in button up shirt (it's near impossible to find a photo of Balfa in anything else, except on the rare occasion he threw on a nice flannel or blazer), Balfa, though known for his fiddle skills, was filling in on guitar alongside accordionist Gladius Thibodeaux, fiddler Louis "Vinesse" LeJeune, and percussionist Revon Reed. He had been invited to the annual Rhode Island festival to play in the four-piece group marketed simply as "Cajun Band" in the event's program. The name was succinct, to the point—its ordinariness belying the group's impending eruption of Acadian spirit. Cajun Band was booked to perform four times over four days, in slots that followed recognized acts like Johnny Cash and Joan Baez and were sandwiched among groups marked as "traditional music" and "international songs."

The weekend performance would mark a turning point, or perhaps a type of origin story, for a revival of Cajun culture that would take place over the following decades with Dewey Balfa serving as one of its figureheads. Parsing the details of Balfa's life and activism within distinct cultural contexts, specifically his role within the wider folk movement and within a theoretical framework of authenticity, reveals how a musician from Mamou, Louisiana, became an integral figure in a sprawling cultural revival.

Cajun music had rumbled out of bayou backyards and tiny town dance halls for decades in the early part of the twentieth century. Residents of rural Louisiana towns played the mixture of country and blues, zydeco and swamp pop often to a small patronage of local friends and families.[1] As world wars and national pressures for Americanization chipped away at Cajun isolation, musical production became an important testing ground for Cajun cultural creation and eventual diffusion. Established alongside a tradition of lively family gatherings, these small-town dance halls became celebratory spaces in flux—outlets for Cajuns unwittingly to develop and set parameters of cultural authenticity. Entertainers who frequented dance hall stages, as well as the audiences to whom they played, contributed to this bricolage process—the symbolic ordering

[1]Ryan A. Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown: The Emergence of an American-made Music* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 113; In 1934, Acadiana dance halls reached capacity somewhere between 200 and 300 dancers.

of the world around them—before becoming purveyors of the authenticity such a process created. I argue that Balfa was one such purveyor specifically well suited to both grasp and embody the significance of Cajun culture as well as execute the public awareness necessary to carry out cultural progression. Although not the only cultural activist of his time, Balfa was well positioned to hold an important role in every phase of the revival, in part because of his presence on these early dance hall stages.

Dance halls played an important early role in shaping conceptions of Cajun authenticity precisely because all the realities of life in southern Louisiana converged within them. Huddled above tables or let loose on the dance floor, audiences and entertainers alike either faced the harsh realities of their world by bemoaning predominantly blue-collar work and family struggles or sought to forget them entirely by indulging in strong booze and Cajun tunes. Musicians did not perform for fame or fortune. With rare exceptions, they "do not make a living from their music, nor do they read or write music. They are barbers and bus drivers, farmers and firefighters, mechanics and masons."[2] Cajun musical production rested "comfortably on tradition. It [sprang] from happy homes and loves lost. It ha[d] the calluses and strength of real life. It is played hard on the

[2]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 11.

weekend to ease the strain of working hard all week."[3] It was only natural that life made its way into song as "the emotional qualities of [Cajun] compositions [were] born of grinding poverty and an agrarian, working-class lifestyle."[4] Halls served as a means to either ignore that poverty or lament it, to celebrate a hard day's work or forget it—and nearly every small town seemed to have its own hall, suggesting how normalized the practice decompressing within one had become in Acadiana.

The simplicity of dance hall settings also allowed patrons to familiarize themselves with performers. Dance halls were often small, rural buildings that offered intimate, close-quarter settings. Because Acadiana's rural towns were communal by nature—places where everybody pretty well knew everyone else—this intimate setting acted as an extension of any normal family fete. Babies and children attended alongside their parents, passing the post-work celebration concept between generations (Figure 1.1).[5] The Cajun term for a dance, "fais-do-do," itself meant "go to sleep" and was so called "because [Cajun] mothers brought their entire families to the country home dances and the old ladies

[3]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 11.

[4]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown,* ix.

[5]This image and its caption were printed in Philip Gould's *Les Cadiens d'Asteur* (Lafayette: The Acadiana Press, 1980), 55.

rocked the infants while mama danced away the night."[6] This intimacy of dance hall settings and the communal nature of their nearby towns often meant patrons were friends or family with performers. This truth fit a key cult of authenticity trait—promoting "not just the songs … but the singers who sang them."[7] Dance halls brought listeners up close and personal with the musicians who filled their stages. Such artist recognition would play a significant part in the folk revival movement.

[6]R.J. Reed, "Eh, Mignon, Come Live with Me in Big Mamou," Lafayette *Daily Advertiser,* January 31, 1954.

[7]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 49.

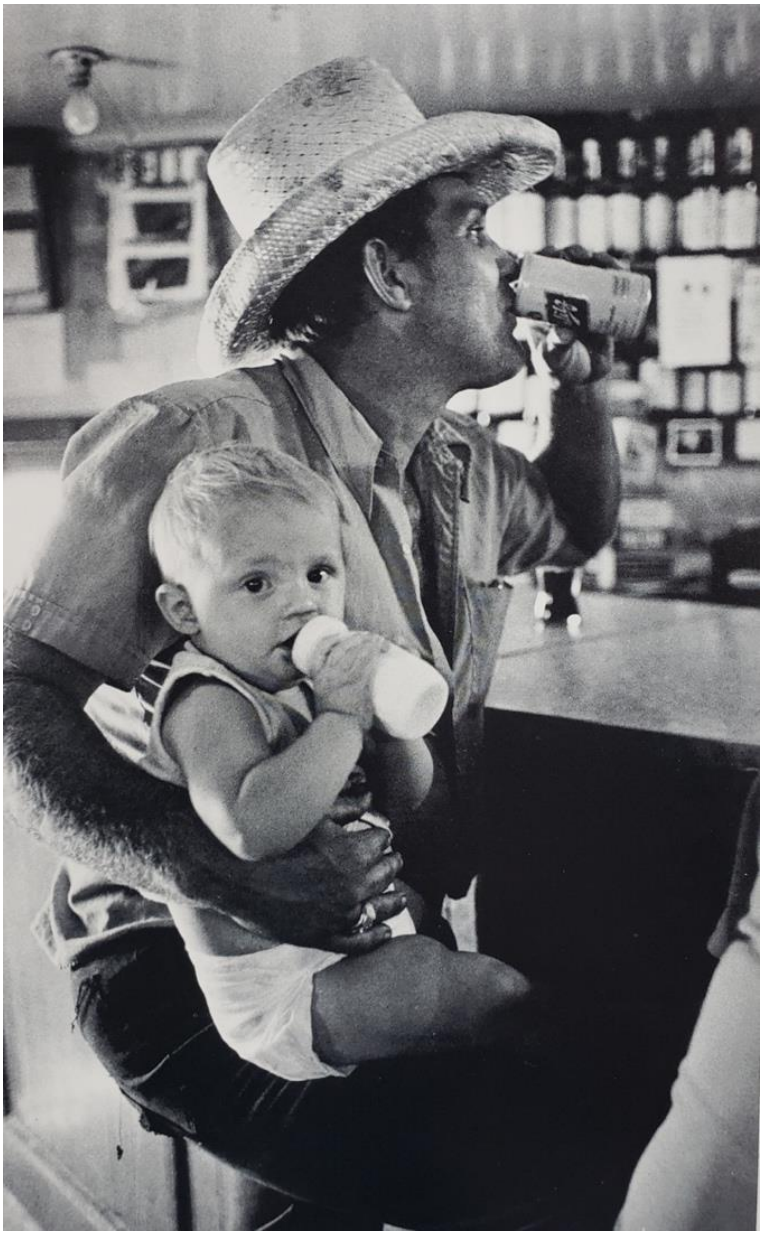

Figure 1.1: Rodney Langlinais relaxes with his daughter at the Rock-a-Bye Club in Forked Island after a day working his cattle.

Hall patrons and musicians brought aspects of ordinary living with them into spaces of cultural production and consequently infused musical creation with the minutiae of everyday life. In this way, Cajuns naturally began creating a space where they consciously and subconsciously navigated the realities of their enclave world. This in part meant coming to grips with their predominantly lower socioeconomic positioning without necessarily letting it define them. They may have been mere bus drivers and mechanics, yet they "had become artists, in the truest sense, while supporting their families with ordinary occupations and with little outside recognition in the early days."[8] Traditional tunes sprang from the depths of their agrarian lifestyle, which they supported through those very "ordinary occupations." This reality fit the narrative of authenticity founded and promoted by the Lomax family in their American travels, which was predicated on anti-fame—or perhaps more specifically blissful ignorance to the possibility of fame. Cajuns played music for enjoyment and catharsis, to continue a tradition carried across oceans by their ancestors, as an authentic folk musician should.

Halls also were a social microcosm of the broader Americanized world, allowing a social stratification to exist within the individual culture that mirrored a wider national stratification. Otherwise put, dance halls made possible at a local level the same promise of personal and professional advancement that existed at

[8]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music,* 14.

a national level. For Cajuns, musical work began after daily labor in the fields—it began “on a bandstand that distinguished entertainers from the mass of dancers who patronized local dance halls.”[9] Folk music was not a viable career choice in southern Louisiana in the first half of the twentieth century, when national and state authorities forced adherence to one ubiquitous American culture and the realm of musical commercialization catered to this Americanization Movement. Their performances at local venues and house parties ensured that Cajun musicians remained “perch[ed] on the cultural margins of their communities,” often swept up in Americanization movements while seeking to retain a unique cultural identity.[10] Thus, “their livelihood necessitated fluency in contemporary musical trends to accommodate audience demands.”[11] Young Cajun musicians like Dewey Balfa would be raised on this precarious crossroad, juggling adherence to forced nationalism while giving the locals what they wanted—some good old chanky-chank. In this way, “public musical performances became the arena where the Cajun community symbolically negotiated continuity and change.”[12] This echoed one truth, as discussed in the Introduction: the essence

[9]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 5.

[10]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown,* 5.

[11]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 5.

[12]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 25.

of Cajun culture lay in its adaptability while simultaneously staying true to a heritage of self-sufficiency. Dance halls allowed Cajun musicians to approach this distant, American world of professional music slowly while also exploring and celebrating the intricacies of their own culture.

While breeding a cohesive cultural identity, the halls also helped produce key figures of the impending Cajun revival—musicians who held a role in the creation and dispersion of cultural signifiers. Among the most important of these would be Cajun fiddler Dewey Balfa, who played often for house parties and on club stages with his four-piece family band, The Balfa Brothers. The Balfas built their musical career splitting time between family gatherings and "these smoke-filled dance halls [that] had long served as cultural incubators for south Louisiana's cross-pollinated musical scene."[13] They were among the earliest Cajun-French bands to make a name for themselves within the southern Louisiana dance hall landscape. When, in the 1940s, "dance halls were at the height of their popularity, the Balfa Brothers band stayed busy, sometimes playing eight dances a week."[14] Their regularity as dance hall acts made them key figures in the creation of Cajun cultural signifiers and consequently regular

[13]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 179.

[14]Barry Jean Ancelet, ed. Bill C. Malone, *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 12: Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 174.

bricoleurs, or participants in the largely subconscious symbolic ordering of their world.

Dewey Balfa's musical tradition came of age around the time of wartime Americanization, an increased focus on roots and folk music, and the early stages of a subcultural response to national homogenization. From the tiny town of Basile, Louisiana, Balfa's professional life stayed fairly simple: he worked as a school bus driver in Basile and later as a life insurance salesman for Automotive Life.[15] Having played in dance halls since the 1940s, Balfa understood cultural celebration on its most basic level—it happened most nights on dance hall floors, when patrons let loose a firm Bosco stomp mid-fiddle tune after a long day's work. Dance halls, like the festivals that would succeed them, became established centers for cultural expression and solidified social bonds. These halls played an important role for Balfa in developing his belief of "music as a universal language … you can communicate with a whole audience at one time."[16] Having experienced the Americanization of French Louisiana early in the twentieth century and its effects on his home region, Balfa sought to combat its negative effects by bringing Cajun culture back to southern Louisiana and back to its people. His close ties to the growing mid-century folk movement, coupled

[15]"Balfa Bros. Charm French Canadians," Ville Platte *Gazette*, July 27, 1971.

[16]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 121.

with the cultural nest building that took place in the musical spaces within which he performed, were of central importance to his mission.

Like a majority of artists recorded during the 1933 Lomax expedition, music was not Balfa's main trade. The son of a sharecropper, he worked a string of blue-collar jobs and thus fit well within the narrative of Cajuns as a simple, working-class people. For that very reason, when he broke away from his enclave and made the last-minute trek to the Newport Folk Festival in 1964, it proved to be a turning point for him personally and for his activism. Suddenly, to the boisterous response from 17,000 strangers, largely ignorant of Cajun culture but captivated by its spirit, Balfa's small-town culture was thrust onto a national stage. He saw the byproducts of a renewed folk tradition first hand and began to realize how his music fit within it. Balfa admitted to a Rhode Island reporter that he had not even heard of a festival before—his Acadian audience rarely topped about 200 people.[17] Festival culture was emerging fresh out of mid-century social movements, and it, too, was changing. Just the next year, at that very same festival, Bob Dylan shifted the folk narrative with a thunderous, electric performance, renouncing "one manifestation of the folk revival, not revivalism as a whole."[18] Dylan was staying true to a folk tradition of shaping themes of

[17]Bernard, *The Cajuns,* 102.

[18]Filene, *Romancing the Folk,* 215.

nostalgia and roots music to the changing times. Balfa borrowed aspects of this festival culture—namely outsider pride and making something your own—and took them home with him to Acadiana. Upon his return, "he joined the new Louisiana Folk Foundation, which operated out of the sleepy Cajun town of Mamou with funding secured from the Newport Folk Festival Foundation."[19] Not only did Balfa return home with national connections and funding, but he "returned a cultural militant," energized by 17,000 cheers.[20] What had been mere fits and starts was now concretely forming in the musical realm—the Cajun revival had unequivocally begun.

Before turning to Balfa's authenticity and deeper connections to his place in the folk era, I must first address scholarly assertions that the term "folk" is tenuously applied to Cajun music. In his book *Cajun Breakdown*, historian Ryan Brasseaux takes issue with the labeling of Cajun music within the folk genre. He acknowledges that "many previous studies have labeled Cajun music as a 'folk' expression" specifically because "working-class musicians by and large were not 'formally' trained musicians who paid for lessons from instructors or professors."[21] Insofar as genre is concerned, however, he asserts Cajun music's

[19]Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 102.

[20]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 30.

[21]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, ix.

eventual “commercialization and commodification and the broad spectrum of Cajun musical expression make its connection to ‘folk’ ideology tenuous at best.”[22] He goes on to clarify that it is precisely Cajun music’s breadth of repertoire that leads him to define it “more by ethos and social context than by a delimited set of stylistic features.”[23] Brasseaux is not wrong to suggest that the complexity and adaptability of Cajun music brings its folk connection into question. Folk was, indeed, about purity of sound coupled with authenticity of origin, and Cajun music was known to borrow from a number of musical traditions. However, Brasseaux’s claim is dated as well as limited by preconceived musical boundaries that gloss over the power semiotics can have on public perception.

The importance of Cajun music’s connection with folk ideology does not lie in its stylistic preciseness but in the opportunities that connection with the folk movement made possible. Brasseaux takes issue that the term “folk” carried with it, and in turn cast onto Cajuns, a “connotation that translated as isolated, primitive, uneducated, homogenous, and delightfully backward.”[24] This was true for the folk movement’s initial iteration in the 1930s—Brasseaux’s main decade

[22]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, ix.

[23]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, ix.

[24]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 93.

of folk focus—when Cajuns were still battling Americanization's homogenizing forces and negative associations with the term "Cajun." However, by the time of the folk movement's revival in the 1950s, folk took on an entirely new, and specifically reverent, tone. Brasseaux also acknowledges something of perhaps greater importance to the Cajun revival: application of the term "folk" also "created a statis Cajun caricature in the national imagination that distinctly characterized the ethnic group as the 'Other.'"[25] Though marveled at for their cultural oddities just two decades before, Cajuns and other "Others" were revered by mid-century folk adherents precisely for their ability to stay authentic in the face of American homogenization. This was the energy Balfa felt in 1964 when the Newport crowd erupted in applause. Without an implied or overt connection of Cajun music to folk ideology, the Cajun renaissance might well have never found solid footing from which to grow.

The belief that Cajun music had folk leanings was powerful enough to keep it in the public eye and, more importantly, acknowledged on a national level. Also, while purity may be a folk mainstay—for "the supposed purity and simplicity of the music had been what attracted the earliest collectors of roots music"[26]—Brasseaux's insinuation that folk ideology rested on anti-commercialization

[25]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 93.

[26]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 58.

mischaracterizes the Lomaxes' own connections to capitalist doctrines and the future use of those doctrines in the folk revival. It is true that the Lomaxes, in crafting folk concepts, sought musicians "rooted in the precommercial past."[27] However, they also actively tapped into the era's burgeoning use of strategic advertising to "sell" the American public on folk musicians and, by extension, on the importance of the Lomaxes' folk work.

> The Lomaxes were the first to use "actual folk" to promote a coherent vision of America's folk music heritage. To promote their canon they relied not on a popular interpreter of folk songs but on exemplars from the folk culture itself. They enlisted the full of array of mass media—newspapers, radio, movie newsreels, concerts, and records—to transform rural folk musicians into celebrities. In effect they spread their vision of American music by integrating folk into mass culture.[28]

To popularize folk musicians, the Lomaxes became experts at "calculated promotion," which employed capitalist concepts of exposing everyday items' marketable qualities through advertisement to generate public acceptance and commercial viability.[29]

The folk revival that began in the 1950s continued this tradition of commercial dabbling. Although mid-century folk adherents largely rejected the era of mass consumption in which they were raised, echoing the "noncommercial

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[27]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 55.

[28]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 57.

[29]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 75.

tradition [the Lomaxes] prized," the success of the mid-century American folk movement relied on capitalist ideals.[30] Newport itself was a commercial venture—ticket sales ranged from $2 to $5 daily, depending on the event, and various ads riddled the program's pages (Figure 1.2, Figure 1.3).[31] Many even appealed to the folk sense itself: "Folks who Favor Folk Savor Columbia Records," one advertising headline ran (Figure 1.4).[32] The folk movement may have tapped into a sense of cultural celebration that ran against the grain of the American norm, but it was by no means outside the influence of American capitalism. Brasseaux was not entirely wrong to claim that folk ideologies were predicated on anti-commercialism, but the success of the folk movement, just like the success of the Cajun revival, necessitated certain levels of commercialization if it was to garner support in a nation run on capitalist principles. I will further expand on the role musical commercialization played during the Cajun revival in Chapter Three.

[30]Filene, *Romancing the Folk,* 58.

[31]The image in Figure 1.3 was used with permission by Joseph Armstrong, "Bob Dylan Newport Folk Festival Concert Poster 1964," Vintage Concert Posters, accessed October 28, 2020, http://vintageconcertposters.com/_main/Index.cfm?page=api/gallery/photo.cfm&id=219&gid=14&poster=Bob%20Dylan%20Newport%20Folk%20Festival%20Concert%20Poster%201964.

[32]The images in Figures 1.2 and 1.4 were both used with permission by Michel Pomarede, "Newport Folk Festival 1964," Come Writers and Critics, accessed October 28, 2020, https://www.bobdylan-comewritersandcritics.com/pages/programmes/dylan-newport-festival-1964.htm.

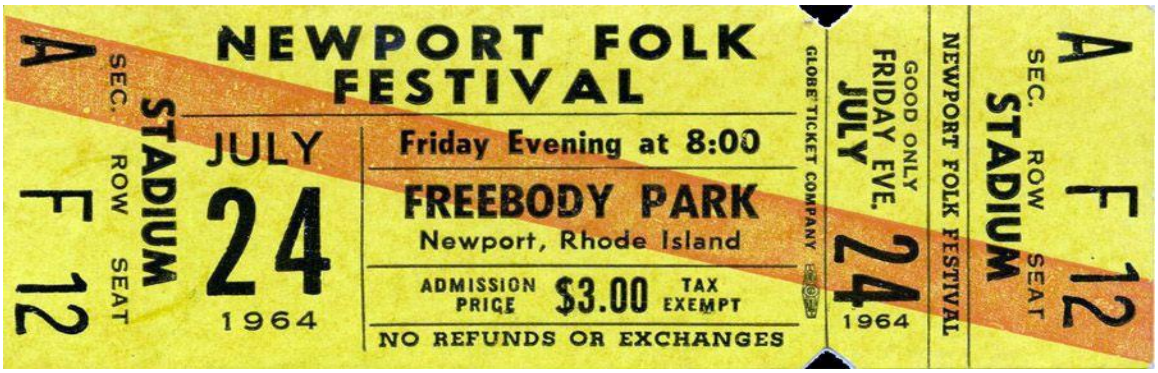

Figure 1.2: A 1964 Newport Folk Festival Friday evening ticket.

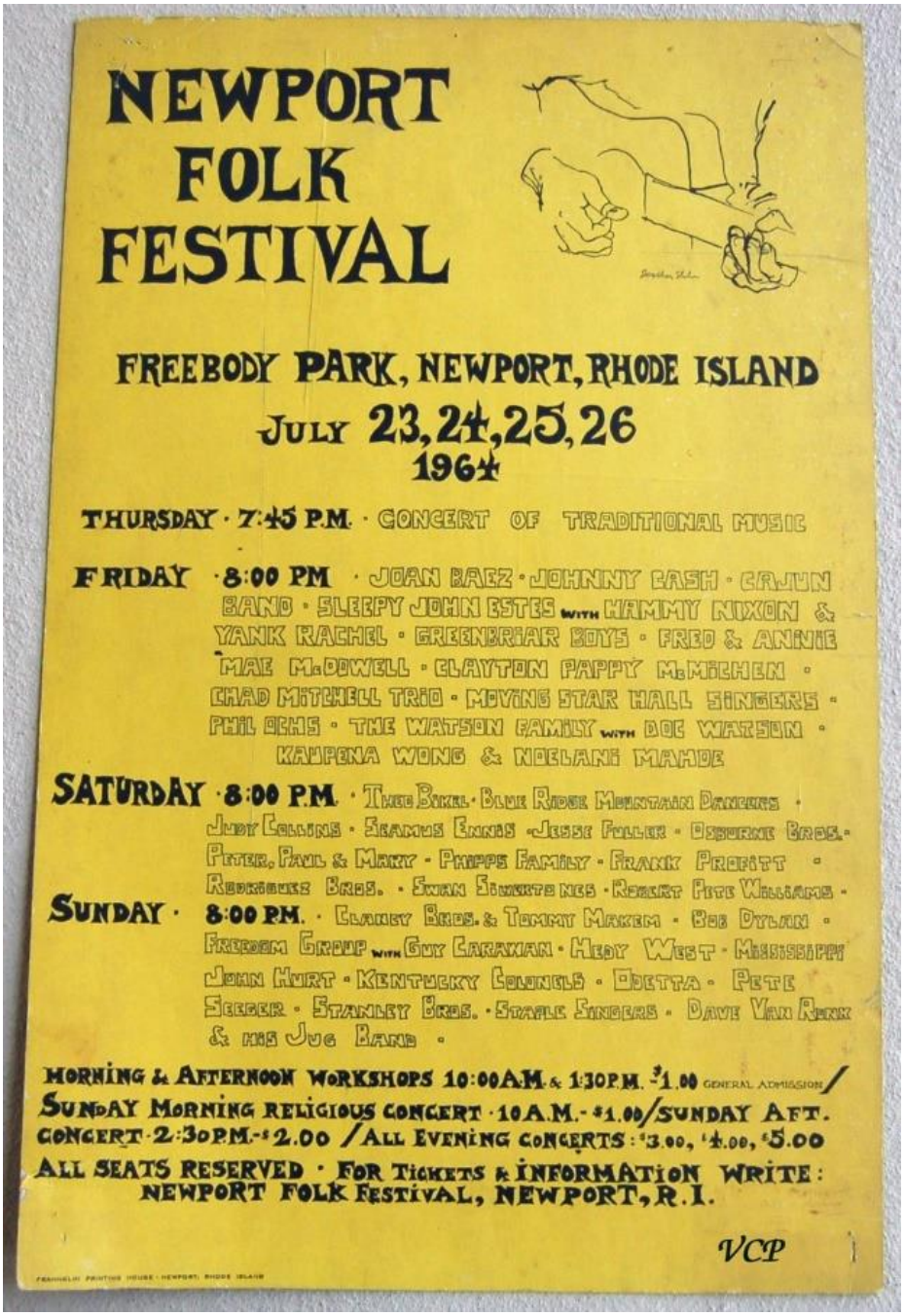

Figure 1.3: A 1964 Newport Folk Festival poster shows the daily lineup as well as variable ticket costs, depending on day and event.

Figure 1.4: A Columbia Records advertisement run in the 1964 Newport Folk Festival program.

Dewey's performance at Newport in 1964 would help Cajun music achieve national recognition and connect it to key folk figures, which led to crucial funding, like Dewey's reception of the Folk Artist in the Schools Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. He received the grant in 1977—thirteen years after his first appearance at Newport and three years after he successfully helped create the first "Tribute to Cajun Music," discussed further in Chapter Two. Balfa's Folk Artist in the Schools program brought Cajun music to southern Louisiana's youngest residents, who he vowed would no longer just "come back from school and do their homework as fast they could and then watch television."[33] Not only did Balfa believe the program would combat the still-lingering effects of Americanization—or as he put it, "a lot of artificial things, instead of the real, down-to-earth values" Cajun heritage upheld—but specifically "that the only way [Cajun culture] would survive, could survive, was to bring this music into the schools for the children."[34] Music thus became of inter-generational importance to the culture's revival, all due to its historical ties to the Lomax project and location in the folk movement.

This is what Cajun revivalists had to contend with: carving out space for themselves in a national discussion on authenticity while remaining true to

[33]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 124.

[34]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 124.

cultural ideals of communal solidarity and self-sufficiency. By the time Balfa came on the cultural revival scene, social ideas may have shifted, but the legacy of authenticity remained. For a revival to work, its key players had to tap into the lessons of past folk musicians and folklorists in navigating the desires of outside cultures. The type of Americanism Balfa had to maneuver changed under the weight of social movements like civil rights and second-wave feminism. Cultural authenticity was now boosted by a sense of similarity through difference—America as a patchwork of unique, regional cultures rather than one unified, whitewashed American ideal. The outsider image sold because it "reminded Americans of themselves—or of how they wanted to see themselves: independent, proud in the face of hardship, straightforward, beholden to no special interests."[35] Folk images "attracted Americans because they suggested sources of purity and character outside the seemingly weakened and corrupt mainstream of society."[36] From Mamou, Louisiana, Balfa and his brothers, Rodney, Will, Burkeman, and Harry, epitomized this small-town performer aesthetic crafted and sold by the Lomaxes. The Balfas came from the "'eddies of human society,' self-contained homogeneous communities cut off from the

[35]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 65.

[36]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 65.

corrupting influences of popular culture."[37] Balfa was not among the musicians the Lomaxes recorded in their 1930s tour, but we can locate parallels between the types of musicians they sought to sell to mass audiences and subcultural musicians like Dewey Balfa.

First, Balfa's isolation from mass culture fit the folk narrative. The rural landscape central to Cajun identity also served to insulate the culture from change. Cajuns lived predominantly in rural sections of Acadiana, like Balfa's hometown of Basile, so outsiders rarely opted to navigate southern Louisiana's winding back roads, shielding those who stayed behind from Americanized wartime propaganda. In this way, Cajun music and the French in which it was sung was preserved in backroad, small country dance halls. The Balfa Brothers built their early career in places just like this, playing mainly for "family reunions … dances, weddings and house parties."[38] This made the Balfas precisely the type of musicians the Lomaxes sought. They and twentieth-century folklorists like them created "the notion of recovering a 'disappearing' culture," which "continued to drive some of the most visible aspects of the folk revival in the 1960s, and even today collectors traipse the South looking for 'lost' practitioners of the old-

[37]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 50.

[38]*Les Blues de Balfa*, directed by Yasha Aginsky (Aginsky Productions with Les Films Cinetrie and Les Fiilms d'Ici, 1983), accessed October 28, 2020, http://www.folkstreams.net/film-detail.php?id=152.

time styles."[39] Dance halls provided “an alternative critical space within the subculture itself to counteract the hostile or at least ideologically inflected coverage [from] the media” of outside cultures.[40] The ways in which this media, that is to say the broader American public, represented subcultures made “them both more and less exotic than they actually are.”[41] This duplicity was crucial in a folk context and still rang true as revivalists worked to draw forgotten cultures out of the shadows by alluding to the depth of their authenticity.

To apply concepts of authenticity appropriately, cultural historians must grapple with, understand, and navigate the term’s murkiness, which requires acknowledging its two main states of being. The first is a type of unadulterated cultural purity, and the second results from a sudden realization of and attempt to repeat the first. The first version I would call simply authenticity. A pure authenticity exists inherently in the bricolage of a society—the coalescing of worldly bric-a-brac into culturally significant symbols—and it often persists in a state unacknowledged by its main adherents. The second I would call a commodified authenticity as it falls more in line with what Filene explores as the Lomaxes’ cult of authenticity. The second is what happens when "a culture [sic]

[39]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 120.

[40]Hebdige, *Subculture*, 111.

[41]Hebdige, *Subculture*, 97.

suddenly discovers it's a culture," or perhaps more accurately when outside cultures discover and wish to recreate and sell that culture.[42] I use the term "sell" loosely—the goal is not always financial gain but rather replication. Folklorists like the Lomaxes had to "sell" the idea of authenticity to national audiences to prove the importance of their work. They did so by tapping into the first form of authenticity and extracting some of the main characteristics of a culture to sell. This "creation and diffusion of [sic] styles [was] inextricably bound up with the process of production, publicity and packaging,"[43] i.e. in the evolving ways the Lomaxes harnessed a new world of American advertising and applied its concepts to grow a folk tradition.

Roots musicians like Balfa had to contend with a folk history that monetized authenticity. The world of recorded and stage music contained within it levels of removal, each of which chipped away at a pure form of cultural authenticity. In the world of recorded music, authenticity is first vetted through the producer's cultural understanding. What songs are recorded, what messages and emotions are shared, is at the producer's discretion. In the twentieth-century South, this meant class-based and racial power structures became an unseen force in the creation of cultural output. Marketers, too, determined the popularity

[42]Susman, *Culture as History,* 186.

[43]Hebdige, *Subculture*, 95.

and reach, adding another potential layer of departure to authenticity. In his study on musicians of the country-soul triangle, Charles Hughes claims when record producer Sam Phillips told musicians to use "native type of influences," it would be "a product of conscious artistic choice and careful development in the recording studio. But he also concluded that a market existed for a gritty southern sound that he could promote as more authentically black."[44] The same deception went for musicians like Charley Patton, whose records became popularized almost predominantly through clever marketing ploys that forced public interaction with Patton's identity.[45] After producers and marketers whittle down musicians to fit a particular image, public perception swoops in to play its part in vetting and shaping authenticity. Thus, with directives from producers, marketers, and social expectations, what sold became an authenticity fiction—a cartoon version of the original culture displaced by multiple levels of re-creation.

Balfa was authentically Cajun. He lived in small-town Acadiana and worked in its fields. He was the son of a working-class sharecropper and became part of this same labor class. He spoke French and often sung in it, preserving the language through years of vicious national campaigns to eliminate all

[44]Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 22.

[45]Amanda Petrusich, *Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World's Rarest 78 rpm Records* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 74-75.

customs alien to a centralized American way of life. By the time Balfa began playing at country dance halls and fiddling away at family reunions, a folk music tradition was established that opened lines of communication between mass and outsider cultures. It was into this changing world that Balfa would step in 1964. Playing at the Newport Folk Festival was a turning point. He saw how cultures could positively interact and returned home with a message: we need to acknowledge our culture, and we need to share it. Activism forced Balfa to identify the cultural signifiers he and his family band helped Cajuns to navigate and agree upon in Acadiana's backroad dance halls. In this way, he began broaching a commodified form of authenticity that he would take with him into the Cajun revival's most active years.

CHAPTER TWO:

Festival de Musique Acadienne: A Space for Cultural Navigation

When the Opelousas *Daily World* published an editorial lamenting the sorry state of Cajun music on October 20, 1965, Cajuns had had enough. The title of the editorial, "They Call That Music??!!," coupled with its excessive punctuation, characterized a long-running public criticism of Cajun culture and its musical byproducts.[1] Author Burton Grindstaff was fiery in his critique, likening the sounds that exuded from a fiddle, accordion, and triangle when three Cajuns got together to the noise that seeped through cracks in a home when crickets feel an urge to "make themselves heard." Whatever Grindstaff intended, be it humor or sincerity, his derision toward the "dissonant squeal of a Cajun musician" sparked outrage. The response signaled another turning point in the revival movement: grassroots support for cultural reclamation was growing, and Cajun advocates were willing to fight back. An integral component of that fight was creating a space for cultural solidarity and support. Grindstaff's editorial was

[1]Burton Grindstaff, "They Call That Music??!!" Opelousas *Daily World*, October 20, 1965, reprinted in Barry Ancelet and Philip Gould, *One Generation at a Time: Biography of a Cajun and Creole Music Festival* (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Center for Louisiana Studies, 2007).

published one year after Dewey Balfa's Newport performance, and slowly over the next decade, a windfall of events led to the creation of the Festival de Musique Acadienne. The festival served the cultural revival in several important ways: it became a crucial space for Cajuns to regain a sense of cultural pride en masse; it further cemented positive associations with Cajun cultural signifiers; it invited outsider cultures to join in celebrating Cajun cultural traits, inevitably expanding cultural awareness outside of Acadiana; and ultimately, it allowed Cajuns to begin toying with the potential commodification could have on their cultural rebirth.

For the idea of a Cajun music festival to manifest, two of the revival's key leaders, Barry Ancelet and Dewey Balfa, had to complete their journey into activism. As detailed in Chapter One, Balfa's course to activism culminated in his last minute, life-changing Newport performance. Ancelet's would be just as unexpected: his "own involvement in the [festival] project came as a result of a personal exile experience in France."[2] By chance, Barry Ancelet spotted the Roger Mason poster one afternoon while walking back from the marketplace in Nice, France. He had been feeling restless and, though fluent in French, out of place during his one-year study abroad. When he spotted the words "Roger Mason joue la musique de la Louisiane," or "Roger Mason plays music from

[2]Philip Gould and Barry Jean Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), xi.

Louisiana," he thought music from his home state might lift his spirits.[3] Ancelet had never been an active, conscious participant in Cajun culture—he only listened to Cajun music when his dad "got to choose the records."[4] Yet, when he arrived at the venue "just in time to hear the strains of 'The Crowley Two-step' drift up from the basement … the music washed over [him] like a warm tide." It was as if he had slipped back to a backyard family barbecue. Mason was "in no way a Cajun himself."[5] While speaking to the performer backstage, Ancelet learned he "had encountered Cajun music through the American folk music revival movement and had fallen in love with it."[6] Excited to hear that Ancelet was himself a Cajun, Mason charged that he "must know all the great people [he had] learned from: Dewey Balfa, Nathan Abshire…"[7] No, Ancelet said. He had not heard of any of them, and "it occurred to [him] that something was wrong"—he knew all about the châteaux along the Loire but nearly nothing about cultures teeming along Louisiana's Bayou Teche. Mason suggested he get in touch with Dewey Balfa, and when Ancelet "returned home a couple of months later, I immediately borrowed my father's pickup truck, drove to Basile, got directions to

[3]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco,* xi.

[4]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco,* xi.

[5]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco,* xi.

[6]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco,* xi.

[7]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco,* xi.

Dewey Balfa's house, and knocked on his door."[8] A chance run-in in a foreign country produced one of the revival's most important activists and introduced him to another. In the decades that followed, Ancelet became not only a cultural scholar but, more to this chapter's point, a main co-organizer with Balfa of the first Festival de Musique Acadienne.

The folk revival movement weaves in and out of the Cajun revival timeline at crucial points. Balfa owed his 1964 Newport performance to the very existence of the movement, for through it a folk festival circuit emerged that gave way to such festivals as Newport and the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife. Consequently, Balfa's performance at Newport thrust him into the world of cultural activism. Perhaps of equal importance, it allowed him to make connections with key folk movement figures, like Ralph Rinzler, a folksinger who helped establish the Smithsonian's folklife program and nudged the institution toward acquiring Folkways Records, a collection of 2,200 recordings of folk and tribal music as well as documentary readings.[9] So, too, did the tendrils of the movement stretch across oceans to influence foreign musicians like Roger Mason, whose "Crowley Two-Step" cast Ancelet one spring evening in France all

[8]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco*, xi-xii.

[9]"Ralph C. Rinzler, 59, Smithsonian Official and Folk-Life Expert," The New York *Times,* July 8, 1994, p. A19; accessed October 9, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/1994/07/08/obituaries/ralph-c-rinzler-59-smithsonian-official-and-folk-life-expert.html.

the way back home to Louisiana. Such was the magic of the folk revival movement: its ubiquity had the power to coax cultural activists out of the shadows and the funding for outcast cultures to reinvest in and reinvent themselves.

Creation of the first Festival de Musique Acadienne, known in its earliest iterations as the "Tribute to Cajun Music," got off to a rocky start. Since its establishment in 1968, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) had sought, through legislation and other means, to reinfuse pride in the state's French language and use perceptions of language authenticity to invigorate the state's tourism industry. When, in 1974, the council agreed to host an international convention of French-speaking journalists and sought "newsworthy events for them to cover," Balfa and Ancelet rushed to pitch the music festival idea.[10]

While an advocate for the French language, James Harvey Domengeaux, CODOFIL's founder and chairperson, harbored a distaste for Cajun French and by extension lacked enthusiasm for Cajun music. Although warned of Domengeaux's distaste, Balfa initially floated the idea of a Cajun music celebration in 1973 when he first met Domengeaux. He shared with the CODOFIL official how he had witnessed the power of Cajun music while at

[10]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco*, xii.

Newport and "insisted that Cajun music could galvanize the still-struggling Louisiana French movement. 'You've got the power,' Dewey dared. 'If you put on a festival here, you'll see what the music can do for our people.'"[11] Domengeaux diplomatically changed the subject, but the specter of Cajun music returned the following March when he desperately sought to impress French journalists and prove the progressive work the council was accomplishing. Ancelet was working as an aide in the CODOFIL office at the time and attended a meeting about the incoming international French contingent. After spotting Balfa, whom Ancelet had met immediately after returning from his year abroad, the two activists resuscitated the idea of a music festival, suggesting that such an event might capture the attention of the visiting journalists."[12] Domengeaux finally conceded.

Folk revival connections once again reared their heads when CODOFIL sponsored the first "Tribute to Cajun Music" concert in cooperation with the Smithsonian Institution. Serving on the tribute concert's committee, Balfa suggested connecting with Ralph Rinzler, who "served as a programming consultant by phone and agreed to come to Lafayette to help host the concert."[13]

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[11]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco,* xii.

[12]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco,* xii.

[13]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco,* xii; This would not be Rinzler's first trip to Acadiana. According to Par Pascal's column "Du Crow's Nest," printed in the Mamou *Acadian Press* on May 19, 1988, Alan Lomax sent Rinzler to Louisiana's bayou country in 1964 "to look for Cajun French musicians" to play at the Newport Folk Festival. Lomax served on the festival's board at the time. This is when Rinzler would discover Gladius Thibodeaux, Louis Vinesse Lejeune, and Wallace LaFleur, before

This connection with the Smithsonian Institution, at its surface, lent an air of prestige to the concert. Behind the scenes, however, the connection meant that the newborn Cajun revival was worthy of recognition and support by top-level folk revival figureheads, further cementing its place in the folk movement and, by extension, as an authentic representation of Cajun culture. Recognition on a national level also created avenues for external funding to increase marketing and pull in a more diverse crowd of Cajun and non-Cajun festivalgoers.

In his role as concert committee member, Balfa felt the concert's purpose was to call attention to the music that had flourished in small country dance halls and to bring roots music back to Louisiana's Cajun people. To Balfa, the concert was "a festival for the people." It was a lesson for the cultural authorities and a chance for "those people who hold the reins of the culture to be exposed to the Cajun music experience."[14] Creators of the "Tribute to Cajun Music" concert intentionally drew from what they knew: traditions established in spaces of authentic musical experience, which in south Louisiana meant dance halls and family gatherings. While these spaces helped craft signifiers of authenticity, as discussed in Chapter One, for patrons, they had existed for so long simply for

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LeFleur had to cancel and "Dewey Balfa was contacted and agreed to go to the festival as the guitar player." Ralph Rinzler would thus also be connected from the start to Cajun culture's inclusion in the evolving folk revival.

[14]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music,* 124.

pleasure and respite, not cultural celebration. Festival organizers harnessed Lomax tactics by taking the spirit and authenticity of dance halls and placing them in an educational setting.

The "Tribute to Cajun Music" concert was meant to educate as much as entertain. To force a level of attention and contemplation rarely achieved in Cajun music's traditional venues, organizers of the first tribute concert forced attendees to sit—the tight stadium seating discouraged festivalgoers to engage physically with the music as they would in a dance hall. Held on March 26, 1974, in Lafayette's Blackham Coliseum, the structure of that first "Tribute to Cajun Music" supported what Ancelet would long reiterate about the concert's intention: "we were … trying to put Cajun music and Cajun culture in general in a setting that was attractive to the general culture."[15] Organizers felt there was a marked "spirit of elegance and formality unusual among a people famed for their informal approach to life …" Those in the audience who had heard Cajun music "had done so in dark, smoke-filled dance halls paying only enough attention to know when to put the next foot down."[16] Activist organizers wanted to enforce attentiveness; to make attendees learn about the music's history and its cultural significance. They were admittedly trying to make heroes of traditional Cajun

[15]Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a Time,* ix-xi, 3.

[16]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco,* xiv.

musicians like Dewey Balfa, Dennis McGee, and Nathan Abshire in front of two important audiences: the performers' own cultural brethren and cultural outsiders.[17]

Turnout for the first "Tribute to Cajun Music" concert testified to the public's interest in celebrating Cajun music and to the grassroots support that CODOFIL and cultural enthusiasts were seeking. Concert organizers were initially skeptical of the event's reception—would Cajuns want to listen in a space where dancing was discouraged and attentive listening was the goal? Nevertheless, on a rainy Saturday, in a coliseum that seated fewer than 10,000 people, families poured in "carrying their shoes and their babies" in southern Louisiana fashion. Prevented from dancing, the audience was forced to listen to the music—to understand it, hopefully, in a more holistic way as the product of generations of cultural exchange. And it seemed to work. The "sturdy Coliseum shivered" with the roar of applause that erupted from the "mass of crazily happy people" after the first song, read an Opelousas *Daily World* news piece—the same newspaper, as it were, that had published Grindstaff's fiery critique.[18] This reaction was a far cry from the quiet shuffle of feet on and off dance-hall floors

[17]Dan Willging, "Festival Acadiens: Cosmic Moments," *Offbeat Magazine*, September 26, 2016, accessed April 24, 2017, http://www.offbeat.com/articles/festivals-acadiens-cosmic-moments/.

[18]"Cajuns Gather, Play: Coliseum Shivers Under Impact of Music Rally," Opelousas *Daily World,* March 1974, reprinted in Ancelet and Gould's *One Generation at a Time*, 6.

after a song's closing notes. Guest speakers were also brought on stage to present a history of the development of Cajun music. This cultural scholarship allowed the crowd to correlate the nuances of Cajun history and culture with the performances they were witnessing, ultimately sieving out the characteristically Cajun traits that linked both.[19] This recognition served to reestablish cultural pride and connect that pride to specific signifiers. As the revival drew on, those signifiers would be used in new and increasingly commercialized ways to assert positive associations with Cajun culture to wider audiences.

Concert enthusiasm never waned throughout the 1970s, reflecting a consistent growth of the Louisiana French renaissance movement and a broader, growing recognition of Cajun culture. CODOFIL did not intend to carry the concert into a third year, but organizers and Cajun culture advocates insisted the event not lose momentum. The concert was moved to the fall and into Girard Park, which abuts the University of Southwestern Louisiana (USL) campus (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette). Organizers understood by the concert's third year that "the point had been made about listening to the music and that the crowds should be allowed to do what comes naturally." With a park full of Cajuns

[19]Barry Jean Ancelet, interview by Alan Lomax, August 24, 1983, accessed in the Archive of Cajun and Creole Folklore, Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Louisiana. The center was allowed access to the footage by the Association for Cultural Equity.

dancing to spirited traditional tunes by authentic Cajun musicians, the "all-day outdoor event marked the transition from concert to festival."[20] In 1977, the festival grew into a two-day event. The decision to move the concert to the outdoors not only marked its transition to festival but also was almost a symbolic regifting of Cajun cultural celebration to the wider Cajun world. Placing the festival in Girard Park not only gave Cajuns the physical space to do what came naturally when bows struck fiddle strings, but it also placed cultural celebration in the public's line of sight. More specifically, it put Cajun music on public display, in front of those previously uninterested in participating. Cajun music had weathered its public trial period, and Cajuns found its authenticity worthy of acceptance and promotion.

Organizers made sure the festival went beyond music to reflect Cajun culture as a whole. Building on goals set out by CODOFIL, organizers built the festival around a celebration and preservation of Francophone Louisiana. Festival posters were bilingual, and classic, savory Cajun food, like boudin and cracklins, were concession mainstays. The festival program included a greeting from Domengeaux to all attendees explaining how the "world [had] come to know a new Louisiana, one proud of its rich French heritage and determined to

[20]Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a Time*, 19.

preserve and defend its language, culture and traditions."[21] Some performers, too, addressed the crowds only or primarily in Cajun French and offered personal accounts of their musical and ancestral influences.[22]

The festival's appeal to younger Cajuns, both musicians and attendees, reflected the growing popularity of Cajun culture among all ages. Festival photos depict lively crowds of college-aged dancers (perhaps drawn to the park by its proximity to USL) in a cloud of dust kicked up by shuffling feet alongside photos of white-haired members of the Lawn Chair Brigade.[23] Organizers felt this growing trans-generational appeal was crucial to the revival's longevity. Before the concert's conception, "Louisiana French music did not seem to be renewing itself."[24] Born in 1940, Marc Savoy was the youngest to perform the first year. The rest of the performers "were in their fifties, sixties, seventies, and eighties. But as improbable as it may have seemed that night, within a very few years the situation began to change."[25] The festival was attracting an entire generation of younger musicians who were reacquainting themselves with tunes known only

[21]Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a Time,* 14.

[22]Festival recordings found in the Center for Louisiana Studies' Archive of Cajun and Creole Folklore; Lomax interview of Ancelet, August 24, 1983.

[23]These photographs appear in Ancelet and Gould's *One Generation at a Time,* 26 and 28, respectively.

[24]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco,* xiv.

[25]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco,* xiv.

from family barbecues, when a parent had control of the record player. By the fifth festival in 1978, which was dedicated "to the young people who were playing Cajun … music," eight out of twenty-two groups invited to perform were entirely composed of musicians younger than thirty years old.[26] Two of those eight were entirely composed of musicians younger than twenty. By successfully making heroes of Cajun musicians, the festival drew in younger and larger crowds each year, adding a level of surety to the renaissance's survival.

The festival successfully weathered major alterations late in the 1970s. In the latter years of the 1970s, the Louisiana Crafts Festival and Bayou Food Festival joined the "Tribute to Cajun Music" concert to form the co-op Festivals Acadiens.[27] The additions buoyed festival organizers' intention of cultural inclusion on a comprehensive scale. In addition to Cajun musical standards, attendees were now privy to classic Cajun dishes and traditional Louisiana crafts handed down through generations. The assemblage of events was beneficial to the festival's goal, but the added responsibility could have been detrimental

[26]Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a* Time, 25.

[27]According to a special Festival Acadiens guide published in 1983 by *The Times of Acadiana,* the Louisiana Native Crafts Festival began as a project of the Lafayette Natural History Museum in 1972 and attracted only a few hundred people its first year. To have a craft in the festival, the craft must have been practiced in Louisiana prior to or during the early part of the twentieth century; materials must be native to Louisiana, and the craft must be demonstrated at the festival. The festival's intention was "to bring together people of many backgrounds, many of whom learned the craft from parents, who had learned from their parents. Through this unbroken chain of knowledge, the craftsmen have learned to braid, sew, forge, carve, stir and tie native materials into beautiful objects and delicious cuisine."

when, in 1980, CODOFIL chose to withdraw from the Festivals Acadiens co-op because of alleged concerns of a state agency sharing control and responsibility with local government and private business. This withdrawal could have easily meant the untimely end of the now seven-year-old event, but Cajun stubbornness prevailed. Festival board members sought out the assistance of "Tribute to Cajun Music's" producers, and eventually, the Lafayette Jaycees offered to sponsor the event. With the shuffling of sponsors came the transition of names and, in 1980, the "Tribute to Cajun Music" concert became the Festival de Musique Acadienne.[28]

Losing CODOFIL as a sponsor was a turning point for the festival. Although now disconnected from the council, the motives of festival organizers (to preserve and promote Cajun culture) remained unchanged. In some ways, without the supervision of a governmental council, organizers had more freedom to interpret and reclaim their own personalized versions of Cajun culture. Festival organizers understood Cajun culture's historical ability to adjust and made it a fundamental principle to the festival that tradition is "not a fixed product but an ongoing process."[29] To some in the 1980s, that meant acknowledging what the council had avoided: the complexity of Cajun heritage and its siphoning of

[28]Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a Time,* 39.

[29]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music,* 20.

musical elements from other cultures. Such recognition would take place, in part, through the visual representations of culture on its printed marketing materials.

Use of iconography within the festival setting proved indispensable to the persistence of a Cajun ideal. As detailed in the Introduction, Cajun culture became grounded in its specific ties to the fruits of Louisiana's soil—to the bayous and swamplands that made travel difficult for anyone without a boat (or pirogues, to Cajuns) and to the animals who made their homes in its marshes. CODOFIL's work made significant strides in reviving French pride and marketing Francophone Louisiana to outsider cultures. Through initiatives like the festival, CODOFIL marketed Cajun culture by drawing on images of the simple life sung about in authentic settings, like dance halls that teemed with Louisiana's tired blue-collar workers. Southern Louisiana's ample waterways, its rice fields and crawfish harvests, began to stand as visual representations of the shedding of Cajuns' transient, colonial past and the firm establishment of a new, permanent home. Cajun musicians increasingly drew upon these emblems of Louisiana's landscape on festival posters to inject authenticity into the "dissonant squeals" of their accordions, fiddles, and triangles. The Cajun-French language and the symbolism of Louisiana landscapes eventually seeped into the celebratory spaces that events like the Festival Acadiens provided, creating an authentically Cajun space to which the celebration of Cajun culture was central.

Festival posters mimicked the simplicity of some of Cajun musicians' album art, discussed more in Chapter Three, and by doing so not only drew on growing Cajun symbolism but applied Cajun imagery to a physical, celebratory space. Use of the French language on all festival materials, too, while fulfilling aspects of the CODOFIL mission, reinforced the semantic symbolism of a shared French heritage. The first festival poster had a single image surrounded by text, all of which was provided in both English and French (Figure 2.1).[30] Just above an artistic drawing of a man holding an accordion—its stretched bellows insinuating the man was drawn mid-song—are the words "A Tribute to Cajun Music." Just below that, its French translation, "Hommage a la Musique Acadienne." The event's "guest stars" included Jimmy C. Newman and Rufus Thibodeaux listed above other such performers as S.D. Courville, Mark Savoy, The Balfa Brothers, and Clifton Chenier. The event was marketed as "Free to the Public," or "Gratuit" with "bière et gumbo au fais-dodo."

[30]A copy of the festival's original poster was printed in Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a Time*, 5.

Figure 2.1: The 1974 “Tribute to Cajun Music” concert poster.

Event posters became visual indicators of the festival’s evolution over the years. Subtle visual changes marked key transitional periods for both behind-the-scenes operations and organizer’s response to crowds’ desires. In its second year, the “Tribute to Cajun Music’s” poster remained simple: in a two-toned,

woodcut-like rendering floated the smiling bust of Nathan Abshire mid-accordion performance. This two-toned, floating head theme would be recycled on festival posters for the next several years (Figure 2.2-2.4), unchanged until 1980 when CODOFIL decided to drop sponsorship of the event.[31]

Figure 2.2: The official 1975 “Tribute to Cajun Music” poster, featuring accordionist Nathan Abshire.

[31]Copies of the festival’s original 1975, 1976, and 1977 posters were printed in Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a Time*, 11, 14, and 19, respectively.

Figure 2.3: The 1976 “Tribute to Cajun Music” poster.

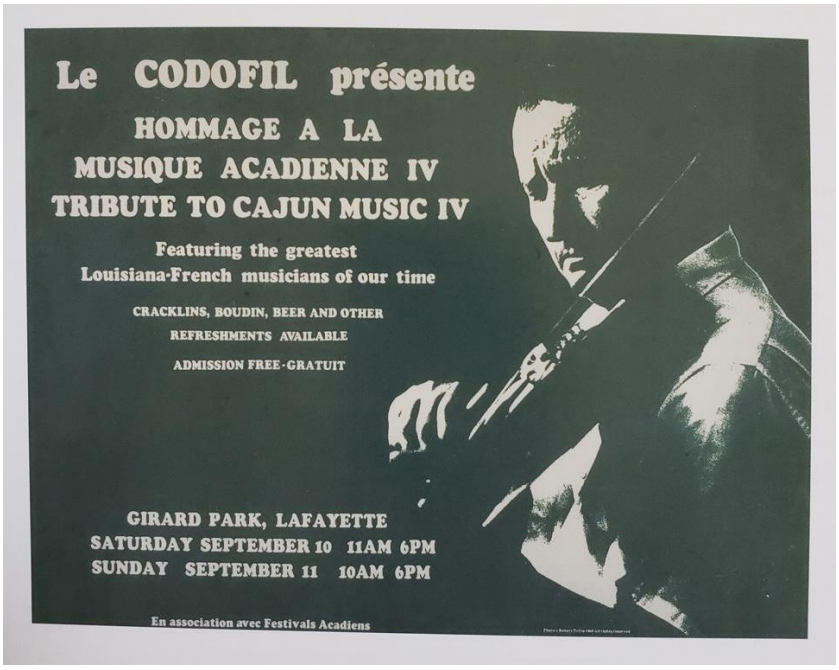

Figure 2.4: The 1977 “Tribute to Cajun Music” poster, featuring Dewey Balfa.

CODOFIL's public reasoning for removing sponsorship hinged on the potential dangers of mixing state agencies with private enterprises. The organization alleged that members had "concerns about the confusion of public support and private enterprise" as well as "sharing control and responsibility with local government and private business."[32] Skeptics, however, believed this to be a veiled, diplomatic response to avoid discussing the agency's continued dismissal of the race issue. Although the concert had regular, yearly acts by Creole musicians like Clifton Chenier, the word "Creole" had never appeared in the festival's name. What's more, "Chairman Domengeaux fought hard to keep black Creole musicians off the annual poster because he claimed their presence on it 'would hopelessly confuse the ethnic issue.'"[33] This clearly did not sit well with a section of the public as, just the year before, an "underground" Festival de Musique Acadienne poster began popping up across town (Figures 2.5A-2.5B).[34] It appeared in almost every way to match that year's official festival poster save for two traits: it paid homage to Black Creole musician Bois-Sec Ardoin and the word "Cajun" was replaced with the word "Creole" in the title.

[32]Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a Time*, 35.

[33]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco*, xviii.

[34]Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a Time*, 32; Copies of the festival's original 1979 poster and its underground lookalike were printed in Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a Time*, 32.

Figure 2.5A: An underground, Creole-focused “Tribute to Cajun Music” poster from 1979 mimicked that year’s official poster.

Figure 2.5B: The official 1979 “Tribute to Cajun Music” poster.

This underground dissension struck at the heart of a long-running criticism of CODOFIL: the agency's efforts were elitist and prejudiced from the start. When its French in the schools program first got off the ground, CODOFIL "opted to import teachers from France, Belgium, and Quebec." The decision cast Cajuns "back into the shadows as many [sic] dutifully echoed past criticisms, apologizing that their language was 'not the real French, just the broken Cajun French."[35] Domengeaux, the agency's very founder and chairperson, was against teaching Cajun French, feeling it was "solely an oral dialect, that it lacked grammar and syntax, and that it therefore could not be written."[36] Folklorist Alan Lomax himself chimed in on the agency's decision to hire outside of Louisiana, stating "CODOFIL could cause as much harm as it has done good if the organization doesn't get over it bias against Cajun French."[37] Subversion of festival art proved that certain Acadian factions were no longer willing to allow CODOFIL to write their own narrative of the state's southern peoples.

Even after Domengeaux was converted to pro-Cajun activist—a result of continued haranguing by Balfa and Ancelet—CODOFIL continued to whitewash Acadiana's complex heritage by refusing to include Creole references in its

[35]Barry Jean Ancelet, "A Perspective on Teaching the 'Problem Language' in Louisiana," *The French Review* 61, no. 3 (February 1988), 346.

[36]Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 128.

[37]Woody Baird, "Lomax at Odds with CODOFIL," Lafayette *Daily Advertiser*, June 19, 1980.

festival marketing materials. In a news article published two weeks before the 1980 “Tribute to Cajun Music”—the last year CODOFIL would sponsor the concert—Domengeaux specifically praised Cajun music as an “easily discernible direct link between the language and culture of today’s French-speaking Louisianans and their European forebears.”[38] In June that same year, Domengeaux ended an editorial letter with the claim that “Cajun music [sic] truly represents the spirit of the Acadians.”[39] Both of Domengeaux’s comments made it clear that he held Eurocentric views about Acadiana’s heritage, which seemed to spill over into his handling of the festival’s marketing. Early on, Domengeaux repeatedly emphasized that the agency’s eventual break from the Festival Acadiens co-op was strictly related to “conflicting dates with other local events.”[40] Yet, criticism of CODOFIL’s history of largely writing Creole communities out of its French revival efforts grew right about the time the agency dropped festival sponsorship. Evidence of this dissent was on public display with the creation of mock festival posters.

The 1980 festival poster made subtle note of this significant organizational and ideological shift. Though still a simple two-toned piece, it was the first festival

[38]“CODOFIL plans festival,” Lafayette *Daily Advertiser*, May 10, 1980.

[39]James Domengeaux, “CODOFIL Praises All,” Lafayette *Daily Advertiser,* June 15, 1980.

[40]Sue Blanchard, “Cajun Music Fete Changed,” Lafayette *Daily Advertiser*, February 14, 1980.

poster to highlight a Creole musician. It also resurrected allusions to authentic Cajun iconography by depicting the lone Creole fiddler propped against a tree, looking out onto empty grasslands. The musician appears at home, comfortable in his open-air surroundings (Figure 2.6).[41] It evidenced not just the organizational change that took place that year, but Cajun activists' own desires to direct public attention to the mixed origins of Acadiana's people and musical heritage.

[41]A copy of the festival's official 1980 poster was printed in Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a Time*, 41.

Figure 2.6: The first post-CODOFIL Festival de Musique Acadienne poster in 1980 was also the first to feature a Creole musician.

Over the next few years, Festival de Musique Acadienne posters annually shifted theme and focus. Painted by Robert Dafford, the 1981 poster again drew upon pastoral imagery by depicting a gang of people in a wooded area. Three shadowy performers huddle around the light of a dim campfire, playing music for a small sea of faces barely visible in the glow. Use of landscape imagery,

alongside the poster's bilingual text and implied intimate relationship between music and listener, again reinforced the growing revival's focus on music, language, and bayou imagery as defining traits of an authentic Cajun identity.[42]

By the 1980s, the festival had grown to international prestige. In 1982, to celebrate the tricentennial of the founding of the Louisiana colony, festival organizers obtained a state grant that allowed them to bring in performers from across the French-speaking world. The guest musicians testified to the cultural reach of Cajun ancestral roots. Performers came from France, Quebec, the Acadian Maritime Provinces, the Acadian and Quebecois immigrant communities of New England, the Old Mines area of Missouri, the Mitchiff community of North Dakota, and the Haitian community in New Orleans. The breadth of talents proved to be successful "guerrilla academics, educating the crowds about historical and cultural connections while entertaining them."[43] Festival organizers added a new twist to the celebration of Cajun culture by embracing and showcasing its complex heritage.[44]

The festival integrated ideals of cultural commercialization in only minor ways in the event's first years. Funneling of grant funds was perhaps of earliest

[42]The 1981 festival poster was reprinted in Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a Time*, 45.

[43]Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a Time*, 51.

[44]Ancelet, "A Perspective on Teaching the 'Problem Language' in Louisiana," 345; Ancelet and Gould, *One Generation at a Time,* xii.

and greatest importance to activists' realizations of what money could do for the revival. Connections to national folk institutions, like the Smithsonian, allowed Cajuns to witness the power external funding could have to embolden revival initiatives. Funds would trickle from national to state levels and eventually to local levels in support of grassroots efforts. As success of the festival was becoming apparent, it received increased attention from local agencies. A printing of the minutes from the Board of Commissioners of the Lafayette Parish Convention and Visitors Commission showed members' desires to apply for two grants in March 1980, one being "a $10,000 grant for promoting Festival Acadiens."[45] Supporting revival initiatives was becoming ever more important even at the municipal level. The festival remained free for many years, allowing access to all public demographics. Yet, its existence was tied intimately to national and state funding. While it did not sell tickets, it "sold" an authentic Cajun ideal, and some tasty boudin. The festival itself, its very existence, allowed Cajuns to flirt with the potential of cultural commodification.

Still held annually to this day, the Festival de Musique Acadienne provided a crucial yet unique outlet for the Cajun revival to thrive. Although other cultural celebrations and festivals took place in Acadiana, Festival Acadiens stood apart for its connection to a hugely successful national movement and its

[45]"Public Notice," Lafayette *Daily Advertiser*, April 1, 1980.

comprehensive approach to cultural promotion. The festival offered Cajun and non-Cajun alike an evolving celebratory space to learn about Cajun history and further embrace cultural symbols. The annual event gave Cajun folk musicians the ability to reach regional audiences and the room to evolve while providing a space for Cajuns to celebrate their heritage and culture. By making the festival both entertaining and educational, organizers normalized the celebration of Cajun culture and, in turn, provided an outlet for the movement to grow. According to festival organizer Barry Ancelet, the festival was "one of the single most successful parts of the French revival movement in Louisiana."[46] Its timing alongside national calls for folk celebration, its use and reinforcement of burgeoning Cajun imagery, its ability to weather drastic change, and the reception it had among Cajuns and outsiders alike played a crucial role in popularizing Cajun culture.

[46]Lomax interview of Ancelet, August 24, 1983.

CHAPTER THREE:

Albums and the Commodification of Cultural Symbols

The first newspaper advertisement for Floyd's Record Shop appeared one June day in 1956, run on page 30 of the Ville Platte *Gazette*. Bordered on the right by a long society news column and below it an ad for an ongoing Dunlop Tire sale, the ad boasted of the new business's diverse offerings, all of them "the latest in recorded music!" From rhythm and blues to pop records to hillbilly and western, Floyd's had it all. Not only that, but Floyd's was offering customers "FREE RECORDS of your choice with each PHONOGRAPH purchased." Ads for Floyd's Record Shop evolved slowly over the coming months. By June 1960, Floyd's offered free piano lessons alongside options to rent or buy a new spinet piano, and just seven pages further into that same *Gazette* edition appeared an ad for the shop's "roll film developing" services. Owner Floyd Soileau was an entrepreneur. By 1957, he had created Flat Town Records out of his shop and its first two sublabels—Swallow Records and Jin Records, both of which would play integral roles in commercializing Cajun music in the twentieth century. That the sleepy town of Ville Platte would host what would become one of the region's

most prolific Cajun music recording studios testified to the genre's place in the growing folk revival movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The success of Soileau's recording ventures testified to another key aspect of the Cajun renaissance: the crucial role commercialization and circulation of celebrated cultural symbols, both to internal and external audiences, had in the popularization of Cajun culture. Album production allowed Cajun culture to enter the deeply American world of mass consumption while staying true to concepts of cultural authenticity. Found acceptable within consumer culture, mass production and distribution of Cajun musical albums opened the door for other cultural traits to enter public awareness, thereby extending the Cajun revival's sphere of influence.

Relegated to dance halls stages and family reunions, Cajun-French music was sparsely recorded in the first half of the twentieth century. The first commercial recording of Cajun-French tunes occurred in 1928, when Columbia cut a wax disc of guitarist Cleoma Breaux Falcon's performance of "Lafayette (Allon a Luafette)."[47] Falcon became a hit, but the piece's reception spoke more to industry interest in indulging public fascination with the original folk movement than to an internal Cajun cultural revival. Local connections to commercial Cajun music "all flowed from one source: the Falcon-Breaux debut."[48] Otherwise,

[47]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown,* 49.

[48]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown,* 51.

Acadians largely consumed their own music by way of get-togethers. Of specific note was the fact that "none of the commercial releases published between 1928 and 1934 were recorded in Cajun Country."[49] The public may now have had more access to commercial Cajun music, but the music's authenticity was called into question through the simple fact that studios removed musicians from their natural, pastoral, modest settings. Studios in effect "forced Cajun musicians to recontextualize their performances in a space where demanding engineers, intimidating microphones, and rigid time constraints replaced dancing farmers, kerosene lamps, and expansive arrangements."[50] The 1920s commercialization of Cajun music failed to spark a revival in the way future decades made possible because of its specific historical contexts. Interest in roots music sparked by the Lomax expedition soon faded with the threat of war and revival of Americanization efforts. Record production, which peaked in 1929, then "tapered off in the wake of the famous stock market crash" that catapulted the nation into the Great Depression.[51] Thus, "local poverty and national economic instability continued to structure the cyclical patterns of Cajun music's commercialization."[52]

[49]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown,* 51.

[50]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown,* 51.

[51]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown,* 51.

[52]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 217.

If that were not enough to signal a Cajun commercial recording death knell, French was still banned in schools and, as the Depression took its toll, Acadiana's predominately blue-collar population did not have the luxury of purchasing phonographs and records.

That script began to flip, however, in the 1950s with the establishment of Flat Town Records. Created in 1957 by Floyd Soileau, Flat Town Records and its first two sublabels—Swallow Records and Jin Records, both based in Ville Platte just forty miles north of Lafayette—capitalized on a thriving post-war market. The era of mass consumption, begun in the 1930s to combat the Depression's negative effects, had cemented itself in American lives through decades of citizen consumer activism and corporate production strategies. By the 1950s, the idea that "the buying power of consumers in the aggregate … would bring the United States out of depression and ensure its survival as a democratic nation" was now firmly rooted in the American psyche.[53] Swallow and Jin came of age in this era of mass consumption. Repeat advertisements for the shop over the years evidenced Soileau's faith not only in Acadians' growing buying power but in their interest in connecting with Cajun roots music through commercial music ownership.

[53]Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 20.

Soileau worked quickly to cut Cajun vinyl records after establishing Flat Town Records. Its first two sublabels were responsible for recording a combined sixteen singles/EPs in their first two years. In 1960, Jin Records alone recorded another sixteen. Recordings were not only musical—the studio released a number of comedy albums in its early years, like Marion Marcotte's "L'Histoire A Dudley" or "Dudley's Story," which by its description in a tiny Ville Platte *Gazette* column, was "a hilarious story told in the 'Andy Griffith style' but in the 'Cajun pied-platte' lingo."[54] Similarly, Revon J. Reed, a native of Mamou, Louisiana, folklorist, and Cajun radio show host, recorded an LP of "Cajun tales and anecdotes" in 1967 that "abound[ed] with amusing littles stories." He specifically made note that the recordings were "not for red-neck or hill-billy consumption."[55] Cajuns were growing more aware of their culture's distinctness, illustrated in part by the creation of CODOFIL the year after Reed's LP release. Existence of a recording studio in Cajun country and its production of Cajun-French records illustrated the potential for commercializing Cajun culture early on.

Album production helped sell ideals of cultural authenticity both through use of iconography and by featuring everyday Cajuns in their conventional settings. In the same Ville Platte *Gazette c*olumn authored by Marcotte, the

[54]Marion Marcotte, Ville Platte *Gazette*, September 10, 1959.

[55]Revon J. Reed, Ville Platte *Gazette*, August 17, 1967.

comedian was described as “a bachelor musician now residing in Arabi, La., [who] was born and raised on a cotton farm in Avoyelles parish.”[56] Existence in natural, often rural, settings and jobs in largely blue-collar trades were key traits of Cajun authenticity, and marketable ones to boot. In the column announcing Reed’s LP, he was referred to simply as a “Mamou High teacher.’”[57] Popular entertainers’ biographies frequently told of their small-town upbringing, inextricably tying concepts of authenticity to modest, moderately isolated living. It also served to remind the public, and sell the idea, that Cajuns were farmers and oilfield workers by trade—generally “respectable” blue-collar workers—and only musicians and entertainers by night (or weekend get-togethers). Even once Flat Town began scratching out vinyl productions by working-class people, allowing them to toy with professionalization, the Cajun sound remained largely for and by the same group of people, keeping its folk connections intact—for the time being.

The number of records released by Swallow and Jin increased as the next two decades wore on, and the use of album art began taking off in the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1965, the year after Balfa’s performance at Newport, Swallow Records released the Balfa Brothers’ first full-length solo album, titled simply *The Balfa Brothers Play Traditional Cajun Music* (Figure 3.1). The very same year

[56]Marcotte, Ville Platte *Gazette*.

[57]Reed, Ville Platte *Gazette*.

downtown Lafayette played host to the first “Tribute to Cajun Music,” Swallow Records released the Balfa Brothers’ second full-length solo album. They again kept it simple, adding only one word: *The Balfa Brothers Play More Traditional Cajun Music* (Figure 3.2). Though at first glance unique, the album covers, like their titles, shared much in the way of characterizing life in Acadiana. The centerpiece of both albums featured photographs of the Balfa Brothers lined up, instruments in hand, on a small, unassuming, wooden front porch. On the 1965 album, they are dressed in suits and ties. Just a decade later, while two brothers remain in full suits, the other two have given in to quintessentially 1970s fashion, including checked pants and bell-bottoms. Yet, fashion aside, the decade bridging the two albums has not removed the family from their rural setting. As both records boast “traditional Cajun music,” they also feature the Balfa Brothers in a “traditional” Cajun setting, posted up on a rickety front porch—one against a backdrop of mossy trees, the earlier album behind an actual horse and buggy. Once given the space to market themselves in the post-war mass consumption economy, musicians like the Balfas and record companies like Flat Town sold images of what they knew best: settings of rural life, of families gathered on front porches in their Sunday best to strike fiddle strings and have a good time.

Figure 3.1: The Balfa Brothers' first full-length solo album, titled *The Balfa Brothers Play Traditional Cajun Music*, was released in 1965 and rereleased in 1974.

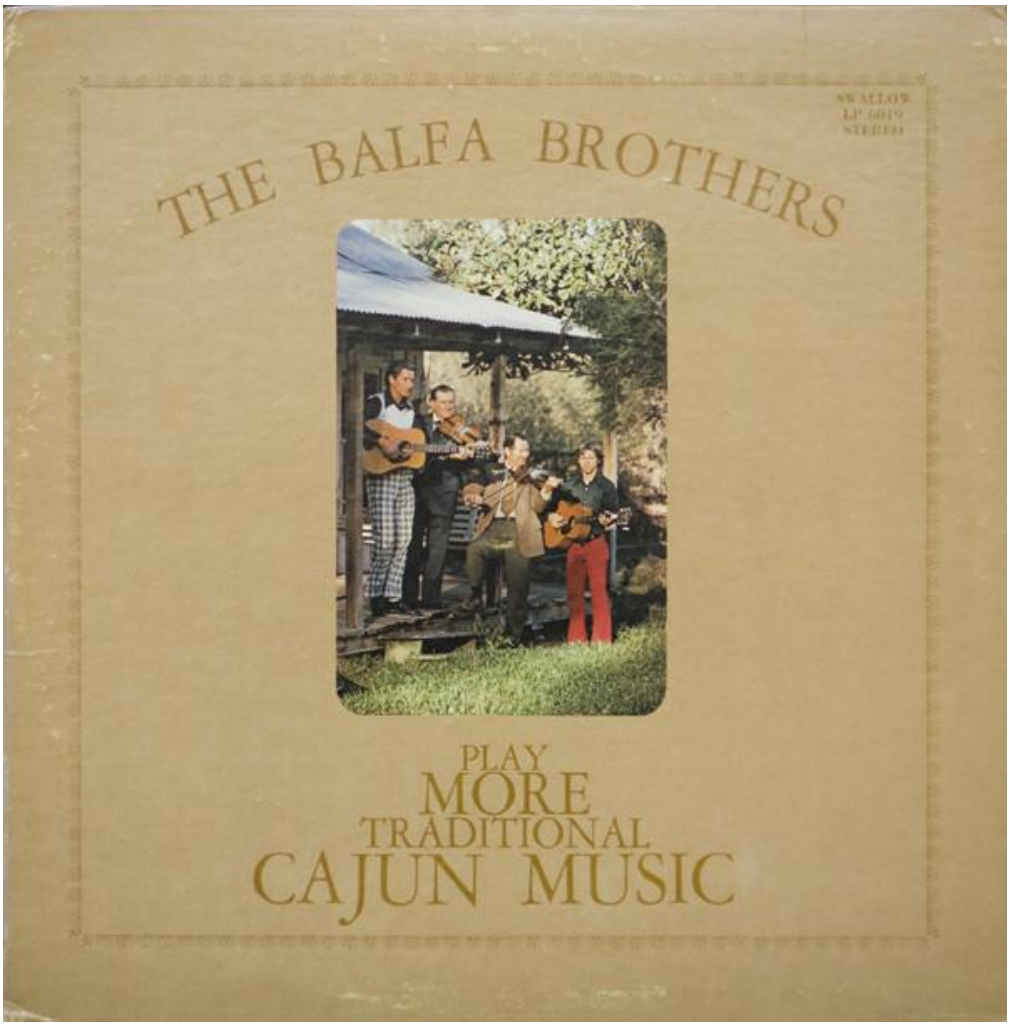

Figure 3.2: The Balfa Brothers' second full-length solo album, titled *The Balfa Brothers Play More Traditional Cajun Music*, was released in 1974.

The use of specific iconography on Swallow's Balfa Brothers records proved that Soileau grasped the importance of selling authenticity in 1960s America. As a successful business owner, he clearly was not ignorant to the

power of marketing. His very use of newspaper ads and the evolution of his merchandise and services indicated at least a basic knowledge of the necessity for businesses to evolve alongside consumer tastes. It also helped that creation of Soileau's business and studios in the 1950s came on the tail end of a massive advertising transition into modernity. The 1920s "witnessed an impressive expansion of the successful application of national advertising" that proved time and again it was "possible to sway the minds of whole populations, change their habits of life, create belief, practically universal, in any policy or idea."[58] Album art selection was a conscious choice that required what decades of advertising evolution had taught producers: the key to selling products was understanding what drove audiences to make purchases. In Cajun country, that often meant appealing to established symbols of pure authenticity as even those ignorant to the folk movement remained influenced by it. Thus, Cajun album art often included tropes of modest living, often within natural, sometimes desolate, landscapes to appeal to a general understanding of what comprised Cajun culture. Front porches lined with rocking chairs as well as horses and buggies all appear on Swallow and Jin album covers throughout the middle of the twentieth century, persistently evoking the simplicity of country life that denotes an authentic Cajun experience.

[58]Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 5.

Swallow also played on concepts of communalism to sell authenticity, alluding not only to Cajuns' heritage but also to the cooperative nature of isolated small towns. That is to say, they included images of the actual artists to invoke intimacy—to insinuate that, while you may not know their name, listeners now know their faces and can become familiar with the individual as much as his or her music. It echoed the same intimacy of those small-town dance halls from which so many musicians found their start. Such was the case for the Balfa Brothers' first two albums cut by Swallow Records. Soileau sold the albums as purely authentic not just by portraying the artists in what appeared to be their most natural settings—on the wooden front porches of rural homes or in sparsely filled living rooms plopped pleasantly in rocking chairs (Figure 3.3)—but by selling the artists themselves, much like the Lomaxes did for Lead Belly and Muddy Waters. Album art from a 1975 record cut by Nathan Abshire, *The Good Times Are Killing Me*, echoes those same motifs by featuring two photographs, one of an accordion on its own and the other of Abshire standing alone with his accordion on a wooden porch, peering down at the camera with a slight smile (Figure 3.4). Swallow marketed Abshire's album exactly as it had the Balfas'—through use of both quaint homes and familiar faces.

Figure 3.3: According to a Ville Platte *Gazette* story run March 28, 1968, the Balfa Brothers were photographed by Melvin J. Hester inside “the Acadian Home” for their first album, *The Balfa Brothers Play Traditional Cajun Music*.

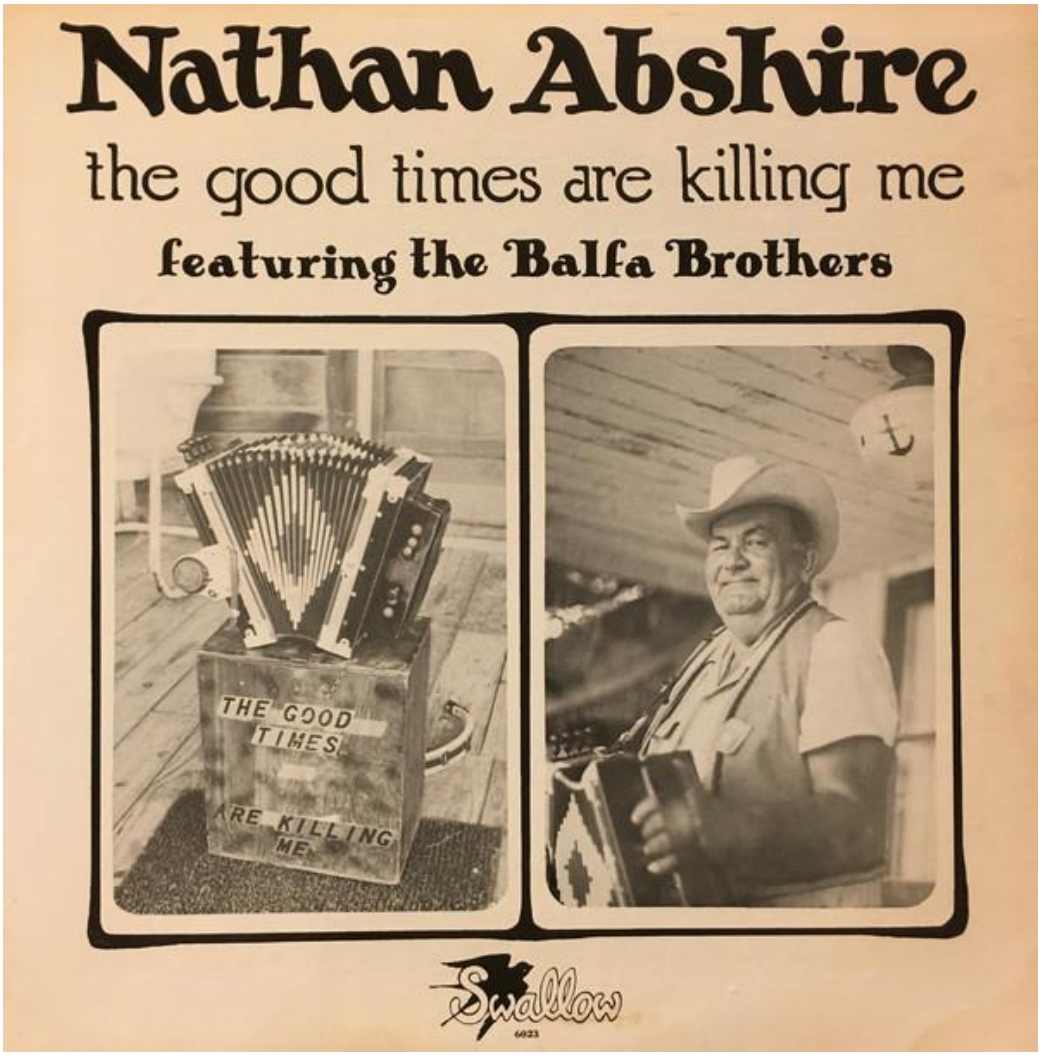

Figure 3.4: Nathan Abshire's first full-length album featured the Balfa Brothers and was released in 1975.

A distinct and notable shift in album art subject matter took place in the 1970s when international labels began recording remakes of popular Cajun albums. Le Chant Du Monde, a recording studio in Paris, France, rerecorded the

Balfa Brothers' first album in 1975, having the brothers sing each song in their native French. The marketing of that album changed entirely. Rather than sell artist familiarity, international studios used established Cajun iconography on its album covers. The horse and buggy, with its allusions to isolation and antiquation, returned on the French remake of *The Balfa Brothers Play Traditional Cajun* Music, now called *Les Cajuns* (Figure 3.5). Completely alone in the photo save for a distant object, the buggy retreats down an empty dirt road rimmed on either side with endless fields. Similarly, when a Canadian record studio, Disques Bleu, recorded a French remake of Abshire's album *The Good Times are Killing Me* in 1976, now *Laissez Le Bon Temps Rouler*, the studio opted to turn Abshire and a number of other nearby partiers and musicians into caricatures for the album's cover (Figure 3.6). Though broken up by the trunks of tall trees, a line of quaint cartoon cottages appears behind the group, all tiny, modest and constructed close together. What appears to be an empty oil drum peeks out from behind one tree, and revelers seem more concerned with enjoying tunes than fixing a broken window screen hanging slightly off one home.

Differences in marketing style correlated specifically with studio location. Albums recorded in Cajun country at the Swallow Records studio marketed familiarity and artist recognition while still respectfully incorporating landscape imagery and insinuations of simple living. No doubt Soileau's own Cajun heritage and daily immersion in Cajun country determined how he marketed his own

cultural ilk. Although selling even the most traditional of Cajun music was still a commercial venture, Swallow's marketing of Cajun albums dabbled more in pure rather than commodified authenticity. Rather than portraiture or illustrated album art, which by nature takes subjective liberties, Swallow photographed their musicians for album covers, thus minimizing the need for cultural interpretation. This isn't to suggest Soileau was not aware of the imagery promoted on albums but rather that, as a producer of Cajun culture himself, he didn't need to engage in the same type of cultural study required by outsiders, such as the Lomaxes or international studios seeking to jump on the folk bandwagon. Like the Lomaxes, Le Chant Du Monde and Disques Bleu had to tap into a culture's pure authenticity and extract some of its main characteristics to commodify and sell it as authentic. Despite cartoonish representations (and sometimes misrepresentations), use of Cajun iconography by international studios proved not only the extended visibility the Cajun revival had achieved but the recognition and institutionalization of cultural signifiers. Even in France and Canada, audiences recognized Cajun albums by their use of specific iconography.

Figure 3.5: The French recording studio, Le Chant Du Monde, released Les Frères Balfas' *Les Cajuns* album in 1975, which was a fully French remake of *The Balfa Brothers Play Traditional Cajun Music*.

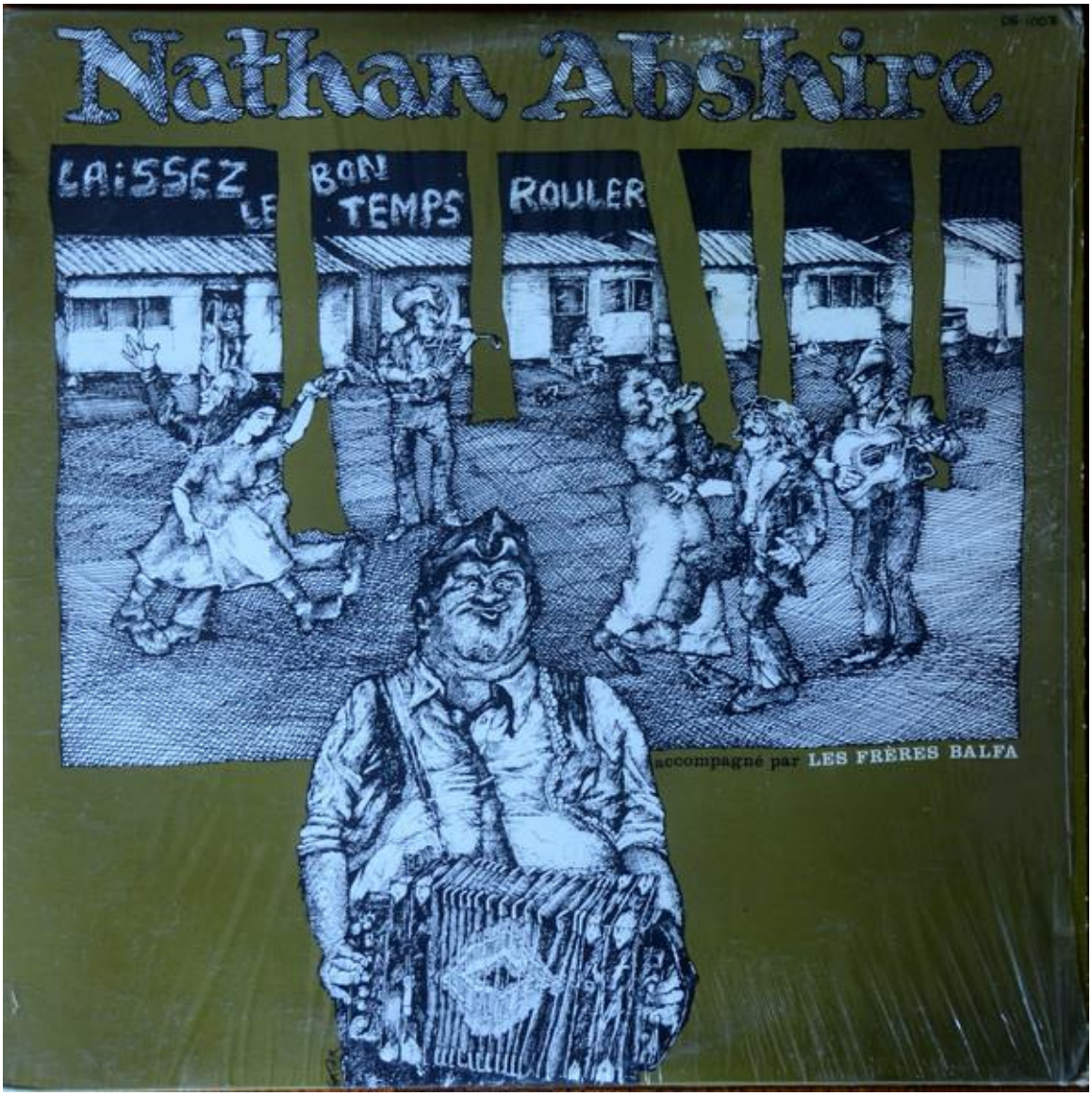

Figure 3.6: The Canadian recording studio, Disques Bleu, released Nathan Abshire's *Laissez Le Bon Temps Rouler* album in 1976, which was a fully French remake of his hit Cajun album, *The Good Times are Killing Me*.

The production of Cajun albums, specifically by Flat Town Records, exploded in the 1970s and 1980s, coinciding precisely with the revival's most active years and testifying to positive public reception of Cajun commercial music. Swallow Records cut at least 42 vinyl records between 1970 and 1979, all of them featuring largely Cajun and some Creole entertainers. The Jin sublabel stayed active, also cutting more than 50 records during the same decade, though its wares comprised a more diverse selection of genres that, while still incorporating Cajun, ranged from country and western to swamp pop and zydeco.

Soileau's musical ventures became so popular that a long-held dream of both his and his brother's, Joseph Kirt Soileau, came true when the duo opened Ville Platte Record Manufacturing Co. in 1975.[59] Soileau had dreamed since the 1950s of creating a business that incorporated the full record-making process, but record manufacturing was an expensive industry. Instead, for many years, Swallow and Jin records were cut in Cajun country then manufactured en masse at plants in Houston and California. Creation of the company thus implied that both producers and consumers in Acadiana, though largely working class, had made their way out of Depression-era poverty and were now financially capable of spending money either on their dream ventures or on luxury items, like records

[59]"Making Records – Ville Platte's New Industry," Ville Platte *Gazette*, June 26, 1975.

and phonographs. Additionally, the company's start evidenced steady, if not growing, interest among Acadians of not only celebrating their local culture, but also putting hard-earned money toward its continuation. Ville Platte Recording Co. "turn[ed] out about 1,600 45 RPM records and-or about 1,000 long-play albums per day" after first opening.[60] The sheer number of albums produced indicated growing public interest within Acadiana, as well as outside of the region.

Touristic events like Festival Acadiens, which drew larger outsider audiences each year, no doubt helped to extend awareness of Cajun musical commercialization—and consequently sell more records. It also helped that within the marketing of music, "localized markets can easily be made profitable without extensive market research," signaling a lower overhead than required by Cajun music's earliest commercial studios and in turn more funding put toward recording and production.[61] Thus, as Cajun album production grew, so too did distribution of Cajun iconography to wider and more distant populations. Without this distribution, Cajun iconography might well have remained either within its natural settings or within spaces delineated specifically for cultural celebration,

[60]"Making Records – Ville Platte's New Industry," Ville Platte *Gazette*, June 26, 1975.

[61]Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 109.

like festivals and dance halls. While festivals, too, drew non-Cajun crowds, they drew crowds that clearly already had interests in exploring the bric-a-brac of Cajun culture. Musical albums succeeded in both broadening internal cultural celebration and putting Cajun imagery in front of certain audiences that may never have known of the culture's existence.

Perhaps as important to the Cajun renaissance as the distribution of cultural signifiers is the ideological and cultural impact of its deeper incorporation into the American consumer economy. Sweeping international commercialization did not take root in Cajun culture until the late 1980s, after the most active years of the renaissance had ended, yet Cajun music had flirted with commercialization in cyclical patterns related to the economy's boom and bust for almost a century. As historian and musicologist Ryan Brasseaux explains:

> Abundant evidence of capitalism and bilingualism during [sic] the nineteenth century suggests that the adaptive processes driving Cajun culture's evolution were well under way by the Civil War when dance hall owners began charging admission thus opening the door for the widespread commercialization of Cajun music.[62]

His use of the term "widespread" is suspect without his setting specific parameters (dance hall patronage would inherently be limited by antebellum travel methods and would thus limit Cajun music's commercial reach); however, his point holds that Cajuns were not ignorant to the ways their cultural output

[62]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown,* 217.

could be monetized. Although albums were not the first form of commercialization of Cajun culture or music, they were among the first forms of cultural commercialization after the dawn of the era of mass consumption.

For mass consumption to rebuild an economically robust America as was hoped, production gave way to concepts of planned obsolescence that translated in the musical sphere, in one way, as the hit market. Industries understood that "fueling 'mass consumption'—enhancing the ability of the mass of Americans to purchase goods—promised not only a route to economic recovery, but also a more democratic and egalitarian America for all its citizens."[63] For mass consumption to continue and to sustain an ever-stronger America, producers and consumers each had to continue performing in their roles. To ensure this trend recycled itself, "style obsolescence promised to solve the problem of overproduction."[64] The most basic concept of preplanned obsolescence was the adoption of "regular changes in both technology and style" to continue to spur a company's growth.[65] Obsolescence produced the concept of cyclical style trends, because to wear an outdated frock or not refurbish your home with new styles was to make your "surroundings look unacceptably inharmonious and out of

[63]Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 55-56.

[64]Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 156.

[65]Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 156.

style."[66] Incorporation of style trends ensured that a company could maintain growth of its bottom line while also giving the public reason to continue engaging in mass consumption.

Planned obsolescence may not have manifested in the musical realm as concretely as in clothing or technology industries, but desires to stay relevant in a quickly evolving world amped up the zeal with which record producers sought talent. Seeking to avoid their own obsolescence tended record producers toward a constant search for the next best artist. Finding breakout stars to sell records fueled "mass production, [which] erase[d] value-creating differences" by saturating markets and overwhelming consumers with the sheer number of musical choices.[67] Overproduction created the need for a system that would simplify consumers' interactions with the saturated musical market by determining musical value and assigning a ranking based upon that value. Thus, the hit parade, or hit market, was born.

The hit parade affected Cajun-French music not by the genre's place within it but by the genre's success despite it. Cajun music did not necessarily battle for a spot on Billboard's top songs, but as the consumer market increasingly accepted the hit parade's legitimacy, Cajun music fought simply to

[66]Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream,* 155.

[67]Attali, *Noise*, 106.

not be drowned out by it. As social theorist Jacques Attali states about the hit parade:

> The ranking is never more than mythically a reflection of the desires of the consumers. It is not based solely on the work's satisfaction of an audience's mysterious and elusive tastes. Those who believe they participate in the ranking by writing to radio stations and newspapers should know that in many cases their letters are not even opened, or their telephone calls made note of. The ranking, in fact, depends very largely, on the one hand, on pressures applied on station program planners by record manufacturers eager to see their new releases carve out a place for themselves on the market and, on the other hand, on real sales results. The speed of a title's climb up the charts is thus very largely a function of the number and quality of the new titles awaiting release. It has "value" in the eyes of the listeners, then, by virtue of the ranking to which they think they contributed. When, as usually happens, they buy in quantities proportional to the rankings, they justify them, bringing the process full circle.[68]

In essence, popular producers and production studios largely influenced the contents of hit parade lists. The first hit parades came about in the 1930s, when the original folk movement was at its height and the first recordings of Cajun-French music became popularized.[69] That Cajun music found a spot within this production system, given the competitive nature of it and the limited availability of spots within it, attests to growing attention by outsider cultures before America's economic collapse. As the hit system rebuilt itself alongside the post-war economy, Cajun-French music lacked representation until recording studios like

[68]Attali, *Noise*, 107.

[69]Attali, *Noise*, 107.

Flat Town Records were established within Cajun country. Small-town Cajun recording studios served less to advocate for Cajun-French music's place on hit parades and more simply to ensure its continued production and distribution. That Cajun-French music still registered commercial successes in post-war decades despite a lack of representation by popular labels proved growing support of this folk genre by diverse audiences both internal and external to the core culture.

Establishment of recording studios in Cajun country and the distribution of Cajun-French albums turned Cajuns increasingly into music consumers (evidenced by Flat Towns' immense success); and in the era of mass consumption, there was power in being a consumer. The consumer culture created during the New Deal era supported the concept that "consumers held the present and future health of the American capitalist economy in their hands, and that what mattered most was their aggregate purchasing power."[70] Additionally, for underrepresented social groups like Cajuns, who were for so long marked as the "other," "identification as consumers offered a new opportunity to make claims on those wielding public and private power in American society."[71] Simply by entering the commercial world, Cajun cultural adherents were given increased

[70]Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 54.

[71]Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic,* 32.

access to channels of power by "participat[ing] in a broader political culture of dissent where 'the consumer became viewed as a legitimate and effective agent of protest."[72] The commercialization of Cajun music allowed Cajuns to gain a more influential foothold in a world where money was power. However, commercialization also put a specific price on cultural output and drew Cajun music into a market where worth was determined as much by public tastes as supply and demand. Musical commercialization allowed Cajun culture to enter the American capitalist system in ways that opened new avenues of economic agency to this marginalized culture. With recording studios like Flat Town established in Cajun country, Acadians had more power to determine what cultural signifiers would enter the commercial realm and, subsequently, the wider American public. With more power to influence markets, Cajuns also had new channels to insert their own commodified cultural productions and thus subtly increase public visibility of cultural signifiers.

Despite growing public successes, Cajun musicians stayed true to their downhome roots by continuing to play music for the fun of it. In a 1980 interview with Michael Doucet, the Cajun fiddler and founder of the popular Cajun band, Beausoleil, remarked on how "the musicians involved in the making of these albums do not make a commercial profit … 'It was just something that was given

[72]Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 53.

to me. This feeling I have for the music is something I was born with.'"[73] This modesty only served to reaffirm Doucet's authenticity as a Cajun musician, invoking now-firmly established ideals of Cajuns as a humble but culturally proud lot and increasing public interest in his band, Beausoleil, as a result. In 1976, the year Beausoleil recorded their first album, the group both traveled to France and played at the National Folk Festival in Wolf Trap, Virginia. The next year, they played at President Jimmy Carter's inauguration, held at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.[74] Beausoleil's success is one example of the Cajun renaissance's influence and was predicated on decades of hard-fought cultural battles by Cajun musicians and activists alike. The recording industry and its distribution of Cajun-French albums played a key part in shoring up the revival's sphere of influence. Cajun musical commercialization ensured that cultural signifiers had a viable avenue for dissemination to the public and also increased Cajun consumers' clout within the American capitalist system—both important realities for sustaining cultural rejuvenation.

[73]Lisa Sylvester, "Music is Important Part of Cajun Philosophy," Lafayette *Daily Advertiser*, August 17, 1980.

[74]Sylvester, "Music is Important Part of Cajun Philosophy."

CONCLUSION

In 1955, to commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of the Grand Derangement, or the expulsion of French settlers from Nova Scotia, Lafayette and surrounding towns hosted a ten-month-long cultural fete. Organized by "Louisiana government officials and representatives from Southwest Louisiana towns," the Acadian Bicentennial Celebration (ABC) would be the "largest celebration of Cajun ethnicity to date."[75] While the event succeeded in heightening ethnic pride and awareness as well as convincing the Louisiana Department of Education to emphasize French in high schools, it would be plagued with questions of authenticity almost from the start.[76] Held at the height of the Cold War, organizers "assumed the difficult task of celebrating their distinctive French-Catholic heritage without appearing to question mainstream American values."[77] It was historically poor timing to try to champion cultural distinctiveness, and efforts remained myopic, relegated largely to boosting

[75]"Acadians' Arrival in State To Be Honored at 1955 Fete," Lafayette *Daily Advertiser*, January 6, 1954, 1; Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 50.

[76]Bernard, *The Cajuns,* 52.

[77]Bernard, *The Cajuns,* 50.

"tourist trade and business activity."[78] Its poor timing, coupled with limited reach into the more isolated communities of Louisiana's bayous, meant that "the ABC failed to achieve its primary goal of preserving Cajun culture, for in striving to satisfy mainstream America its organizers excluded South Louisiana's mass of ordinary Cajuns."[79] For a cultural revival to be successful, initiatives had to appeal to the broadest cross section of ordinary citizens as possible. This fact was especially true in Acadiana, where a significant portion of the state's residents worked blue-collar jobs, and many lived in poverty even after state tourism took off in the 1980s and 1990s.[80] ABC failed to approach the levels of progress accomplished in the decades that succeeded it in part because of historical timing and also because it ignored what the mid-century revival did not: appealing to Cajun country's most authentic residents through one of the most relatable and unifying mediums—Cajun music.

Southern Louisiana witnessed a grassroots Cajun cultural revival whose most active years stretched across three decades in the latter half of the twentieth century. While the Cajun renaissance succeeded through support from

[78]"Acadians' Arrival in State To Be Honored at 1955 Fete," 2.

[79]Shane Bernard, "Acadian Pride, Anglo-Conformism: The Acadian Bicentennial Celebration of 1955," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 41, no. 2. (Louisiana Historical Association, spring 2000), 161.

[80]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 217; Brasseaux goes on to explain that in the 2000 U.S. census, the projected median income for Acadiana's northern parishes in 2003 would collectively average 42.67 percent lower than the national standard.

a number of cultural avenues, perhaps none was as far reaching and influential as the progress that occurred within the Cajun musical sphere. While important local and world events created conditions favorable to its development, like CODOFIL and initiatives like ABC, the revival's most active years coincided specifically with developments within the Cajun musical sphere. The revival's most successful years came as a result of continued activism, celebratory spaces, and cultural production and commodification, all intimately linked by music. Success is, of course, an easy word to throw around and a hard one to pin down. In the instance of Cajun culture, my use of the term refers not only to a renewed internal pride but also to an increased attention of and appreciation for the enclave culture by outside cultures, both national and international. Dewey Balfa's Newport performance, the creation of a celebratory festival space, and the selling of Cajun albums and by extension cultural signifiers boosted public visibility of Cajun culture at a time when anti-American sentiments sought to extol previously vilified cultures.

To celebrate cultural distinction in mid-century America meant to focus on concepts of authenticity established, in some ways, within the musical realm itself by way of the Lomax expeditions. The Cajun revival succeeded in the 1960s and 1970s because of the specific historical contexts that surrounded it, like the anti-nationalist, pro-individual liberty sentiments of the ongoing civil rights movements and the many sub-movements they influenced, including the folk revival

movement. Newport Folk Festival crowds attended the annual event each for their own reasons, but a majority understood that attendance meant witnessing performances by the era's most popular protest artists, like Bob Dylan. Protest music was central to the Newport Folk Festival experience in its earliest years. This fact was evidenced by what historian Benjamin Filene calls the "oft told" story of Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan's 1963 performance where the duo sung "We Shall Overcome" while standing hand in hand with other protest and folk artists—"such luminaries of the folk revival as Joan Baez, Theodore Bikel, the Freedom Singers, and Peter, Paul, and Mary."[81] The importance of timing cannot be overlooked as this was only one year before Dewey Balfa and the Cajun Band performed at the festival along some of those same acts.

Music was central to the Cajun revival because it was central to the civil rights movement, which was central to the folk revival and its affiliated folk festival, and that festival produced one of Cajun music's most ardent activists. The 1963 performance of "We Shall Overcome" deeply moved Seeger. He saw it as the "consummation of an effort begun by his [folk] mentors." Dylan specifically was the "focal point of Seeger's pride and hopes" in the folk revival's trajectory because Dylan "seemed to meld a political conscience with a performance style, persona, and repertoire deeply rooted in American folk traditions …

[81]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 183.

demonstrating conclusively that this combination could be commercially powerful."[82] For many of the same reasons, Balfa deeply influenced the Cajun revival because like Dylan, but separate from him in distinct ways, he melded cultural consciousness and a willingness to evolve with a culturally authentic performance style.

None of this is intended to suggest Balfa alone is to thank for the Cajun renaissance's success nor minimize the efforts of many other musicians and activists. Arguably, most musicians who performed throughout the Festival de Musique Acadienne's existence contributed to Cajun cultural advocacy, but specific musicians were as culturally motivated as Balfa. Marc Savoy, for example, spent years teaching himself the art of Cajun instrument production, which created connections within folk music circles. He opened Savoy Music Center and became deeply "motivated by a firm sense of loyalty to the grassroots and an unyielding drive for excellence and … dignity of the folk arts."[83] Savoy would eventually take a seat on the National Council for the Traditional Arts—a council with which Balfa himself worked closely. Michael Doucet, too, became "a leader in the renaissance of Cajun music."[84] He shared Cajun music's diverse

[82]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 183.

[83]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 135.

[84]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 141.

history through productions and performances by his two bands, Coteau and Beausoleil. Doucet also served the revival through musical advocacy and a shrewd way with words, believing that "what a musician does is translate cultural ideals into appropriate sounds … [the musician] is an interpreter, a spokesman for cultural values."[85] Many musicians, indeed, advocated within the Cajun cultural revival through their performances, songs, and mere existence. Yet none quite captured the cross-generational imagination, none held quite the amount of historical significance as Balfa. His position in the mid-century revival was entirely unique because of his contributions to the old world and the new. Balfa played in Acadiana's early, dusty dance halls. Dewey Balfa, and his brothers, helped define the cultural signifiers folk revivalists would seize upon to shape celebratory spaces like Festival Acadiens (for which he also helped plan) and sell to diversified audiences by way of album art (for which he also cut a number of throughout his lifetime). Balfa was authentically Cajun to his core, and he learned to apply that authenticity to successful revival ventures.

Authentic music arose from a culture's most ordinary factions and yet ultimately, especially once commercialized and popularized, appealed to citizens across socioeconomic boundaries. The revival gave approval for Cajuns to use

[85]Ancelet and Morgan, *The Makers of Cajun Music*, 149.

what were once symbols of poverty and images of shame—food considered cheap because it was caught by hand, moss-covered trees and algae-riddled marshes that insinuated isolation and stereotypical backwardness—as symbols of pride and celebration.[86] Now, Acadiana's own finer dining experiences exist in settings that pay homage to this idyll. At Poor Boy's Riverside Inn in Broussard, live gators slick through a pond just outside the restaurant's main entrance, which is hidden beneath a canopy of classic Louisiana cypress. Items like smoked gator sausage and alligator "tidbits" (hopefully not from the lagoon out front) line its menu, and dishes like "Shrimp and Catfish Pirogue" conjure up nostalgic images of Cajuns fishing the state's swamps.[87] It has become fashionable to eat dishes that at one time signaled not much more than the frugality of Louisiana's poorest class. The revival, accomplished at profound levels through the work of activists and performers within the Cajun musical sphere, had succeeded in reclaiming a long-forgotten cultural pride.

The revival's success was intimately bound up in the commercialization of Cajun cultural signifiers. Reclaiming those symbols for cultural pride wasn't enough—Cajuns had to publicly rewrite the "delightfully backward" narrative

[86]Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown,* 112.

[87]"Menu," Poor Boy's Riverside Inn, accessed October 28, 2020, https://www.poorboysriversideinn.com/great-seafood-menu/.

pushed for so long by “genteel Acadians” and outsiders alike then sell that narrative back to these groups. To do so in twentieth-century America meant, ironically, commodifying folk perceptions. As decades wore on, authenticity became more tightly woven with commercial profit, which led to inevitable questions. Once individuals become aware of their own authenticity, can any kind of cultural production be considered authentic? Does authenticity rely on a specific ignorance to it? Can cultural output continue to be authentic once it is commercialized and by extension absorbed into the American capitalist mainstream? The specter of authenticity again arose in the 1980s as non-Cajun and non-Creole musicians, like Bayou Seco from New Mexico and Jim McDonald from New York, grew in popularity by performing traditional Cajun and Creole music outside of Acadiana, “raising new issues of authenticity.”[88] This begged the question—did musicians have to be Cajun to play authentically Cajun music?

Marc Savoy summed up the culturally existential conundrum when, after being asked if he thought it unfortunate that Cajuns have been “discovered,” he responded, “What’s more unfortunate is that Cajuns have discovered themselves.”[89] Essentially, he was fearful of commercialization’s adverse effects on the revival’s progress. As Barry Ancelet put it, anyone can now “go fishing in a

[88]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco,* xxi.

[89]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco,* xx-xxi.

Cajun brand bass boat with Cajun brand crickets for bait and Cajun brand ice in a Cajun brand ice chest to keep the catch cold so that it will be fresh when fried on a Cajun brand outdoor burner."[90] The implication was clear: Cajuns had made such a name for themselves that that very name could, and was, now widely marketable, and how authentic could something remain if its authenticity was being sold by inauthentic producers? After decades of activism, Cajun culture had escaped public disdain only to have certain aspects now become caricatured by American capitalism.

Perhaps best epitomizing the dichotomous effects of commercialization on Cajun cultural awareness was the production and reception of the film *Allons Danser!* Produced and directed by Opelousas native and dance instructor Randy Speyer late in the 1980s, *Allons Danser!* taught viewers some of Cajun country's most famous dance moves. Speyer shot the film in locations around Acadiana, featuring such sites as "the Mamou Mardi Gras and Fred's Lounge, Lafayette, Breaux Bridge, and Opelousas." It also featured "a short documentary on the Cajun Culture as well as musical selections by Michael Doucet and Beausoleil."[91] In 1988, the American Film Institute and Billboard Magazine honored *Allons*

[90]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco*, xxi.

[91]"Cajun video honored at banquet: Mamou scenes featured in video," Mamou *Acadian Press*, May 19, 1988.

Danser! as a top dance film alongside other honorees like Jane Fonda, Paul Prudhomme, and Bill Cosby.[92] The honor was as much a testament to Cajun culture's national popularity as to how entrenched it had become in the American cultural mainstream. Notable, too, was the video's featuring of the same small-town dance halls (and one of those actual halls) that hosted the earliest forms of authentic Cajun music. Alluding to the rural small towns that peppered Acadiana's bucolic landscapes and gave rise to the same dance halls that incubated its modern-day musical sound remained an important part of selling Cajun authenticity.

Conceptual complications arising out of the commercialization of authenticity do not undo the decades of activist work within the Cajun music realm that helped popularize Cajun culture locally, nationally, and internationally. The work of those same cultural activists whose efforts and writings fill this thesis' pages resuscitated a dying culture—one being slowly swallowed up by Americanization and wartime nationalist rhetoric. On stage at the 1985 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, fiddler, bus driver, insurance salesman, and cultural activist Dewey Balfa offered sentiments that get at the heart of the revival's most elemental accomplishments. Balfa made note of the fact that, for half of their forty-five-minute set, he and his Cajun band had been

[92]"Cajun video honored at banquet: Mamou scenes featured in video," Mamou *Acadian Press.*

playing traditional songs that were fifty years old or more. But now, he said, they would perform some "new songs, songs that he and his brothers had composed just before Rodney and Will died in 1978."[93] Barry Ancelet tells the story in his opening to the book *Cajun Music and Zydeco*, recounting the words Balfa shared with the crowd of thousands gathered just a stone's throw from the Washington Monument:

> Cultural conservation doesn't mean freezing culture or preserving it under glass. It means preserving the life of the culture, and if we are successful, then our culture is going to be alive and well and continue to grow. And fifty years or so from now in Louisiana, some young musicians are going to need some songs that are fifty or so years old to play so my brothers and I made some, and I'm going to play a few of them for you now.[94]

Despite the complications surrounding concepts of authenticity that arose from increased commercialization and public visibility, the Cajun renaissance that took place in Acadiana from the 1960s to 1980s was, by Balfa's own idealistic definition, a huge success. Sustained activist efforts recast long-held negative tropes about Cajun culture that ensured modern-day Cajuns had access not only to traditional aspects of their culture but to the same inroads and celebratory spaces Balfa, Ancelet, and others created to help keep those traditions alive. While those efforts took place across broadly diversified fields, cultural activism

[93]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco*, xxi.

[94]Gould and Ancelet, *Cajun Music and Zydeco*, xxi.

accomplished specifically within the Cajun musical realm produced avenues for the mass of ordinary Cajuns to acknowledge, celebrate, and ultimately commodify and disperse culturally authentic signifiers, which was of central importance to sustain a renewed cultural pride.

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