Spice it up with Cajun and Zydeco

The early history of the Cajuns is a tale of endurance against outside forces bent on their destruction. During the seventeenth century, European settlers left western France and sailed for the new world. The Europeans’ destination was Cadie, or Arcadia, a region of New France that is now called Nova Scotia. It is there that they and their descendants lived until 1755, when they were forced to leave by the British authorities. Many Arcadians were deported to English colonies in what is now the southern United States. Some Acadians wandered to the West Indies and elsewhere, although most of them eventually ended up as subsistence farmers in South Louisiana, where there was already a French population, and where the Spanish government welcomed Catholic immigrants (Winick 1).

By the 1920s, with the development of the recording industry and of radio, Cajun musicians were exposed to other music from outside Louisiana, and they also had their first opportunities to make their own recordings. In 1928, Joe and Cleoma Falcon went to New Orleans to make the first recording of Cajun music: “Allons a Lafayette” (A Brief History of Cajun, Creole, and Zydeco Music 4). Cajun music is emblematic of Louisiana, and it is rooted in the ballads of the French-speaking Acadians of Canada. Cajun traditions can be traced back to the French-speaking people who arrived in Louisiana during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Shelemay 445). It is often mentioned in tandem with the Creole-based, Cajun influenced Zydeco form which both share the Acadian origin. These French Louisiana sounds have influenced American popular music for many decades, especially country music, and the
sounds have influenced pop culture through mass media, such as television commercials. Cajun music is relatively harsh with an infectious beat and a lot of forward drive, placing the accordion at the center. Besides the voices, only two melodic instruments are heard, the accordion and the fiddle. Also, in the background the high, clear tones can be heard of the metal triangle. The melodic range is just one octave, rising a fifth above the tonic and descending a fourth below (“Cajun music” 1). Subgenres of Cajun music include: Traditional Cajun, Country/Texas Swing Cajun, Dancehall Cajun, Cajun “Renaissance,” and Contemporary Cajun Music.

Cajun music, born from ballads, has transformed to dance music with or without words (2). The music was essential for small get-togethers on the front porch, an all night house dance known as a “bal de maison,” or a public dance in a dance hall called a fais do-dos. At Cajun house dances, they would clear out all the furniture and bring in musicians who would play until early in the morning. Often there would be only one musician, like the legendary Amede Ardoin, who exerted a major influence on the development of both Creole and Cajun music. Eventually, Ardoin became acquainted with the Cajun fiddler Dennis McGee and together, they began to play at dances throughout the region. According to Dennis McGee they played in Kaplan, at Bayou Noir, and Lake Charles. Most Cajun vocalists also used a high-pitched singing style to match the musical key of the songs and to carry across the dance floor, although only a few singers could approach the emotional power of Amede Ardoin (“A Brief History of Cajun, Creole, and Zydeco Music” 3).

Cajun music has recently been at the center of efforts to revive Cajun culture by a generation that has lost the ability to speak the language. The association of Cajun music with dance has played an important part in keeping the music alive (Shelemay 449). There are several variations of Cajun dance: a Cajun One Step, also called a Cajun Jig, a Cajun Two Step or
related Cajun Jitterbug, and a Cajun Waltz. Cajun music can be found predominately at Louisiana festivals and dance halls, in addition to weddings in Acadiana (“Cajun music” 3).

The 1940s and early 1950s were times of renewal for Cajun music, and a time when the accordion begin to dominate once again. Some of the brilliant old-time Cajun musicians such as Lawrence Walker and Nathan Abshire had been busy keeping accordion music alive. As the 1950s moved along, and rock ‘n’ roll emerged on the national scene, Louisiana musicians with Cajun roots like Johnnie Allan began to adapt, producing their own style of what came to be known later as swamp pop. English writer John Broven describes swamp pop as “a unique combination of Cajun emotional feel, lingering hillbilly melodies, and refined New Orleans-style R&B musical backings” (“The Brief History of Cajun, Creole, and Zydeco Music” 6). While Cajun music was being reinvigorated in the 1970s and 1980s, Zydeco continued to attract new fans throughout the nation and beyond.

Zydeco is the music of Southwest Louisiana’s Black Creoles, a group of people of mixed African, Afro-Caribbean, Native American and European descent. The Black Creole society is traditionally rural, French-speaking and is somewhat intertwined with the Cajun culture (Romer 1). Zydeco is a form of American roots or folk music, which evolved from the jure during the late 1800s call and response of vocal music of the black and multiracial French speaking Creoles of south and southwest Louisiana. During the early twentieth century this soulful, heavily syncopated, indigenous roots music was discovered by ethnomusicologists and record labels (“Zydeco” 1). Zydeco music usually has a fast tempo, and it is dominated by the button or piano accordion and a form of a washboard known as a rub-board or frottoir. Zydeco music was originally created at house dances where the African Americans and free people of color of south Louisiana would gather for socializing. Zydeco’s rural beginnings and the prevailing economic
conditions at its inception are reflected in the song titles, lyrics, and bluesy vocals. Zydeco music is a relatively new genre of world music, having come about as a style of its own in only the mid-1900s (Romer 1). The music arose as a synthesis of traditional Creole music, some Cajun music influences, and African-American traditions including R&B, blues, jazz, and gospel. Zydeco music is often portrayed incorrectly as being polka-esque, but it actually sounds much more like the blues than like any European music. Zydeco music is sung in both English and French, with English being the preferred language for most modern bands (Romer 2).

Zydeco, like all accordion music, is for dancing. The steps performed to Zydeco music look like swing dancing to those unfamiliar with it. Zydeco dancing is intensely passionate and sexy, and many are heralding it as “the new salsa.” Many Zydeco songs are simply rewordings of R&B or blues songs, many are modern versions of very old Cajun songs, and many are originals. The song lyrics for zydeco music deal with everything from the mundane to intense socio-political issues (Romer 2). Zydeco music was often just called French music or le musique Creole known as “la-la.” The music was brought to the fringes of the American mainstream in the mid-1950s, with the popularity of Clinton Chenier, who was signed to Specialty Records, the same label that first recorded Little Richard and Sam Cooke for wide audiences (“Zydeco” 2). Now there are hundreds of Zydeco bands continuing the music traditions across the United States and in Europe. In the twenty first century, Zydeco fans throughout the Southwest Louisiana continue to spend the weekend camping, dancing to the music of the Zydeco bands, and riding on horseback or in wagons across the countryside on trail rides (“Brief History of Cajun, Creole, and Zydeco Music” 9). Recently, Zydeco became its own category in the Grammy Awards. The Best Zydeco or Cajun Music Album category was created for 2007 (“Zydeco” 3).
Zydeco is actually the most modern form of Creole music from Arcadian, and it first appeared after World War II, when pioneers of the genre like Clifton Chenier and Boo Zoo Chavis combined more traditional sounds with new rhythm and blues elements. In fact, the first Zydeco recording was Clarence Garlow’s hit “Bon Ton Roula,” and it was issued in 1949 on the Macy’s label. Zydeco has evolved considerably over the decades, and now draws on pop music sources like soul, disco, rap, and even reggae. It also is increasingly performed in English, instead of in its original Creole dialect. Zydeco music is oddly regarded as “party music” even though early Zydeco drew heavily on “low-down” blues elements. Zydeco frequently appears in movies, television programs, and commercials even more so than Cajun music, which, unlike Zydeco, has retained much of its traditional flavor. It has attracted a loyal worldwide outside Louisiana, and demonstrated by the large numbers of “Zydeco dancers” on the east and west coasts. Despite the commercialization, Zydeco remains a relevant means of cultural expression for the Creoles of Acadian (“Encyclopedia of Cajun Culture” 1).

If it was not for the Europeans, Cajun and Zydeco music would not exist. Zydeco music was first recognized in the 1800s while Cajun music was not recognized until the 1920s. Cajun and Zydeco music is becoming more popular every day. Recently, Zydeco just became its own category in the Grammy Awards and the Best Zydeco or Cajun Music Album category was created for 2007. Cajun and Zydeco music has a lot of rhythm and style to offer to all the different cultures of people who listen to it. Many people also enjoy bringing in Cajun musicians and having house dances with live entertainment right inside their homes. Lastly, not many people realize that we are surrounded by Cajun and Zydeco music just about everyday from watching television, commercials, and movies.
Work Cited


