

## The Day The Cajuns Were Discovered

The first musicians ever to be invited to the Newport Folk Festival were Cyprien and Adam Landreneau with Jerry Devillier. The latter person is still alive today and can be reached at his home here in Eunice, Louisiana. The second group invited the following year consisted of Gladney Thibodeaux, accordion; Vinus LeJeune, fiddle; and Wallace LeFleur, guitar. At the last minute the guitarist backed out, so Gladney and Vinus invited Dewey Balfa to accompany them on rhythm guitar. The third year featured Bois Sec Ardoin and Canray Fontenot. The following year featured the Balfa Brothers. I know this because I was there. When the talent scout from the folk festival first came to Mamou in July of 1964 to search for talent, he took a photo of the group that was chosen, and the local newspaper printed this photo along with a story about the group. The fact that such a prestigious folk festival, in Rhode Island of all places, was interested enough in Cajun music to hire and fly up a group was so unbelievable to the locals that it made the newspaper headlines. In the photo next to his mentor, Cyprien Landreneau, was seated a 24 year old Marc Savoy, who was an alternate if Cyprien or Adam was unable to make the voyage. The original newspaper is on display in the folklife section of the Smithsonian and was donated by me upon their request. So I know all these things because I was there and a part of it all.

I fell in love with all things Cajun at a very early age. I began playing accordion and fiddle at age 12 inspired by the music I heard in my home and in my grandparent's home, the house I live in. The legendary fiddler, Dennis McGee, was a tenant farmer for my grandfather in the late 40s and early 50s. I spent many hours in their presence absorbing not only their music, but also their language and stories. Dennis McGee, who died at the age of 96, learned from a man nearly 100 years old. Not only was Dennis an amazing fiddler with an astonishing

repertoire of over 500 songs, but he was also a living window into a vanishing past. Through interviews with Dennis we can acquire a pretty accurate picture of what the early Acadian people were like and how they became Cajun. One of the interesting things that was consistent with all my interviews with Dennis, and many people like him, was the wealth of information these people knew about their songs, their music and about living. Even more interesting to me was the fact that their oral history did not include any information about why they spoke French, where they came from, or how they got to where they were – nothing about their connection to France or Acadia. Nothing of that nature ever existed in either their songs or oral history. You would think that Dennis would have had at least one song in his enormous repertoire that would have dealt with his ancestors' journey into Louisiana. Not only did they lack this information, they were completely uninterested in this aspect of who they were, or why they had become who they were. I think that this in itself is a very important fact to understand, since it pretty much defines why these people became who they are. They arrived on our shores, a hardy destitute people, with a strong, independent will to overcome any obstacle and a talent to adapt. Independent from the rest of the world and self-reliant, they were able to survive and thrive in this foreign land. Their past was definitely connected to the French world, but after arriving here, their past no longer had the same connotation it had before being expelled from their home by the English. They totally deleted these bad memories of their past. I think that the only remnant of their past that did survive and was very deeply rooted in their oral history was their hatred of the English! To give credit to the French world for having an influence on how the Acadians became Cajuns would be about the same thing as how the coastal redwoods became Louisiana cypress trees. The roots are the same, but the trees are no longer alike. To consider that the Cajun people see themselves connected to any French speaking country would be

as misleading as suggesting that the natives of Amazonia have connections with the Native American tribes of the Great Plains.

The French language in Louisiana is in its death throes, and there isn't much that can be done to avert this. When a culture becomes an academic study, then it is already too late for its survival. The reason that my generation is the last to speak French is simply because this language was necessary to learn so that we would be able to communicate with our grandparents, who were not bilingual. That is no longer a necessity today since everyone speaks English. Without *la raison d'être*, we will lose the language, just as we lost our tails after descending from the trees. The only thing accomplished by teaching French to a Louisiana student is that now you have a French speaking American, useful undoubtedly but that alone will not insure the sustainability of our culture. Neither is the language the definitive criteria that makes this culture so different from any other.

In this day and age of instant and constant information from everyone around the world, I'm not sure that any culture will be able to maintain its identity. The American culture has become very attractive to the Chinese, so it seems that the American homogenization process is very alive and well. Even though I fear that the French language will not survive, I feel sure that many important aspects of our culture will survive; aspects that really define what make a culture what it is. The music will definitely continue in some form or another, but most important of all cultural aspects will be that certain vision that these people will have of themselves; how they live, how they see the world around them in this given time, and how they deal with their place in this world.

I have made my life's work the promotion and preservation of Cajun culture, and though I have been moderately successful at recruiting a few followers, I realize that without the critical mass needed for some sort of chain reaction, my efforts haven't been much more than a life support system. This doesn't mean that I

am going to pull the plug. I will continue my uphill battle as long as I can crawl. I will continue playing the music I heard from the wonderful old people I grew up with and do my utmost not to change it. I will let it evolve, but will definitely not deliberately change anything. I will continue to present my culture in an honest and accurate manner without attaching any false, romantic patina. I do this because my life depends on it. Wish me luck. I need all the help I can get.

Reveil! Reveil!

Qui? Pourquoi?

Les Cajuns ne sont jamais endormis.

Ces-là qui dormant sont les

Coonasses et les yuppies.

Pour la santé de la culture Cajun, laisse-les dormir

Fais do do! Fais do do!

*Marc Savoy*