Musical Traditions of Southern Louisiana

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This unit was developed for use in French classes at the secondary level. It gives students opportunities to

- Research the history and patterns of French settlement in Louisiana
- Discover three types of music (New Orleans jazz, Cajun, Zydeco) which are representative of the Francophone presence in Louisiana.
- Make connections between the rhythms of the music and those of the French language.

Although I intend to use the unit in my fourth-year French classes at Bellaire High School, the material is probably better suited to the curriculum of second- or third-year classes, as some of the state-adopted textbooks at those levels have chapters that deal with Louisiana. I believe that the unit could be modified for use at any level of French language instruction.

BACKGROUND NARRATIVE

In the nearly twenty years that I have been teaching French, I have observed that while the students' motivations to take the class have remained largely the same (it's a beautiful language, I want to travel/live in France, my mother made me), the emphases in the teaching of the language have changed quite a bit. As a student and in the early years of my teaching career, I (along with other Americans) studied the sound system and patterns of the language, attempting to mimic the pronunciation and intonation of French as my primary goal. That approach was superseded variously by those focusing on the grammar, the vocabulary, or the learning of language in context as revealed by reading. The one aspect of the study of French that seemed to be static was the culture; until very recently, the references were to France, and more specifically, to Paris. Occasionally one of the characters in a dialog went on vacation to the provinces or to Versailles, but the message was clear that, for the most part, French was France, and France was Paris.

All that has changed in the last decade or so, possibly because the world has been made so much more accessible through travel and technology. While there were already trends in that direction, the 1995 publication of the National Standards in Foreign Language Education left no doubt that the first two goals of contemporary language study are communication and cultures (note the plural). Thus American students today are aware that not all French speakers are white Parisians, but may come from countries in Africa and Asia, from islands in the Caribbean, Atlantic, or Pacific, and from areas in

both North and South America. Of course, one reason for highlighting the variety of countries and cultures where French is spoken is to increase student interest in the study of the language. Students can appreciate the value of studying a language that is "an official language in 33 countries …and the only language other than English spoken on five continents." (Shryock, 1).

Of particular interest to students of French in Texas is the presence of Francophone culture in neighboring Louisiana. Our proximity to the state and our familiarity with the history and customs of southern Louisiana make us believe that we are just a field trip away from meeting and communicating in French with those who live there. But before we can take a field trip, virtual or otherwise, we need to gather some information. A prepared traveler has a more enriching experience than one who is unaware of the stories to be told by history, by art, by food, and of course, by music.

Everyone likes music, even those who display no particular talent for the production of it. Our study of jazz history has piqued my interest in using musical traditions as a way to study the French presence in southern Louisiana. Initially I had thought that I would confine my curriculum unit to the exploration of jazz as it developed in New Orleans. As I have read in preparation, I have realized that to study only one element of the musical gumbo that is in Louisiana would be to show as incomplete a picture as was shown by those white Parisians who represented all French speakers to students in the past. Jazz is probably the music that most of us think of in connection with Louisiana, but it is not the only music that is representative of the collision of cultures (European/ Native American/American/African/Caribbean) and of races that has taken place near the mouth of the Mississippi River.

Francophone culture is also expressed by Cajun music (a white genre) and by Zydeco, "the exuberant dance music of southwest Louisiana's black Creoles" (Oliver 14). Southern Louisiana is also musically welcoming enough to embrace swamp pop, which is "a biracial genre that relies primarily on English lyrics" (Bernard 8) and so is exempt from study in this particular unit. I think there is adequate material in the investigation of jazz, Zydeco, and Cajun music, with their related histories, representative artists, and selected works, to sustain a unit of study that would last for one to two weeks of traditional-length classes.

STUDENT OBJECTIVES

The students will build upon their oral and written communication skills using the music of southern Louisiana as a vehicle. The will do so by listening to representative musical selections, doing independent research about the artists who produce the music, and discussing their responses to the music. They will also learn, through teacher presentation and class discussion, about the history of the groups whose music is studied. Students will read short historical documents in French or English and will draw conclusions about the effects of historical events on the people who lived through them. They will make connections about the groups of French speakers who settled in

Louisiana, and how the music they developed is representative of their backgrounds. The students will also listen to recorded speech of the several groups (if examples can be located) so as to discover whether the rhythms and the dialects represented can also be found in the music studied.

GENERAL TEACHING STRATEGY

I will include this unit in one of two places in the curriculum: chronologically, during our study of 16th- and 17th-century French colonial expansion, or as a beginning, welcome-back-to-school activity in the fall. If the latter time is chosen, students will have pertinent information about fall music festivals (e.g., the Zydeco Festival in September) available to them on the Internet. Students will also be able to use the information accumulated to help in the preparation of activities for *La Semaine du Francais,* a week set aside each November to highlight and celebrate the study of the French language and the Francophone cultures. This week-long observance is sponsored by the American Association of Teachers of French, and is encouraged throughout the United States. At Bellaire High School, we have various in-class activities appropriate for each level, but we come together to plan and provide what we call a *Fete Francaise,* to which we invite middle school students from our feeder schools. At our *Fete* we have projects which focus on some of the Francophone cultures we study, one of which is Louisiana.

Background historical information

To build a well-rounded picture of contemporary Francophone Louisiana, we will need to return to France during the 72-year reign of Louis XIV. During the 17th century many European countries were spreading their influence worldwide through colonialism, and France was no exception. French explorers had laid claim to land in Canada and on islands in the Caribbean, and in 1682 were led by Rene Robert Cavalier (later Sieur de la Salle) to do the same in the Mississippi valley. The land was named Louisiana in honor of the king, shares in the venture were sold in Paris, and a colony was planned. That settlement, later named La Ville de la Nouvelle Orleans (after the Duke of Orleans, who was the regent during Louis' minority), was meant to link the colonies in Canada with those in the Caribbean and create a vast French empire in the New World (Delehanty107). Those Frenchmen who colonized North America were the ancestors or the people we call Cajuns and Creoles today.

For whatever combination of reasons, most of those who were willing to leave their French homes to resettle in North America were from the coastal regions of France: "1500: Primarily Catholic, France has a ravenous appetite for fish and a restless, independent-minded seacoast population capable of sailing to the New World to obtain it." (Rushton 303) Ongoing strife between Protestants and Catholics in France also contributed to the motivation to immigrate to a new land. Another reason for colonization of far-off lands was to take advantage of the agricultural products there (e.g., sugar cane from the islands in the Caribbean). Those who left France for one of three destinations (Acadia, Louisiana, or the Caribbean) all contributed to the character of their

descendants. Indeed, current scholarship on the Cajuns indicates that "the typical 'Cajun…is today the same sturdy Breton peasant who fished and trapped and farmed over two hundred years ago in the environs of Nova Scotia" (qtd. in Henry 11).

Those who set up farming communities in the Canadian area of Acadia (now Nova Scotia) worked their own small plots of land, whereas the French who colonized the Caribbean islands of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Hispaniola (later Haiti) oversaw plantations worked by slaves brought from Africa. The sugar cane produced on the islands was so valuable in France that all the holdings in Canada were given up to the British (during what we call the French and Indian War) in exchange for the right to keep the colonies in the Antilles. As a result of their refusal to swear allegiance to the British, the French settlers were deported from Acadia, an event known in French as *Le Grand Derangement.* Some of these returned to France, some settled other places, but most ended up in southern Louisiana, where there was already a French presence because of the settlements around New Orleans. The farmers and fishermen from Acadia moved on to the farmland deeded them along the bayous and rivers west of New Orleans, where "for more than two hundred years the Cajun culture has preserved its ethnic identity" (Browne introduction). The Cajuns (or Cadiens) of today are the descendants of those hardy souls who endured the privations described in "Evangeline," Longfellow's poem about the deportation of the Acadians.

The term "Cajun" is attributed to American settlers' corruption of the already-shortened "Cadien," which was the term New Orleans Creoles used to refer to an Acadien (Rushton 329). Thus "Cajun" is the written form of the English pronunciation, and "Cadien" is the French. The term "Cajun" and the people it represents have been the subject of much confusion and not much study until relatively recently. Prior to the 1960's and 1970's, "the usage of Cajun/Cadien followed a clear pattern: it was used derisively or stereotypically by outsiders [and] it was avoided or used carefully by insiders" (Henry 11). One result of the negative image was the decreasing use of the French language, a trend which was not reversed until the late 1970's. At that time, the state agency CODOFIL (Council for the Development of French in Louisiana) was created for the purpose of preserving and promoting Louisiana's French culture.

Less clear is the history of the term "Creole." Initially it was used to describe the offspring of Europeans (either Spanish or French) who were born in the New World. Many were associated with plantation society, such as Josephine de Beauharnais, who was raised in Martinique and later married Napoleon and became Empress of France. Other Creoles formed the group of families who settled New Orleans in the early 1700's, "good old names figuring in the lists of military, naval and civil officers" (King 3). This early use of the term to refer to whites changed over time. The confusion of the use of the term "Creole" dates back to the 18th century, according to Ben Sandmel in Zydeco! "Creole slave owners sometimes applied the term to slaves of African descent who were born in Louisiana" (18). Some time later the term was used to refer to light-skinned blacks from the Caribbean, some of whom spoke French (Sandmel 18). In New Orleans,

the term was applied to the children of intermarriage between blacks and whites; these were the “Creoles of Color” “whose ancestry was part African and part French” (Gridley 39). It appears that the current use of the term “Creole” is in reference to “members of southwestern Louisiana’s black community who speak French or have ancestors who did” (Sandmel 15). The same identity-affirming actions that occurred among the Cajuns have been happening with the Creole population: C.R.E.O.L.E. was formed in 1987 to “promote Louisiana Creole culture through student exchanges [and] cultural activities such as Zydeco dances…” (Henry 19).

Teaching strategy: introduction to the music

I think that student interest in the unit would be piqued if we were to start with the music and work back to the history. I would like for this activity to be student-driven. We have successfully used a process of discovery before when we studied the French Impressionist painters, and I foresee using the same type of activity in the study of the musical styles. Students will listen to selections of jazz, Zydeco, and Cajun music (without having it identified as such) and will write individual responses to the music after each selection is played. They will then form small groups to share responses, to try to identify each selection as one of the styles mentioned above, and to discuss similarities and differences in the musical styles. This series of activities will probably take one 54-minute class period, perhaps less.

After the general introduction to the music, students will individually (or in small groups) choose the type of music that appeals most to them, and do several days’ research into the genre, the cultural group it represents, and the history of that group, including its area of geographical concentration in Louisiana. The student or the group will also be responsible for discovering a musician associated with the genre, finding out some biographical/stylistic information, and a sample of the music. (The Houston Public Library system has CD’s of all the music studied). Although I want the students to find out this information on their own, I expect that those who research Cajun music will find that its focus is on the group rather than on the individual, thus they will bring in music from a contemporary group like Beausoleil or Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys. They may, however, want to investigate Ambrose Thibodeaux, one of the “most accomplished ” players of French Acadian accordion music (Rushton 224). Clifton Chenier, “Zydeco’s single most important artist” (Sandmel 12) will possibly represent that genre.

Those students who choose to investigate jazz will have much information available to them, and so there should be several groups or individuals working on this topic. In their research of the history of New Orleans, they will find that some early French settlers of the city were convicts and prostitutes (Brown introduction), and that the city was always tolerant of the many types of people and lifestyles of those who lived there. I will want the students to find out that, in the latter part of the 19th century, efforts were made to contain the activity and the brothels in one part of the city. Although it was officially to

be called "The District," this area was and is often referred to as Storyville, after Sidney Story, the alderman who proposed the ordinance to set up legalized prostitution in the area (Rose 9). Storyville is especially important for the environment it offered to musicians:

> Music was everywhere. Even the dingiest, dirtiest saloon had at least a piano player whacking away at ragtime or a blues guitarist singing his lament. Many of the places had full-fledged bands playing the new hot music that was just [being born] (Collier 23).

Two of the most important of the early Creole jazz musicians were trombonist Edward "Kid" Ory and Ferdinand La Menthe, known to jazz fans then and now as "Jelly Roll" Morton. He was a "Creole of color," one of the members of "a substantial and literate population of free people of color, most of them Francophone" (Delehanty 191). In Jelly Roll's words, "My folks was all Frenchmens" (Lomax 3). Because he came along so early in the history of jazz (which he claimed to have invented), the information we have about him "came from himself and is suspect," according to Collier in Jazz: An American Saga (22). It is however apparent from the reading that Jelly Roll was an interesting character, and that and his status as "the first truly significant jazz pianist" (Collier 25) and "possibly the first jazz composer" (Gridley 63) should make student research into this early jazz great an interesting experience for them.

As jazz evolved, the focus changed from the group to the solo artist, and saxophone player Sidney Bechet was an important early soloist. He was also a Creole from New Orleans, although he left the city before the 1920's and began what were to be extensive travels in Europe. Bechet was especially popular in France, where he moved during the latter part of his long career, and where he had a street named for him after his death (Collier 37).

We will attempt to draw some conclusions, if we can, about the types of music expressed by the historically disparate groups who eventually settled in southern Louisiana. For example, Cajun and Zydeco music are from a rural tradition, and early Cajun music was played "entirely without sophisticated instruments…the performer would sit, singing, clapping, and tapping his feet, and using a few sticks or kitchen implements to amplify the beat" (Rushton 230). In later Cajun music, the use of the '*tit fer*, or triangle, replaced spoons as a rhythm accompaniment. An interesting aspect of Cajun music is that "a separate social class of musician-entertainers never developed, for everyone could play at least one instrument, even if it was only the '*tit fer*" (Rushton 231). The entertainers were home-based, as the term for them indicates: *fais dodo* refers to the need for children to go to sleep [dodo=*dormir*] "so that their parents and older brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles can play music and dance together all night in the front rooms" (Rushton 232). Fais dodo halls eventually replaced the homes as locales for dancing and music. In recent years, the music, as well as the locations, have been "pulled off in other…directions by the demands of the modern commercial American

music industry…"(Rushton 235). As a result, the "family base and oral tradition of the music [has] been seriously compromised" (Ruston 235). What has not changed is the message of Cajun music, which

> …tells us it is better to live a full life, even with its pitfalls, than simply to exist…to sing and laugh coarsely than to curse fate or grumble about the human condition…that it is better to love and to trust than to fight and to fear (Rushton 238).

Both Cajun music and Zydeco are played communally in social settings, and are dancing music. In fact, Zydeco is referred to as "exuberant" dance music. According to Clifton Chenier, "if you can't dance to Zydeco, you can't dance, period" (Sandmel 14). It is not surprising that Zydeco has Afro-Caribbean rhythms at its core, the rhythms of the Senegalese who were first taken to the Antilles, then to coastal America. The name itself is an elision of the beginning words of a common phrase in black Creole folk music: "*les haricots sont pas sales*" (Sandmel 15). Zydeco, like jazz, has improvisation as a key element, although in Zydeco it is the lyric and not the music that is improvised. Both Cajun music and Zydeco use the accordion as the primary instrument, accompanied by strings (fiddle and acoustic guitar) and drums. Zydeco sometimes features horns in addition to those basic instruments. An instrument peculiar to Zydeco, the *frottoir* or rubboard, announces to listeners that these rhythms have folk roots. Zydeco tempos are "more assertive and syncopated" (Sandmel 24) than those of Cajun music, giving them parallels to jazz. According to folklorist Barry Ancelet, "Cajuns learned style from black Creoles, and black Creoles learned repertoire from Cajuns" (Sandmel 22). Both genres have renditions of favorites such as "Jolie Blonde" and "Allons a Lafayette," which would be good to use to let students hear the stylistic differences between Cajun and Zydeco treatment.

Jazz developed as urban music, and New Orleans was its birthplace. It too was community music, much of it played outdoors in celebration of births, mourning of deaths, and the marking of many other occasions. Among many elements that distinguish jazz are improvisation of melody, syncopation (occurrence of accent at unanticipated times), two- and three-part harmony, a collective rather than solo approach, and a call and response format (Gridley 43-45). These distinguishing elements arose out of the musical pasts of the people whose cultures collided in New Orleans during the 19th century, specifically West Africans and Europeans. Jazz at first was collective music because it was based on brass bands, and the instruments involved were mostly brass, but may have included stringed instruments such as guitars and banjos as well (Collier 33). As is true of the other types of music we will be studying, jazz is dance music. All three musical styles attest to the *joie de vivre* we associate with southern Louisiana.

Teaching strategy: comparing music and language

Just as “a child learns to speak by imitation of the people around him, coupled with endless repetitions” (Pei 7), musical innovation relies on imitation and assimilation (Marmolejo). When we first begin learning French, we mimic native speakers’ pronunciation and intonation, and we repeat until a degree of expertise is acquired. It is not until we have a certain proficiency at one level that we can advance to the next. In language as well as in music, successful improvisation is based on practice as well as talent. It is also based on experience: as “most jazz musicians have worked out for themselves things to play when they draw a blank” (Colliers 94), language learners draw from past experience when improvising language in a new context.

Students at more advanced levels of French can use their accumulated language skills and the new vocabulary encountered in this study to do some improvising of their own. They can practice a sentence like, “*Je m’appelle* _______ *et j’aime faire la fete avec mes amis*”using a) the regular French pattern of all syllables having the same amount of stress, b) a jazz syncopation like “one two three FOUR when we are expecting to hear ONE two three four” (Gridley 361). They could listen many times to a favorite piece of music (“Jolie Blonde” done in Cajun and Zydeco styles, or Jelly Roll Morton’s “Blackbottom Stomp,” for instance) and then insert a French text to the tune and beat of the music. In my class we have done this activity in reverse fashion with the *Chanson de Roland,* putting the text to music, with some interesting results.

Language will also be improvised when the students come together with the results of their research on the music, the artists, and the cultural groups represented. The presentations will be in French if I use this unit at the 3rd, 4th, or 5th level. . The students of each group will be expected to teach the other members of the class any necessary vocabulary. Since my classroom is arranged *bistrot*-style with tables and chairs, the stage will be set to present the information gathered as a series of musical happenings, complete with food, no doubt. The research could be expanded to include a *specialite* of Creole or Cajun cuisine, recipes for which are easily found. The foods are representative of the collision of cultures we will have studied, with Creole food emphasizing the urban and cosmopolitan aspects of New Orleans, and Cajun food showcasing the ingredients bountiful in rural southwestern Louisiana: rice, crawfish, tomatoes, etc.

Our musical/historical tour of southern Louisiana will thus conclude with student presentations of a Cajun *fais* dodo, a Zydeco festival, and a New Orleans jazzfest. As I have done in the past, I will require that each group turn in a series of quiz/test questions pertinent to the information presented in their segment of the unit study. I will cull and compile the student questions and add an essay topic for the final written assessment. Oral and participation grades can be given using rubrics created for this purpose or found in many ancillary teaching materials.

APPENDIX 1

Table for use in preliminary listening activity

	JAZZ	CAJUN	ZYDECO
Beat			
Tempo			
Rhythm			
Improvisation			
Syncopation			

APPENDIX 2

Vocabulary

<u>Histoire</u>

L'Acadie

Le Grand Derangement

La Nouvelle Orleans

<u>La Musique</u>

Fais dodo

La musique cajun

Le jazz

Le Zydeco

Un violin

Une guitare

Une basse

Un accordeon

Un saxophone

(Vocabulary – Continued)

La batterie

Le p’tit fer

Le frottoir

La Cuisine

Le gombo

Le boudin

Une crevette

Un huitre

Le riz

Le jambalaya

Faire la fete/ Laissez les bons temps roule

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allez, Viens! Level 3. Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1996.

One of three locally-adopted textbooks for use in the French class. Chapter 11 is about Louisiana.

Balliett, Whitney. Jelly Roll, Jabbo, & Fats: 19 Portraits in Jazz. NY: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1983.

Contains biographical information on Jelly Roll Morton and Sidney Bechet, and shows the importance of French critics Hughes Panassie and Charles Delaunay to *Le Jazz Hot.*

Bernard, Shane K. Swamp Pop: Cajun & Creole Rhythm & Blues. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996.

An introduction to a "sister genre" to Cajun and Zydeco music which includes discussion of them as well.

Browne, Turner. Louisiana Cajuns/*Cajuns de la Louisiane*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977.

Information about Cajun lifestyles and mentality.

Collier, James Lincoln. Jazz: An American Saga. NY: Holt, 1997.

Discussion of the roots and great artists of jazz. Aimed at young people.

Delehanty, Randolph. Ultimate Guide to New Orleans. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1988.

A guide book with extensive sections on history and architecture of New Orleans.

Giles, Dari. "Zydeco Country." American Voices, February/March 1995.

Gridley, Mark C. Jazz Styles. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985.

Seminar text used for appreciation of jazz through discussion of history, elements, and artists.

Henry, Jacques. “From ‘Acadien’ to ‘Cajun’ to ‘Cadien’: Ethnic Labelization and Construction of Identity.” Journal of American Ethnic History, Summer 1998

Analysis of labels used to describe descendants of the Acadians.

King, Grace Elizabeth. Creole Families of New Orleans. NY: The Macmillan Co., 1921.

Gives the family histories of the early French settlers of New Orleans. Provides information on the early use of the term “creole” to identify whites (note publication date).

Lomax, Alan. Mister Jelly Roll. NY: Pantheon, 1993 (Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1949).

Biographical information on Jelly Roll Morton by the man who interviewed him and quoted extensively from him.

Pei, Mario. How to Learn Languages and What Languages to Learn. NY: Harper & Row, 1973.

Not current, but good introduction to importance of aural method and repetition in language learning.

Rose, Al. Storyville, New Orleans. University of Alabama Press, 1974.

History of the area in New Orleans where legalized prostitution was allowed during the early years of the 20th century.

Rushton, William Faulkner. The Cajuns: from Acadia to Louisiana. NY: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979.

Includes concise chronology of the history of Acadia dating from 1500.

Sandmel, Ben and Rick Oliver. Zydeco! Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999.

Includes comparison with Cajun music as well as complete discussion of Zydeco.

Shryock, Richard. French: The Most Practical Foreign Language. Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1997. shryockr@vt.edu http://www.fll.vt.edu/french.

Downloaded from the American Association of Teachers of French website, this article gives reasons for the choice of French as the foreign language of choice.

"Two Stepping: Ancelet and Morgan Return to the Cajun-Creole Music Trail." New Orleans Magazine, 1 January 2000.

Observations about the current state of the music/language relationship by one of the best-known scholars of Cajun music.