

Cajun Music's Journey: From Mamou to Newport to Wolftrap to around the Globe

In 1964 Ralph Rinzler, assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institute, came down to Louisiana to scout around for Cajun musicians for the prestigious Newport Folk Festival in Newport, Rhode Island. After spending several days traveling around Acadiana, nothing he found seemed to be what he was looking for. As early as the 1920s Cajun music had begun to borrow very heavily from country music to the point so that many of the popular Cajun bands resembled country and western bands but with a Cajun accordion. The story goes that Ralph Rinzler was leaving town driving to the airport when all of a sudden he picked up a live radio broadcast of what he later recalled as being “the wildest thing you ever heard”. He had accidentally tuned into the Revon Reed Show, live and direct from Fred's Bar in Mamou, Louisiana and had caught the last song of the show played by Cyprien and Adam Landreneau. This was exactly what he had been searching for; Cajun music without the influence of country and western. The local newspaper was very impressed that someone from so far away was in Mamou to hire Cajun musicians for a festival way up in Yankee land. A lot of people thought it was all a hoax. The newspaper article, dated July 1964, shows a photo of Cyprien with his accordion and seated next to him a twenty-four year old Marc Savoy playing his handmade accordion. I know all these things because I was there and a part of it all. In the article I am listed as an alternate to replace Cyprien in the event that he would have been unable to make the journey. The group chosen to represent Cajun music for the first year in Newport was the Eunice Playboys; consisting of Gladey Thibodeaux (accordion), Vinus LeJeune (fiddle), and Dewey Balfa (rhythm guitar), replacing Wallace LaFleur, who dropped out at the last minute..” This Newport performance was the first time that Cajun music was presented to a mass audience away from Louisiana. It was impossible to predict what the festival's response to this music was going to be, and most certainly none of the three Cajun musicians had any clue to the impact that their performance would have upon the folk music world. This performance in Newport in 1964 was the first thing that was destined to slowly begin the long road that would eventually change the attitude of being Cajun, from a stigma to an asset.

I couldn't wait for the Cajun band to return from Newport so that I could find out about the reception they had received. Gladey Thibodeaux said that the Cajun band had opened the festival and was followed by Peter Paul and Mary, Bob Dylan, and many other folk artists of that era. You would think that the Eunice Playboys would have been intimidated to be playing before such legendary folk stars, but not the Cajuns – they had never heard of these folks. This was the peak of the folk renaissance years and folk music had taken on a whole new persona. The first song the Cajun band played was Grand Mamou, and before the song was halfway through, the audience was giving them a standing ovation. What is this music with the fiddle and this little wooden button accordion?? What is this language you are speaking and singing in?? What is it about the rhythm that makes everyone want to dance?? What country are you all from?? This music had always been here in Louisiana, but it was so isolated from the rest of the world that it seemed to be hidden behind a cultural Iron Curtain. According to the band, when the media discovered that these three musicians playing this wonderful music and speaking this beautiful language were indeed Americans, every major network descended upon the festival to interview the Cajun band. In a matter of a few short minutes, Cajun music had become an integral part of American folk music, and from that moment it began a journey that would eventually circle the globe.

The things that the band would tell me about how Newport had responded to Cajun music pretty much confirmed what I had always believed; that Cajun culture was very unique and special, and that it's potential as a tourist attraction was tremendous. However, the problem was how to achieve this. At that time I was playing in dancehalls around Louisiana and East Texas simply because there were no other venues to present the music. Music festivals, restaurants with music, and cultural organizations were nonexistent. It would be another decade before Louisiana would present its first folk festival and another two decades before the term “cultural tourism” would be coined.

By that time I had reached a crossroads in my life and wanted to continue playing music, but also to work towards promoting Cajun culture. I was becoming

somewhat confused by the manner in which most audiences perceived a Cajun band. I grew up in an area in which there were many great old time accordion and fiddle players. These people were my heroes, and I literally loved the ground they walked on. Out of respect to my mentors, and out of a deep love of my culture, I had no desire to bastardize this music with any other genre. Not many people shared my love of traditional music, much less my belief in the potential of Cajun culture as a tourist attraction, so I realized it would be an uphill battle all the way. I also wanted to be my own boss and not have to work for someone who didn't share my dream. What to do??

I was in close contact with Cajun musicians, and as a result I learned which bands were to be invited to Newport the following year. In 1965, Newport presented the Mamou Cajun Band; which consisted of Cyprien(accordion) and Adam(fiddle) Landreneau with Jerry Devillier on harmonica and triangle. In an interview with Jerry Devillier in December, 2013, he described their performance as: “It was an outdoor concert and the entire hillside, in front of the stage, was covered with twenty thousand spectators. We did our set, received a standing ovation, and were asked for an encore. We played the encore and they kept insisting for another. The energy was so high that the audience wouldn’t let us leave the stage. The stage manager was becoming frantic in his efforts to keep the show on schedule. He had to ask the audience to please quiet down so that the other performers (Peter, Paul, and Mary, Bob Dylan, and Joan Baez,) could have their turn on stage.” In 1966 it was Bois Sec Ardoin and Canray Fontenot. In 1967 it was the Balfa Brothers.

Newport was only the beginning. The National Folk Festival, held annually at a national park called Wolf Trap Center for the Performing Arts, presented Cyprien and Adam in the summer of 1965, and then they were off to Germany that fall for the Berlin Jazz Festival. From this point on, any folk festival that didn’t feature a Cajun band, wasn't really considered a serious first rate festival.

The first festival I ever attended was in 1971 when I was invited to Wolf Trap National Park as a craftsperson to display and demonstrate my accordion making craft. The following year I was invited to return again to Wolf Trap, but this time as

a musician playing with Dennis McGee and Sady Courville. In these early years the only venues that would present music festivals were either universities or folk music organizations working in conjunction with national parks. Myself, Sady Courville, Dennis McGee, DL Menard and the Louisiana Aces, and the Balfa Brothers soon found ourselves playing a national park circuit of festivals. Some of the national parks that really stand out in my memory were of course, Wolf Trap National Park in Arlington, Virginia, Chamizal Memorial in El Paso, Texas, and “the Arch Gateway to the West” in St. Louis, Missouri.

I would always return from these early folk festivals full of dreams and inspiration but also very confused. It was confusing to me how someone could be a cultural hero two thousand miles away from Louisiana but on their home turf they were considered almost a substandard citizen. Also confusing to me was the fact that most of the different music styles presented at these folk festivals came from cultures hundreds if not thousands of miles away. Why not have a national park facility in the area where these cultures are still alive and thriving? Why not have a national park in Eunice?? Would anything be more effective than that in preserving and propelling Cajun culture into the next millennium? My dream was to see a facility of some sort dedicated not to the preservation of things that were All-American but rather dedicated to things that were not all-American, in other words the Cajun culture. I returned to Wolf Trap Park in 1976 and one of my dreams came true. I met my wife, Ann-beautiful, musician, spoke French, author, photographer, etc. etc. I begin traveling with the Balfa Brothers, DL Menard, Dennis McGee and Sady Courville, and Doc Guidry. I was still dreaming of a national park in Eunice. I was also dreaming about the day when my wife and I could travel and play music together. That would have to wait a while because in 1978 Sarah, our firstborn arrived on the scene. By that time Cajun music had taken me all over the United States, Europe, Central and South America, and Canada. In February of the very cold winter of 1979 DL Menard, Doc Guidry and I were invited to the University of Chicago Folk Festival. Sarah was a very good child so we bundled her up really well and off we went to Chicago. During the festival we learned that there was a showing of the new film by Les Blank called *Chulas Fronteras*. We were big admirers of Les’ work ever since he made the film on Cajuns called “Spend It All” in 1969. After watching Les’ new film featuring the music of Flaco Jimenez and listening to the people talking about how they were

ostracized by the gringos, it dawned on me how close the Mexican culture was to the Cajun culture. We both spoke a foreign language, both loved accordion music, and were both fighting to prevent our heritage from falling into the great American melting pot. I was so moved by this film that I felt compelled to do something to bring this wonderful music to Eunice, Louisiana. I wanted my friends to see this beautiful film and hear this wonderful music. In 1980 several like-minded people got together and formed a nonprofit organization called "S.P.E.C.I.A.L.," which stood for "Society for the Preservation of Ethnic Culture in Acadian Louisiana". The purpose of this organization was to present, promote, and encourage Cajun culture in Louisiana. To be able to accomplish these presentations, we needed an operating budget. This was before we knew about grant writing so nothing of that sort was available to us. The problem of where the operating budget would come from remained very prevalent. However it had always been a Louisiana tradition that when someone needed financial help, friends and family would organize a benefit concert to raise the money. By this time I had already met Flaco Jimenez and was now one of his biggest fans- so why not put on a Mexican accordion concert in Eunice?? I called him in San Antonio, Texas, to make arrangements. Unfortunately for us none of his open dates corresponded with the dates that we had open so he said, "Why don't you call my brother Santiago?? " I phoned Santiago, agreed to his price, promised he and his group a big gumbo feast after the show, and also promised to take them to the local Cajun dance later on that night. The only thing left to do now was the problem of raising the money and finding a suitable venue to host the show. Everyone that I spoke to about the upcoming concert of Mexican music was very enthusiastic. I had previously worked closely with the current accordion builders so I turned to them for help. If each person would sell twenty-five tickets to their customers, that would cover the operating budget. The NPR station WWOZ in New Orleans found out about the upcoming concert and offered to publicize it on their radio. We felt confident that we could easily raise the money to cover the performance fee so all that remained now was to find a venue to present the show. There was a beautiful old 1920s Vaudeville theater in Eunice called the Liberty Theater that had been closed for the last ten years. This would be a perfect venue to present our upcoming Mexican concert if it was available. After our initial meeting with the owners of the theater we found out that there were major problems with the facility such as mildewed seats, toilets that did not work, sound systems that didn't work, etc. etc. We kept insisting to the

owner that we could overcome these obstacles including getting the projector to work so we could show Les' new film about the Mexican culture. Finally after enough persuasion the owner agreed to rent the Liberty to S.P.E.C.I.A.L. for a very reasonable fee. The day arrived, and Santiago Jimenez and his band rolled into Eunice from San Antonio, Texas. We opened the doors of the Liberty Theater for the first time in ten years. Within thirty minutes the place was packed with people. Wow! I stood by the exit after the show to hear the comments of the people. Everyone had really enjoyed not just the film but the entire show that evening.

In the audience was our friend Nick Spitzer, who at that time was the folklorist for the state of Louisiana. He had just completed his new film entitled "Zydeco" and was looking for an organization to premiere it's showing. He asked if S.P.E.C.I.A.L. would be interested. Affirmative! As an extra attraction we hired John Delafosse of the Eunice Playboys to play a dance prior to the film showing. The audience consisted of half Creoles and half Cajuns. I'm sure that this was the first time in history that both races had met under the same roof to share something that both groups held dear to their hearts: music. This event was held on a Friday night so most of the out-of-towners from places like New Orleans and Baton Rouge spent the night in Eunice. I knew that many of them, including Nick Spitzer, would be at the store the next morning for the jam session.

Everyone that had worked putting on the two events at the Liberty was now so pumped up with the success of both projects, that I presented my ideas to Nick Spitzer about what it would take to make my dream of a national park in Eunice become a reality. Nick's advice was that I should call Jim Isenogle, the regional director of the Jean LaFitte National Historical Park complex which was located in New Orleans. Monday morning arrived, and finally the clock reached 9 AM. I called the number Nick Spitzer had given to me the night before, introduced myself to Mr. Isenogle, and came to the point immediately. "What would it take for the Department of Interior to establish a national park in Eunice?" I asked. I sort of expected him to hang up, but instead he seemed to be expecting my call. He replied, "First you need a suitable venue, which apparently you guys have already found. Secondly, you'd need someone with a lot of political savvy." There was a long pause from my end of the phone. What did he mean when he said that we had

already found a venue?? The long pause from me must have indicated to him that I was not on the same page as he was, so he quickly followed up with “ Oh, by the way, I thoroughly enjoyed the Santiago concert and Nick’s film and thought both were very well presented.” I suddenly realized he had been in the audience for both shows! It seemed as if fate was on our side and things were happening as destined.

One of Jim Isenogle many questions was whether or not the Liberty Theater was for sale and if so for how much. These questions I could easily find the answers to but the other question about finding a person that had both political savvy and an interest in promoting Cajun culture was the question I put on the back burner for the time being. After meeting with the Liberty owner and learning that the theater was indeed for sale, I informed Jim Isenogle of this. He said, “I think we should have a look at the structure in daylight.” He asked that I please arrange a meeting with himself and the owner. We set a date for this meeting with a lunch at my home prior to the meeting. He and his assistant arrived both dressed in their national park ranger uniforms. The first question the owner of the Liberty Theater had asked me when I inquired whether or not the theater was for sale was “Who wants to buy it?” I really wasn't sure what the answer to that question was so I simply replied that it was a group of investors. I thought it prudent at the time not to mention the fact that The Department Of The Interior was involved. What to do now that they had arrived at my home all dressed up in their Park Ranger uniforms?? As fate would have it both Park officials were about the same size as Ann and I so it's off with the uniforms and on with some of the finer examples of our wardrobes. To say that my wardrobe has always consisted of the simplest of garments would be the understatement of the year. My wife, Ann, has always been referred to by her friends as the “fashion queen”. Not the latest fashions, however, but rather the fashions of the 1920s. I wish I had taken a picture of this couple dressed in their disguises. We met the owner at the Liberty Theater and he gave us an in-depth tour of all the nooks and crannies of the theater and I remember thinking how odd it was that the owner never once inquired as to who these people were. Perhaps, because of the way they were dressed, he realized, that simply knowing their names wasn't going to clear anything up, so he may as well just skip names and let it go at that-the advantage of dressing properly for the occasion!

The meeting ended with the owner of the Liberty stating his asking price which according to Jim Isenogle was very reasonable and a fair amount. On the way back to my home to change back into their uniforms, he kept stressing the fact that the only way the Department of the Interior would consider such a project would be if the city itself would purchase the building. The city would have to prove its support of such a venture and although I was never involved with city politics, I knew that with past city council members and mayors this wasn't going to happen. At least not for any thing having to do with Cajun culture. However there was a new mayor in office. I had heard from others that he spoke French, loved Cajun music, and loved all things Cajun. I had never met Mayor Curtis Joubert, but I thought he would grant me a few minutes of his time if I requested it. But what to do and what should I say to convince this man, who was busy running the city of Eunice, that this area stood a very good chance of becoming the recipient of a national park? I mean, after all, this was a pretty far out concept, especially considering the way that the bulk of the citizens felt towards all things Cajun. Even though, the phrase "cultural tourism" had not been coined yet, our area would have been most willing to embrace tourism. However, the question remained, why would tourists come to this area to begin with if it wasn't for the beauty of our culture - to see the mountains and beaches?

Playing at folk festivals all over the world, I had witnessed firsthand the effect Cajun music had on people away from here. I saw the beginning of cultural tourism as early as 1966 when I opened the doors to Savoy Music Center. The problem was, how do you convince local people that Cajun culture could be a tourist attraction?? I knew that none of the locals had ever been to a music festival held in a national park so there was no way that they could feel as adamant about the project as I did. I always heard that a prophet goes unheeded in his own land. I wasn't a prophet, but I did go unheeded anyway. I decided to call for help from a friend of mine by the name of Alan Jabbour who, besides being a wonderful fiddler and a great human being, was also director of the Folklife Division at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Alan and I would run into each other very often at various folk festivals around the country. Many of the late-night jam sessions we had together would often end with me expressing my dreams of a national park in Eunice. Alan was always very positive with his encouragement and would offer his help in any way he could, including coming to Eunice if he was needed. I knew that Alan had worked closely with other national parks in programming their

festivals and music programs and also that he was the one man who mayor Mayor Curtis Joubert would most likely listen to. So I made an appointment with the Mayor's office and then I called Alan Jabbour to see if he was still interested in helping out with the project. Alan answered, "Just give me a day's notice and I'll be down there." So it was off to the mayor's office to play my hand. I was pretty confident because I felt that I had an ace up my sleeve. I met Curtis Joubert who greeted me in French instead of English. Good start. His rating had already gone up in my book and we hadn't even started yet. I questioned why he spoke French so well to which he replied that growing up in Lawtell, French was his first language. I mentioned a few of my aunts and uncles living in the Lawtell area so that I could establish some sort of pedigree of myself. His face lit up. He knew them, liked them, and respected them. The Cajun way! The ice was broken between us. Now it was time to get down to business. I played my hand, but it was weak as I expected it to be. I saw the look of uncertainty in his kind face. I quickly pulled out my ace and offered to pay for the phone call to the Library of Congress so that he could speak to Mr. Alan Jabbour. The conversation went something like this: "Mr. Jabbour, my name is Curtis Joubert. I am mayor of Eunice, Louisiana, and I have a man in my office here that is telling me something about the Department of Interior being interested in maybe establishing a national park in our area. *(long pause)* Yes, the man is Marc Savoy. What? You mean you could come down here tomorrow morning to discuss it??"

The rest is history.

Curtis Joubert and I became fast friends. I don't think any other person could have taken the ball and run with it like Curtis. I knew the people involved with the cultural side of the park service but to make the project become reality it needed someone with not only a lot of political savvy but also that person had to personally know the politicians themselves. Even more important than Curtis knowing the politicians, was the fact that the politicians had to know Curtis. I don't think anyone could have achieved the impressive list of senators, congressmen and governors willing to help, had it been only for the sake of a worthwhile project. I'm sure politicians are confronted with worthwhile project daily. Curtis brought

these politicians on board because they knew and respected his personal and political reputation.

Initially it was very frustrating dealing with some of the local people. Unbelievable as it would seem there was a lot of opposition directed towards the project by some of the citizens themselves. Even as the project began to take shape the opposition consensus was “it will never happen”, a phrase that lingered until the project came to fruition. But in all fairness how could it have been otherwise, given the status of Cajun culture at that time. Other than a very small group of musicians, no one else has ever been to such places as Newport, Chamizal, “The Arch Gateway To The West”, Wolf Trap, or any of the other national parks that presented Cajun music festivals. By the mid-1970s myself and many other musicians had already taken Cajun music to about every state in the union including State Department's tours of Central and South America as far south as Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Columbia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Nicaragua, Canada, Norway, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, England, etc. etc. No locals had ever witnessed the world's response to something that a lot of people back home were either ashamed of, or worse yet, were running away from. But how could it be otherwise, especially since as early as the 1920s Cajuns were made to feel inferior. How could anyone not be stigmatized by their heritage when even teachers imposed harsh punishment upon students that could only speak French, their native language?? How dare anyone pass such judgment! What were these people thinking?? Wasn't it rather the teachers' fault themselves that they were unable to speak the indigenous language?? What sort of education system would impose the teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic to someone in a foreign language?? In all fairness it was difficult for many locals to view Cajun culture in a positive light much less to see it as something with tremendous potential for tourism.

Thanks to Curtis Joubert what was once a rat infested building is now a beautiful theater connected to a multi-million dollar national park complex.

It happened because the right people were in the right place at the right time.

Never quit dreaming,
Marc Savoy