



MUSIC

Cajun Sound, Rock 'n' Roll Energy



Jillian Johnson

Among the bands bringing Cajun music into the 21st century are the Pine Leaf Boys, from left: Cedric Watson, Blake Miller, Drew Simon, Wilson Savoy and Jon Bertrand.

By GEOFFREY HIMES Published: March 4, 2007

LAFAYETTE, La.

Multimedia

"Pine Leaf Boy Two Step" (mp3)



"Zydeco Gris Gris" (mp3)



THIS wasn't a show for Mardi Gras tourists. On Lundi Gras, as they call the day before Fat Tuesday in south Louisiana, the Pine Leaf Boys were onstage before a crowd of locals at the Grant Street Dancehall here. The five musicians, all in their 20s, played songs by Cajun legends like the 1950s accordionist Iry LeJeune and the 1930s fiddler Dennis McGee, but the dancers who were packed shoulder to shoulder on the well-worn wooden floor didn't seem to care about the history. They were more interested in the visceral excitement of the band's

signature song, "Pine Leaf Boy Two Step."

The songwriter Wilson Savoy, a long and lanky accordionist in a white mesh farmer's cap, sang in Cajun French with whoops of excitement. A bleating melodic phrase from his button accordion was echoed by a high-pitched fiddle line and shoved along by an impatient rhythm section of guitar, bass and drums. A spell was cast, combining a mysterious past — the nearly forgotten dialect and the archaic squeezebox's red bellows — with an unabashed rock 'n' roll energy conducive to the elbow-flying, hip-swiveling spirit on the dance floor.

The band sustained that spell for 90 minutes. The fiddler Cedric Watson, dressed in a blue Cajun Mardi Gras costume with yellow and green fringe, closed out the show with a new arrangement of "Zydeco Gris Gris." Mr. Watson sawed out the infectious tune and led the cries of "Zydeco!" The musicians' fellow 20-somethings in the crowd hollered right back.

This was the Pine Leaf Boys' seventh show in five days, and if you had spent the Mardi Gras weekend in Lafayette, the biggest city in the Cajun region known as Acadiana, you could have also seen the Lost Bayou Ramblers at the Blue Moon

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Saloon on Saturday night and the Red Stick Ramblers at 307 Downtown on Sunday night. At each spot you would have found young dancers responding with the same enthusiasm.

These three Lafayette bands, with a fourth — Feufollet, a teenage group that spent the weekend touring the Midwest — form the core of a renaissance in Cajun and Creole music. After years of recycled arrangements and graying performers and listeners, Acadiana's dance halls are suddenly filled with young musicians, young dancers and a hard-rocking approach to the old acoustic instruments.

Next month Arhoolie Records will release the Pine Leaf Boys' second album, "Blues de Musicien," an impressive recording that may vault them onto the national roots-music scene — though probably not onto the pop charts. They are introducing the album with an East Coast tour that brings them to Connolly's in Manhattan on Sunday night.

Cajun music is the fiddle-and-accordion-based sound invented by French immigrants in rural southern Louisiana and first recorded in 1928; Creole was the variation created by their African-American neighbors. In the 1990s Cajun and Creole were eclipsed on the local music scene by zydeco, an outgrowth of Creole that was bluesier and more percussive. There were some great zydeco acts in the '90s — Beau Jocque, Boozoo Chavis, Geno Delafosse, Nathan & the Zydeco Cha Chas — but they largely abandoned the fiddle, the waltzes and the French language, all essential elements of Cajun and Creole. The Pine Leaf Boys are able to bring back those neglected Cajun aspects without sacrificing any of zydeco's dance-floor excitement.

"Cajun music has survived because it's dance music," Mr. Savoy, 25, said before the show. "Cajuns have a need to go out on a Saturday night to a dance hall and have a good time."

When he goes out to dance, Mr. Savoy said, "I want to hear a 25-year-old kid jamming on the accordion in a bar where young people are screaming on Football Friday." Then again, "I don't want to hear five two-steps in a row," he added. "I want to hear a waltz so I can get close to a woman."

ON the Sunday afternoon before Mardi Gras, Marc and Ann Savoy gave a tour of the home where their four children, Wilson, Joel, Sarah and Gabie, developed their deep affection for Cajun culture. Outside Eunice, La., northwest of Lafayette, the 1911 white farmhouse with the yellow trim and red roof sits at the end of a long driveway flanked by old cypress and oak trees and at the center of a 200-acre farm that belonged to Marc's grandfather. There are home movies, Ann Savoy said, of her children in their pajamas sprawled on the screened porch with their coloring books while some of the greatest figures in Cajun music — Dennis McGee, Dewey Balfa and D. L. Menard — jammed with the parents of the oblivious children.

Like many Acadiana musicians Wilson and his siblings more or less inherited the family business from their parents. Marc Savoy is one of North America's most respected makers of button accordions, smaller and reedier-sounding than piano accordions. His shop, the Savoy Music Center in Eunice, sells Cajun instruments and recordings. With his wife and the fiddler Michael Doucet of Beausoleil he plays accordion in the Savoy-Doucet Band; last year he self-released his latest solo album, "Marc Savoy Plays Cajun Accordion: Back to the Basics Savoy Style."

Ann Savoy, a singer and guitarist, has her own bundle of projects, including the Zozo Sisters, a duo with Linda Ronstadt that resulted in the 2006 album "Adieu False Heart" (Vanguard). Nominated for a Grammy for best traditional folk album, it lost to [Bruce Springsteen](#) last month.

Ms. Savoy's parents were jazz buffs in Richmond, Va., and she revisits those roots on a swing record to be released in May, credited to Ann Savoy and Her Sleepless Knights. Meanwhile her all-female Cajun band, the Magnolia Sisters, is working on a second album of traditional Cajun children's songs. And the second Savoy Family Band album, with Marc, Ann, Wilson and Joel, is set for a summer release.

"Music was a part of the household," Ann Savoy, 55, recalled. "The instruments were all over the place. We didn't make a big deal about taking lessons. We just said you can pick up an instrument and join in if you want. Sometimes the best way to drive children away from music is to pressure them to play."

Marc Savoy, 66, added: "When Wilson said, 'Daddy, can I play your accordion?' I said, 'Sure, but you have to treat it with respect, because it's delicate. But don't expect me to show you anything. You have to figure it out for yourself.'"

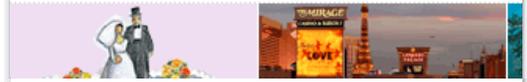
He admitted that later, after he saw that his children were serious about music, he showed them a thing or two. "This music is part of who we are as a family and a people," he said, "so you don't want to screw around with it."

The Savoy tradition was also passed along to Joel, who was a founding member of the Red Stick Ramblers. He didn't adapt well to the band's grueling road schedule and amicably departed to start a new Cajun-Creole label, Valcour Records. His most recent release is "Allons Boire un Coup: A Collection of Cajun and Creole Drinking Songs." Featuring contributions from the Pine Leaf Boys, the Red Stick Ramblers, the Lost Bayou Ramblers, Feufollet, Ann Savoy and Joel Savoy himself, the disc's combination of old songs and fresh approaches is a fine introduction to the lively revival.

"I want to document what's going on here," Joel Savoy, 26, said, "because it's exciting to see all these young kids playing this weird traditional music with accordions and fiddles and to have all these young kids eating it up like it's the coolest thing ever."

Joel Savoy's commitment to the Cajun-Creole revival includes organizing a traditional Courir de Mardi Gras near his parents' home. This old rural Mardi Gras run features costumed revelers on horseback or foot going from farm to farm to beg for chickens for the gumbo pot while a Cajun band wagon plays on an old hay wagon.

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In recent years the courirs in many Louisiana towns have allowed floats, beads, recorded music, uncostumed onlookers and drunken fights until, he said, they became a bad parody of Mardi Gras in New Orleans's French Quarter. So he and his childhood friend Linzay Young started a traditional courir.

"Linzay and I have always been into creating our own scene," Joel Savoy explained, adding, "We did that with the Red Stick Ramblers and now we're doing it with our Courir de Mardi Gras."

So it was that at 9:30 on Mardi Gras morning 300 people in screen masks (made from window screens), conical caps and fringe-draped costumes stood in the front yard of Joel Savoy's neighbor, Rick Smith. Mr. Smith was on his roof, holding a writhing, flapping chicken in each hand. He was willing to donate them to the gumbo pot, but according to custom he was going to make the maskers chase and catch the chickens. The maskers responded by stretching out whichever hand wasn't holding a beer.

Meanwhile, beneath a tree in the yard, Joel's brother Wilson, dressed in a plaid costume with gold and maroon fringe, was playing accordion while Joel, decked out in a red and yellow costume, was playing fiddle. It was Cajun music for catching chickens, and the two brothers were beaming.

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