

**LOUISIANA ROMP: EXAMINING THE PERFORMANCE OF TRADITIONAL
CAJUN MUSIC WITHIN A CONTEMPORARY SETTING**

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ABSTRACT

KATHERINE CONRAD DOSS: Louisiana Romp: Examining the Performance of
Traditional Cajun Music Within a Contemporary Setting
(Under the direction of William R. Ferris)

The Lost Bayou Ramblers, a young Cajun band based in South Louisiana, infuse energy and vivacity into the traditional creative expression of Cajun music, as they travel to share their sound and thus their culture with the world. I suggest that the Ramblers, in the face of globalization, are purposefully engaged in protecting and enhancing their culture by performing this roots music far and near. They offer a compelling performance and thus transport, produce, and extend their culture through music, which serves as a powerful symbol, drawing each audience into participation of it. Through a focus on the specific dynamic between culture, its music, and the performance techniques of these particular cultural practitioners, I examine how music acts as an agent of cultural understanding while simultaneously transforming the place and culture that produced it.

DEDICATION

To the members of the Lost Bayou Ramblers, whose inimitable talent and vision captured me and countless others, drawing us into their world. Their willingness to extend their friendship and share their stories, insights, sense of humor, dance tips and van space is deeply appreciated.

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INTRODUCTION



Feelings are bound up in place, and in art, from time to time,
place undoubtedly works upon genius.

- Eudora Welty¹

Louis steps away from the microphone and looks to his left - to the other members of the band. He calls out the song, “Bayou Perdu,” and they move to the ready. Louis turns back to address the audience and announces, “We’re going do the title track off of our last album, a little something called ‘Bayou Perdu.’ And since we are the Lost Bayou Ramblers, that’s our theme. It’s our theme track because it’s ‘Bayou Perdu,’ which means ‘Lost Bayou’. We are not lost. It’s the bayou that is lost.”² This performance disclaimer provides a little humor to kick off their first show at the Lowell Folk Festival held in Lowell, Massachusetts this past July. Consider their ages: late twenties to early thirties, an age range often associated with being lost. Consider their

¹ Eudora Welty, *On Writing* (The Modern Library, New York 1942) 47.

² Louis Michot. Performance, The Lowell Folk Festival, Lowell, July 27, 2007.

immediate location: Massachusetts, hundreds of miles away from any bayou and their Louisiana home and a place vastly different from their culture. Finally, consider their home terrain and the bayous of which he speaks: rapidly disappearing and threatened with catastrophic loss by the forces of nature and human intervention. No, they are not *really* lost, they are simply upholding the second half of their name, the Ramblers. On this day they find themselves on stage in Lowell as representatives of the roots music known as Cajun.

Louis Michot, Andre Michot, Chris “Oscar” Courville, Cavan Carruth, and Alan Lafleur are the newest generation of Cajun musicians who have become expert at traveling to share their sound, and thus their culture, with those both at home and abroad. The Lost Bayou Ramblers play traditional Cajun music, drawing from scores of songs amassed over time. The songs are generally learned and passed down through means of performance, not by reading music on a page. This oral transmission elicits more of a sense of direct connection to the heritage out of which they come, and to the music’s passion for that heritage. According to their friend and fellow musician, Matthew Doucet, whose father is the renowned Cajun musician, Michael Doucet of the band, Beausoleil, “I don’t think you can play this kind of music off of a page. You might be able to play all the notes correctly and it will be the song and the song will be correct, but the *feeling* of the heart will be missing.”³ As part of the negotiation that comes from living in the contemporary world while serving as tradition-bearers, their sound infuses this traditional material with their distinctive personalities and energizing antics. They represent and enliven both aspects of their band name, fusing the duality of being from a specific location, with an identity based on being self-described wanderers of the globe.

When we think of Cajun country, we identify it with a unique culture comprised of a swampy landscape, spice-filled food, dance-friendly music, and a distinct patois. The Cajun

³ Interview, Matthew Doucet, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 9, 2007.

culture thrives in a particular place, South Louisiana, and is making its way to other parts of the country through a growing appreciation of certain elements that make it distinctive. Cajun musicians, who once played only for their communities, now travel the world to share their sound.

What makes the Lost Bayou Ramblers anything but “lost” are the ways in which their music acts symbolically to take their culture with them and to bring people into their culture. As the Ramblers represent and share part of their culture through performance, their music has the symbolical power to “locate” and hold cultural ground.

Research Questions: Cultural Routes, Symbol, Space and Place

I believe the link of culture to location is profoundly important. The cultural historian, Thomas Berry, claims that “humans in the natural order of things belong to, are possessed by, and are subject to the geographical place where they reside.”⁴ The Lost Bayou Ramblers is a Cajun band from Lafayette, Louisiana, which performs around the globe. They stand as living proof of the connection between culture and the very particular place that it belongs to, and in an age of globalization, of the way a musical tradition is available everywhere because it is so firmly grounded in its home base. The Lost Bayou Ramblers validate this thesis by their own testimony, in their performance, and through their conscious decision to be purveyors of Cajun music. Born into Cajun culture, one that has so often been oppressed and mistreated, and so often been marginalized, it may not seem surprising that they would play the music associated with the locale, simply because it is theirs. However, in their modern world of an increasingly cosmopolitan Lafayette that continues to transact with outside influences, any number of musical genres are at their disposal. Instead, they deliberately chose to perpetuate Cajun music

⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (Bell Tower, New York 1999) 94.

by actively performing around the world. An examination of this band and the culture they represent will provide an opportunity for research into the folklore of the place and of the way music represents it and shapes the Cajun culture.

The Lost Bayou Ramblers are based in the heart of what is variously referred to as “Acadiana,” “Bayou Country,” and “Cajun Country,” home to the largest single ethnic population in Louisiana and an abiding culture that continues to evolve with the growing convergence of technology and global forces. Lafayette, in the center of South Louisiana is the host city to this area and this culture. The Cajun country joins with the rest of Southern culture as it continues to fan outward to the new boundaries of globalization. Due to these current transformative cultural shifts, it seems a critical time for a folklorist to engage in research in this particular location with its expressive form, which reveals so much about Cajun identity. By this focus on the specific dynamic between culture, its music and its place, the more general goal of this research will be an



examination of how music acts as an agent of cultural understanding while simultaneously transforming the place and culture that produced it. It is especially important to engage this research during the emerging era of globalization.

The Lost Bayou Ramblers have chosen to be unique musicians, even within the genre of Cajun musicians. The reason for that comes not only from the love and respect they hold for their musical tradition, but also from something these young men comprehend intuitively about the opportunities and dangers of globalization. Their culture can either be overwhelmed or

raised to new heights. They realize that globalization is a grand and international force that is not in their control, but one with which, like their intimately personal experiences with natural forces, they can cooperate and use to their personal purposes.

It is important to distinguish between the phenomenon that we now call globalization and the reality that many parts of the world have been affected by many other parts of the world. Louisiana is a place where this has been the reality, since it developed under Spanish and French rule and Afro-Caribbean and Native American influences. However, globalization in this sense is a new phenomenon that has to do with the way cultural and national boundaries no longer stand in the way of cross-cultural and cross-national engagement.

Globalization has suddenly appeared to come at all of us like an unanticipated force of nature and it is paradoxical in its positive and negative attributes. Globalization makes powerful forces accessible and offers a much wider range of options at the same time that it demands decisions about identity. In one sense, the fact that more people are on the move and have more alternatives in clear sight signals more individual possibilities and with that, heightened imaginations. According to the scholar, Arjun Appadurai, of a changing “ethnoscape,” to use his term, “as international capital shifts its needs, as production and technology generate different needs, as nation-states shift their policies on refugee populations, these moving groups can never afford to let their imaginations rest too long, even if they wish to.”⁵ And yet, while more options are increasingly available, decisions do not simplistically limit options, but open the future to richer and more profound experience, in the same sense that boundaries do not merely hem one in, but free a person to be a self and to act with definition, security, and confidence.

⁵ Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* (Blackwell Publishing, Massachusetts 2003) 32.

We question how economic and demographic change affect a culture, whether it can manage to retain a unique identity or give itself over to the task of becoming part of a broader, world body. The reality of globalization according to Appadurai is “that at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in one way or another”⁶ Will Cajun identity persist or be absorbed into the throes of globalization? The answer is that globalization occurs in places and not just in concept. Jim Peacock has coined the term, “grounded globalism.” By this he means “globalism has to be grounded in localisms.”⁷ Speaking about the response of the South to globalization, Peacock goes on to say that “simply resisting through being won’t work: Southerners will find themselves plowed under, bulldozed over. Offense provides the best defense.”⁸ This insight is at the heart of what the Ramblers do through performance. They do not merely rely on being “Cajun,” but they provide a consistent reminder that place is important when they share their culture with others as well as affirm it to themselves and their community.

For the Ramblers, globalization allows them to encounter a diversity of cultures, both at home and away, enabling them to offer the appeal of their own art to others. On the other hand, it challenges the people of a unique and proud culture to assimilate into the normative American culture by introducing global corporations, inventions, comforts and technologies into Southwest Louisiana. Furthermore, economic globalization poses new threats, in both subtle and dramatically aggressive ways, to their distinctive environment. In no way is this more evident than in the wasting away of the Southwest Louisiana’s terrain. The young musicians know

⁶ Ibid, 30.

⁷ James Peacock, “The South in a Global World” in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (78:4 2002) 591.

⁸ Ibid.

intuitively and as students of the problem that the threat to the land is a threat to their special way of life.

The Lost Bayou Ramblers are the progeny of a generation of Cajun musicians known as the Revivalists, whose intention was to promote Cajun culture within Southwest Louisiana after many years of ethnic oppression and self-consciousness in the wake of assimilation and “Americanization.” In the mid-60s, there was a significant push on the part of many Cajuns to become recognized and appreciated for their unique culture with the help of, for example, the formation of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). One consequence was that Cajun music underwent a major revival, and the musicians in this movement were called “Revivalists.” Today Cajun culture and its music, in particular, has become both chic for those outside the culture and a source of renewed pride for those within it. Louis and Andre Michot are the sons and nephews of the Cajun musicians, Les Frères Michot. Matthew Doucet, as previously mentioned, is the son of Michael Doucet of Beausoleil. Together, these young men represent the generation that has emerged from the original Cajun Revivalists.

Though their culture is grounded in one place, it is enjoying increased representation around the world vis-à-vis its musicians who, after years of relative disregard, now receive



recognition and most importantly, praise. The band’s emergence on the larger music scene is a testament to public appreciation for traditional Cajun music as performed by this generation of artists. In today’s world, Cajun musicians have become highly sought-after national and

international performers. The Ramblers are a noteworthy group within this context.

The Lost Bayou Ramblers were recently honored with a Grammy nomination under the newly established category of “Cajun & Zydeco.” That the category now exists on its own is a testament to the current significance of these musical forms. Zydeco, similar to Cajun music, is a pastiche of sounds from a variety of sources. In this case it is traditional or classic Cajun music and various other forms of culturally derived Southern music, mostly from the Afro-Creole community. A good example would be the fusion of the Rhythm & Blues of the Mississippi Delta and Cajun music of the bayous. The Lost Bayou Ramblers were nominated for their Cajun music, not Zydeco, and this thesis will focus on Cajun music as exemplified by the Ramblers. The nomination sent a powerful message to those dedicated to upholding this cultural expression, at one time little known outside of Louisiana, and has, of course, proved meaningful to the members of the band specifically. The nominated album was a live recording performed at the Blue Moon Saloon, in their hometown of Lafayette entitled, “Live à la Blue Moon.” The nomination of their live album is at once astonishing and yet not entirely surprising, given the nature of Cajun music and the importance of live performance for the musicians and audience members alike. When I asked Chris whether the nomination had made a difference for the band, he said it had indeed. For example, he admitted that for years his family dismissed his musicianship as a passing fancy and hobby. Chris recently confessed to a journalist, who later quoted him, that his family now upholds his decision to pursue this vocation and delights in his status. When his mother read the article, she called him and wondered why he would say such a thing given the support with which they had always showered him. Chris himself laughs at how this type of national - and even international - recognition can bring change to something as small as a nuclear family, and as large as a culture’s sense of self. The question remains as to the

extent to which the award will continue, in the coming years, to affect the creation and perpetuation of this traditional music.

The Ramblers remain dedicated citizens of Lafayette and Acadiana, committed to playing for their community. At the same time, it is this grounding in their home that allows them to open up to share their sound and therefore a part of their culture, with the world. This new generation of Cajun musicians understands the threat of encroachment on Cajun culture and the land itself, and they have accepted the mantle of responsibility for protecting their music and their culture. Yet, their mission is defined differently than that of their forbearers. While the Cajun music they play is traditional in its form, within the necessarily global context their perpetuation of Cajun music has become innovative by becoming globally seductive. The Ramblers realize that they are positioned to re-articulate their Cajun identity precisely in offering the music of their culture to others, drawing people into their culture through the music, and capturing global audiences on the popularity of a genuinely unique music. Their familiarity with this traditional expressive form combined with their captivating performance style makes them capable of making a real contribution toward saving their culture. It is toward this end that they play. That, and the fact they enjoy this music.

Attending a Cajun music performance is a cross-cultural experience for outsiders. The performances draw these people into a culture which is not their own, one that can counter the stereotype of American popular culture. Instead, people are introduced to a culture where people work the land and are deeply wed to it. The music serves as a means to engage people of various cultures – if only momentarily – with the Cajun culture. Furthermore, the live performance of Cajun music refuses to let the audience, even the students of music, merely listen and analyze it. The music demands participation.

I suggest that the Lost Bayou Ramblers, in the face of globalization, are purposefully engaged in protecting and enhancing their culture by performing traditional music far and near. To begin, I will offer an introduction to the Cajun culture that formed this unique roots music, out of which the Ramblers emerge. I will then offer descriptive glimpses of three separate performances that took place during the summer of 2007 at a music club in Austin, Texas, at the folk festival in Lowell, Massachusetts and in their hometown of Lafayette, Louisiana. Finally, I apply Roger D. Abrahams approach to the Rhetorical Theory of Folklore to analyze the value and meaning of the Ramblers' performance by an examination of his categories taken as a simultaneous whole. I will inspect them first as artists; their intentions, strategies, and the way they go about creating their art. Then I will examine their performance and the music itself as an art object. Finally, I will look to the ways in which their performance and audience influence and shape one another.

Methodology

My thesis combines the ethnographic work I conducted in late July and August of 2007, thanks to a grant from the Center of the Study for the American South, with the long-standing friendships I have built with each member of the Lost Bayou Ramblers over the course of four years. I first met Louis, Andre, Chris, and Alan at a dinner party held in New Orleans. At the time, Chris was engaged in a courtship with my best friend, Rose, something I witnessed develop from its genesis all the way down the aisle last year. (I am proud to have been the maid of honor in a bona fide Cajun wedding!) My role in the lives of these young men has shifted from fan, to friend, to ethnographer.

This past summer, I spent three weeks living in Lafayette, Louisiana and traveling on tour with the band to Lowell, Massachusetts and Austin, Texas. When not on the road, I lived with Chris and Rose in Lafayette and conducted interviews with the others either in individual

homes or in the workplace. I recorded extensive interviews, shot numerous photographs both of their performances and their home place, captured several performances through film footage and audio recording, and leaned heavily on my notebook. My thesis will pair the interviews, observations and research that is the outgrowth of this incredibly enriching experience.

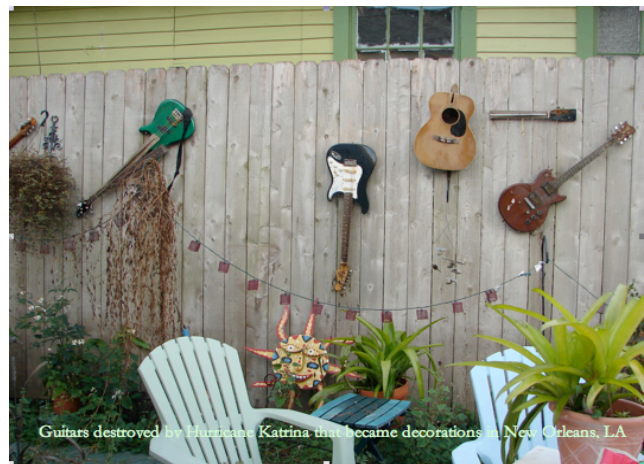


Driving near Arnaudville, LA with Louis and Ashlee Michot

As a Louisiana native studying the impact of Southern music through the Folklore Curriculum at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, my interest in documenting the newest generation of Cajun musicians in

Lafayette had become paramount. I had great access to the culture as a native of Louisiana, though not a Cajun, as well as a close rapport with the band. The Lost Bayou Ramblers is a story worthy of being told because it is emergent, one happening right now, one upon which I could easily seize.

As a New Orleans resident, I see the urgent need to tell Louisiana's stories from an insider's standpoint. In August of 2005, I was among those who were temporarily displaced by Hurricane Katrina. While we could not necessarily be together in one community, people searched for symbols we shared, things that bound us together beyond the experience of tragedy. We longed for the music, cuisine, language, landscape, and recreation that we identify as uniquely



Guitars destroyed by Hurricane Katrina that became decorations in New Orleans, LA

ours.

While evacuated, I was careful to avoid the disparaging images the television eagerly delivered in up-to-the-minute coverage. This was not the city I inhabited, the people with whom I have eaten, danced, worked and worshipped. That is, it was certainly not my memory of them. The term diaspora felt like a terrible pun, “separateness” not “togetherness,” the description of a dispersed community that prides itself on being the consummate community. I opted instead to comb through the scores of magazine, internet, and newspaper articles, in an effort to understand what was happening and await word about our future, my future. Comfort and discernment were not readily found there either. It was in the sound of New Orleans music that reached me one afternoon through the radio where connection occurred. I listened to an NPR story featuring an interview with the renowned musician and producer, Allen Toussaint. I remember his adamancy about returning to New Orleans mirroring my own feelings about my identity as bound to that place. I also remember that they played one of his songs, one that is lodged deep within me, like an anthem. The music served as the proverbial “Batman signal,” projecting itself into the air as an identifier that sought us out, scattered though we were, and called us to reunite. This call instilled in me a yearning to rejoin my community that mixed with an unmatched sense of pride. Such an epiphany was brought about by the depth of connection to this music which held a power and a sway over me that I’ve only experienced previously in a religious context. I had no choice but to return to the wounded city. Soon thereafter, I applied to The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Curriculum in Folklore to pursue questions of identity, sense of place, ritual, symbol, and performance.

I am reminded of what the folklorist, Zora Neale Hurston, said in the introduction to her book, *Mules and Men*. She observed that those interested in documenting one’s culture often have to step outside of it and, as in her case, pursue academic training before returning home.

Hurston confesses that her native Eatonville, Florida “was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn’t see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that.”⁹ That was true for me as well. In order to reveal anything of the culture of which I was a part, one that so many others outside of the culture misunderstood at that time, I needed to gain an aerial perspective before returning to being actively on the ground.

The sense of belonging to a people, a place and more broadly, a culture, became clearer and more heightened during that period of absence from New Orleans after the storm. Yet it always existed, though perhaps less understood or articulated up to that point for me. Eudora Welty, in her essay, “Place in Fiction,” captures the profound sensation of being connected to a place when she writes,

... So irretrievably and so happily are recognition, memory, history, valor, love, all the instincts of poetry and praise, worship and endeavor, bound up in place. From the dawn of man’s imagination, place has enshrined the spirit; as soon as man stopped wandering and stood still and looked about him, he found a god in that place; and from there on, that was where the god abided and spoke from if ever he spoke.”¹⁰

The belongingness is something I identify as real and persistent for those living in Southwest Louisiana who are known to the world as Cajuns. The appeal of further understanding that culture and its abundant spirit in the face of that region’s own threat of land loss combined with adapting to globalization and other changes steered me to this project. Whereas my New Orleans community had only questions and very few answers about the state of its future at that time, I longed to relate to a culture that had also experienced exile and the

⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Harper Perennial, New York 1935) 1.

¹⁰ Eudora Welty, *On Writing* (The Modern Library, New York 1942) 47.

challenge of re-building, but could offer a different – and hopeful – conclusion. Whitney P.

Broussard III, who is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Agriculture and Coastal Sciences at Louisiana State University and a friend of the Ramblers who often accompanies them on stage speaks to this determination when he says,

'The land has always been here. The land will always be here. The land is something that is before us and will be here after us. So there's reality there. I'd like to think that being real is a trait that Cajun culture has held onto because we've been through some serious lows and we've been through some highs and we're still around. One of those reasons is because we're a self-reliant people who know how to make our own wherever we're at and provide for our family and enjoy what we've got while we got it – that's real. Hurricanes come through, Audrey, Rita and others, but people survive. We're still around and doing the same thing because we do it pretty damn good.'¹¹

In establishing my thesis, I wish to place myself within this unfolding story and share how it was I came to this project, my relationship to this place, the journey on which I began, and the development of my relationship with the Ramblers, who, because of an existing friendship and admiration, gave me an invitation into their lives and culture. Considering the number of journalists and media sources generating stories about Louisiana to the nation and the world, most of whom would pass through New Orleans in short stints, I felt a critical urge to explain the culture from an insider's perspective. In fact, the native of any given culture tends to have an easier - or seemingly more deliberate - time capturing the essences of that culture. According to Hurston, "Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by."¹² People experienced a strong desire to share their stories of distress for a multitude of reasons. While that was deeply important for all of us, I saw a need to tell different stories, revealing the very

¹¹ Interview, Whitney P. Broussard III, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, August 10, 2007.

¹² Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Harper Perennial, New York 1935) 2.

active and alive gifts of the culture rather than its losses. To do that takes time and the trust of the community members who believe what they share will be understood and treated with consideration and respect. Fortunately, the members of the Lost Bayou Ramblers afforded me such trust and went about their business openly.

With my folkloric training, I was poised to generate current stories about the evolution of Louisiana's culture in the face of disaster, and its adaptation to current times through the contemporary expression of its cultural heritage. In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, there is still a need to remind and educate the public about the importance of Louisiana's musical contribution to the cultural fabric of our nation.

CHAPTER ONE: PLACE



When the first immigrants from Acadia looked upon the new land, what thoughts must have arisen in their minds? From the grand Canadian island with its cold seas and rocky terrain, its open fields for farming and its European-like woods in which to hunt, fish, and trap familiar animals, from the sense of being in a definable place, from a familiarity that went all the way back to the southwest coast of France, they now found themselves in unfamiliar territory. They moved upon steamy, brackish swamps and bayous and marshes, looked up to a ceiling of vegetation and through it to a sun that penetrated their skin and blinded their eyes. The overhanging Oaks dripping with moss, the thick wilderness of plants and trees close all around, the Cyprus knees and objects underfoot and underlying shallow waters. Then, there were the creatures and critters, the birds and reptiles and animals that had never been conjured up in their imaginations much less out of their experience. They would discover every snake that exists in

North America. What must they have thought when they saw an alligator attack its food? How hungry were they when one ate a crawfish, biting its tail off and sucking its head for nourishment?

The extremes between what had been home and what now offered a new home must have been rather stunning. Still, it was close to French speaking New Orleans, and it offered an isolation that had become highly attractive since the tragedy of being overrun, impoverished, cast out, separated and scattered all up and down the east coast of North America and the islands of the Caribbean. So, the first pioneers of Acadiana sent word for their people to come and started the task of learning all over how to make a living off the land. They began to develop a new way of life.

Whitney Broussard says of his native environment,

South Louisiana is like no place on earth. We've got big cities and big swamps. We've got marshes and prairies as far as the eye can see. We've got woods that are as hilly and thick as any. We've got the biggest river on the continent and a landscape that's thousands of years old. We've got people from all over the world who have come together in a very short period of human history, in a few hundred years, to create something that the world has never seen before. It's great to see that it's being recognized for that because it should be something special, something to recognize.¹³

The Acadians, soon to become known as "Cajuns," developed a deep and enduring connection to this region, establishing an agrarian and self-sustaining culture comprised of farmers, hunters, trappers, and fisherman. They learned from the Native Americans, Afro-Caribbean slaves, Creoles and other European settlers living in the area, which contributed to the blending of tastes, sounds and customs that were formed. The process of creolization manifested itself in, for example, a new musical style composed of an amalgamation of global

¹³ Interview, Whitney P. Broussard, III, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, August 10, 2007.

rhythms, beats, and instruments. According to the folklorist, Barry Jean Ancelet, in his work on the development of Cajun music,

From the Indians, they apparently learned a terraced singing style and new dance rhythms; from the blacks, they learned the blues, percussion techniques, a love of syncopation and improvisational singing, from the Spanish, they may have learned a few tunes . . . Refugees and their slaves who arrived from Saint-Domingue at the turn of the nineteenth century reinforced the African influence with a syncopated West Indian beat. The Jewish immigrants began importing diatonic accordions (invented in Vienna in 1828) when Acadians and blacks became interested in the instruments toward the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁴

In this small pocket of the nation, global combinations were well underway. As with the rest of South Louisiana, this mixing was possible within the framework of the Mediterranean Catholicism that had stayed with them from their French heritage. It rendered the appreciation of the natural and all that is human, even its frailties, combined with an abiding sense of mystery, the way the divine is to be discovered in the earthy and extraordinary, though first in the ordinary. They had a certain genius for domesticity, the daily round and family life, for the ability to stop and enjoy themselves and one another while tending to business with efficiency and skill. They valued community and the things that formed it, from the *fais do do* and the sharing of



food, to helping one another in times of difficulty. Out of that they would find and assess their personal individuality.

Despite, or perhaps because of the unique culture that arose in the wake of their exile, Cajuns were looked down upon and seen as inferior by

those Anglo-Saxon Americans with whom they came into contact and that disdain grew through the years into the modern era. Cajuns continued to live in isolation, for the most part keeping to

14 Barry Jean Ancelet, *Cajun Music: Its Origins and Development* (The Center for Louisiana Studies, Lafayette 1989) 17.

themselves while maintaining a tribal lifestyle dedicated to hard work, family, and social celebrations occurring over a meal or at a dance. The accordionist, Ray Abshire, says of the Cajun value system,

We work very hard and we play very hard. We don't do anything half ass. True Cajuns don't. You know, we take everything very seriously. It's just how we were raised. Our work ethics are different. Our play ethics are different. I go all over the world now and I haven't seen another culture . . . You go to Ireland [and] it's pretty close . . . Other cultures are – it's like they can't cut loose. They can't let go. They just can't let go. I don't know what it is. They can't cut loose. I don't know if it's Protestant thing. I don't want to show my true, I can't be myself in public. Down here, hey, try and stop us. I'm serious man. We're going to be ourselves. This is *me*. You can like it or you can go. We don't really care. We're ourselves. I think that a lot of people are shocked by that when they come down here, but you know we're not here to prove any points, we're just here to enjoy life. That's one thing the Cajuns have managed to figure out.¹⁵

The Acadians managed to forge a vibrant culture, despite being marginalized, which the rest of the nation and the world now recognizes and values. For a period of time, however, which intensified shortly after World War I, the Cajuns underwent the process of Americanization, whereby their language and culture was derided as backwards or lower class. This was a particularly jingoistic period in America, when loyalty to the country was paramount, which resulted in steering people away from local identifications toward a more national one. As the enthusiasm for patriotism and the American value system swelled during this period, the Cajuns experienced indoctrination in becoming more mainstream American. In the schools, for example, teachers targeted the French language that Cajuns spoke and began to teach children how to read, write, and speak only in English. French was consequently forbidden in schools. Many learned to be ashamed of their Cajun and French heritage, embracing an American one instead.

¹⁵ Interview, Ray Abshire, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 13, 2007.

At the outset of the twentieth century, oil was discovered in Southwest Louisiana. As Lafayette's population swelled due to the oil industry, it quickly became - and to this day remains - the most cosmopolitan city in Southwest Louisiana. The author Shane K. Bernard states, "What in 1940 had been an agricultural town of about 19,200 was transformed in only a decade to a thriving petroleum city of about 33,500."¹⁶ With its place on the Gulf at the bottom of the Mississippi River Valley combined with its oil, Southwest Louisiana has become one of the great centers for oil and gas, used throughout the nation. It is now poised to become one of the great transportation centers in the world for shipping and trade with the production and refinement of oil and gas.

The oil industry that exploded in Southwest Louisiana coupled with improved economic conditions in the aftermath of World War II drew Cajuns into the modern, technological and television-acquainted world. According to Bernard, "No longer burdened by rural poverty, Cajuns cast aside the antimaterialism of their ancestors and embraced the age's rampant consumerism."¹⁷ As is the case when culture transforms with time, younger generations more easily embraced this flux and innovation, while the older generation of Cajuns retained the values and traditions that had been handed directly to them without interference or competition. Teenagers, for example, set aside the roots music of their forbearers for the popular sound of rock n' roll that they heard constantly on the radio and on the records they brought home. They even created a new genre of music called swamp pop using rock n' roll instrumentation and singing mainly in English. A hybrid Cajun culture was developing. Just as their French had become bastardized with English words and colloquial phrases, many parts of Cajun culture were being invaded and adapted in all directions by the broader American ways.

¹⁶ Shane K. Bernard, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson 2003) 37.

¹⁷ Ibid, 25.

By the late 1960s, a Cajun Renaissance began to brew, led by several forces. The combination of the civil rights movement, the black power movement and the countercultural landscape of the folk revival signaled a fierce resistance to dominant American culture. Bernard calls it an “Age of Ethnicity” which he claims, “developed in reaction to the Anglo-conformism of the previous times, as minorities demanded their rights and honored their heritage.”¹⁸ In response to this effort to promote and preserve the Cajun culture, a group of advocates established the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana. Among its other impacts, French would again be taught in schools, and Cajun pride would be restored.

One such figure to emerge on the Lafayette scene also insisted that Cajuns resuscitate their traditional culture was a young musician named Zachary Richard. During his performance at the Tribute to Cajun Music Festival in 1975, Richard sang a song entitled, “Réveille!” while throwing his fist in the air. By telling his Cajun compatriots to “Awaken,” he was not only speaking to the Acadians in the song who needed to wake up because the British were coming to exile them, but his revolutionary call was also meant for the Cajuns who were in danger of losing their heritage. Though the generation before Richard may have disapproved of this display of militancy, it was enormously important for his generation, who became the leaders of the Cajun revival. Richard later gained wide appeal in France and Canada, introducing international audiences to his indigenous sound. The popularity of Cajun culture, too, fanned out to a national and international consciousness, as tourism lured people to Louisiana to experience this unique folk culture.

Several of Richard’s contemporaries, including Barry Jean Ancelet, Michael Doucet, Sonny Landreth, Marc Savoy and the Michots, all of whom attended the same high school in Lafayette, helped to launch this Cajun revival. Michael Doucet, for example, started a Cajun

¹⁸ Ibid, 87.

band in collaboration with CODOFIL to promote Cajun culture. They called the band, Beausoleil, named after the leader of the Acadian resistance to British brutality and eventual deportation. Michael's son

Matthew recalls the reaction to his father's decision to play Cajun music instead of rock n' roll, "He was laughed at, actually, by a lot of people because they just thought he was insane. He brought it to a



really good light . . . That was the whole mission: This is our music. This is how beautiful it is. Let's revive this and have a good time instead of feeling bad about being different.”¹⁹ Though the members of Beausoleil have changed over time, its popularity has taken the band across the globe and even earned them a Grammy award for Best Traditional Folk Album in 1997. Cajun music, and by extension Cajun culture, is no longer scrutinized, but upheld and celebrated.

Similarly, Rick, Tommy, Bobby, David, and Mike Michot formed a Cajun band in the 1980s called Les Frères Michot, meaning The Michot Brothers. Though Les Frères Michot enjoys international success and has toured all across the globe, they maintain their careers at home and play their music when it is possible, both for educational purposes and also for the love of the music.

Members of the Lost Bayou Ramblers, such as Louis and Andre Michot, and their contemporaries Matthew Doucet, and Wilson and Joel Savoy are the children of the generation that has perpetuated the Cajun music sound. Matthew Doucet plays fiddle with a number of bands, including on occasion with the Lost Bayou Ramblers. Wilson Savoy is the accordion

¹⁹ Interview, Matthew Doucet, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 9, 2007.

player for the Pine Leaf Boys, and his brother, Joel, is the fiddler for the Red Stick Ramblers. Each of these young musicians grew up playing Cajun music because it was part of their upbringing. Matthew Doucet recalls the role of music in his home, “You grow up hearing it. At least I did because there was music around all the time . . . There always was and still is instruments like guitars that are sitting out. Just pick up [a] guitar and someone else will come in and pick up another instrument and start laughing and play goofy stuff, you know. That’s how we always were.”²⁰

The decision to play Cajun music rather than rock n’ roll or other popular music was a deliberate choice for them, though not the norm for people their age. Louis confesses, “Music was my passion from high school, but never in my wildest dreams did I think I’d play Cajun music.”²¹ Just as in the plight of their parent’s generation, the cultural pressure on the youth was to move away from the local music to the pop music of America. Louis admits that when he started playing Cajun music with the Ramblers, “people would be making fun of us, people who were too cool for it, but they were Cajun, people my age . . . It wasn’t in, you know, but the more and more we played, the bigger our crowds got.”²² Ray Abshire, who has watched Louis and Andre grow up and first step onto the bandstand, says of the two Michots, “[Cajun music] is in them. It’s got to come out. They have no choice. It’s in them and it’s what they’re going to play.”²³ The music was part and parcel of their upbringing and cultural milieu, and the Ramblers are still admittedly lovers of this art form as well as exceptionally talented musicians. Yet, while their parents played to revive their culture, this generation has but to uphold the tradition in

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

²² Ibid.

²³ Interview, Ray Abshire, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 13, 2007.

order to generate that which expresses who they personally are as musicians and as Cajuns of today. The Ramblers are aware of the power of music to transform culture and affirm community. The Anthropologist, Victor Turner writes, “cultural performances are not simply reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting ‘designs for living’.”²⁴ Having learned from the Revivalists, the Ramblers have accepted the torch which was passed down to them in this traditional expressive form, and have taken the next step forward in what they consciously view as a process of transforming the context of the culture in which they live rather than giving in to threats brought by change. This includes making use of rapidly growing globalization and environmental demand.



The Lost Bayou Ramblers were formed after Louis returned from a stint in Nova Scotia, having learned French in an immersion program and honed his skill on the fiddle, which he played on the streets for sustenance. Louis says of this turning point in his

life, “As soon as I got [to Nova Scotia], I started learning the songs I had been playing my whole life . . . Before it was something I was born into and at that point, it was something that I choose.”²⁵ As he traveled, he realized that people were crazy about this type of music. He saw the opportunity to start a band with his brother, Andre, who, unbeknown to Louis during his

²⁴ Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (PAJ Publications, New York 1986) 24.

²⁵ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

time abroad had learned how to play accordion. They played their first local gig at Café Rue Vermilion in Lafayette with Louis on fiddle, Andre on accordion, Chris Courville on drums, Matthew Doucet on fiddle, Ryan Brasseaux on triangle, David Michot on upright bass, Adam Cohen on guitar, Thad Duplechain on rubboard and Gary Hernandez on clarinet. Though musicians drifted in and out, the core members of the group became Louis, Andre and Chris. Louis set about hustling for gigs that would help to establish them locally as well as internationally. Louis recalls,

We definitely tried to get where we are. It was the very roots – we do *everything*. No one was holding our hand . . . We didn't try to say we were some big thing. We didn't make these posters of ourselves and say, "Yeah, we need \$5000. We're starting at the top." No. We played for like \$5. We played at the bar to get our name out there, and they are great places to play.²⁶

Andre Michot also remembers his personal revelation that the Ramblers could successfully forge ahead with producing their own Cajun band. He says, "This time it was us out doing it . . . I realized that's when I definitely wanted to try to do it and I guess Louis did too because he pushed all the gigs. I just like playing the music."²⁷ Establishing a new band, separate from Les Frères Michot with whom he had played, was a new and exciting endeavor.



²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Interview, Andre Michot, Broussard, Louisiana, August 7, 2007.

Although the Ramblers sing mainly in French and play traditional Cajun music, harkening back to what Doucet calls “the old scratchy stuff,”²⁸ they produce an energetic and innovative sound. Erik Charpentier says of the Ramblers, “The band’s latest approach avoids the mainstream ‘cradle of traditionalism’ endorsed by the Cajun Renaissance and by the Nashville-polish of contemporary Cajun bands. Rather, the band embraces older, indigenous musical approaches (rhythmically complex, minimalist arrangements) of the early days of Cajun music in both spirit and creativity.”²⁹ Ancelet furthers this description by claiming that the newer generation of musicians, “. . . express a strong interest in reverently preserving the style and repertoires of their mentors, yet even these constantly recharge past songs with the vitality of the present.”³⁰

The Ramblers have inherited the cultural stature for which their parent’s generation fought so fiercely. They also inherited the songs that have been around for many generations through oral transmission, which they keep alive through their performance. Yet, they live in a



time when the internet breeds most of our communication and contact. This same technological tool allows them to share their music online, through their band website and myspace page. Ultimately, though, these modern forms of operating in the world do not disrupt the core of

²⁸ Interview, Matthew Doucet, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 9, 2007.

²⁹ Erik Charpentier, “Get Lost” in *Accordions, Fiddles, Two Step & Swing: A Cajun Music Reader* (Center for Louisiana Studies, Lafayette 2006) 497.

³⁰ Barry Jean Ancelet, *Cajun Music: Its Origins and Development* (The Center for Louisiana Studies, Lafayette 1989) 48.

their identity or their Cajun lifestyles.

Returning to Abshire's definition of the Cajun value system, the Ramblers work hard and play hard. Louis, Andre, and Alan are expert at carpentry and have all built or added on to their houses, and continue to juggle this skill with playing music. Furthermore, Louis and his wife, Ashlee, formed a nonprofit organization called CRIA, the Cultural Research Institute of Acadiana. Having worked with and studied permaculture for many years (what Louis defines as "permanence in culture through agriculture"³¹), the idea of re-energizing land and teaching others to do so inspired him to form his own nonprofit. According to Louis, "Its primary purpose will be to create a seed bank of edible, medicinal, and useful plants of the Acadiana peoples to ensure future generations' food security and preparedness in the face of disaster."³²

For example, CRIA believes in teaching others how to live off of the land in much the same way as his Acadian ancestors, without the reliance on a modern technology that increasingly impedes the opportunity for people to enjoy a direct



relationship with the land. As technology takes over, less know-how is passed down through the generations. Louis notes how dire this loss of information can be, especially if we are ever faced with disaster in which technology and modern know-how proves insufficient, such as the Flood of 1927 or Hurricane Katrina. He claims, "When our [grandparents] are gone and when our

³¹ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

³² Written correspondence, Louis Michot, October 8, 2007.

parents were around and they didn't learn because they didn't have to, well then who knows how to do this, how to do that? Nobody? Oh yeah, we forgot to ask. I think we are just moving a little too fast for ourselves and someone has got to take a step back and pass down this knowledge."³³ According to Thomas Berry, our society is fixated on progress, which allows us to "manufacture greater quantities of products with greater facility. We can travel faster and with greater ease. So we continue to progress endlessly with a feeling that all is well."³⁴ Globalization seems to foster this fixation on progress. Mirroring Louis's concern for raising the public's consciousness about the earth's inherent value over against the seduction of progress, Berry says, "This 'degradation' of the Earth is seen as the condition for 'progress' of humans . . . Within the human community, however, there is little awareness that the integral survival of the planet in its seasonable rhythms of renewal is itself a condition not simply of human progress but of human survival."³⁵ This is a dedication to the land that many Cajuns continue to uphold and about which the Ramblers are especially vocal. In fact, the backdrop of the band's website page is an aerial photograph of the Louisiana coast near Redfish Point in Vermilion Bay, Louisiana, which marks the visual erosion of that tract of land. As part of the standard series of links which visitors to the website can follow for the band's tour schedule, bio, music, and photo gallery is one entitled "Wetlands," which provides recent news and advocacy links related to the Wetlands conservation. The band states in this section,

The Wetlands of the Gulf Coast are not only important to those of us that live in Louisiana, but it is invaluable important to the entirety of our nation - from ecology, to culture, to industry; the health of our Wetlands effects us all. That's

³³ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

³⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (Bell Tower, New York 1999) 62.

³⁵ Ibid.

why we feel it's important to do our part to encourage education, conservation, and activism for the support of the Wetlands.³⁶

Ultimately, the Lost Bayou Ramblers are a generation of Cajun musicians who have learned to pair what it means to function in the contemporary and tech-savvy world, while they continue to live with an old fashioned and deliberate dedication to the land and the maintenance of the traditional Cajun lifestyle, upholding the sounds and values of their predecessors.

As those with an intimate connection to the land, who live in and work on a particular terrain, the notable disappearance of land brings the fear that their culture may suffer and may itself be a loss with the land. The author, Wendell Berry, links the use of land to culture, noting that a crisis of one signals crisis of the other. Berry claims, “A culture is not a collection of relics or of ornaments, but a practical necessity, and its corruption invokes calamity. A healthy culture is a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration . . . It clarifies our inescapable bonds to the earth and to each other.”³⁷ When the Ramblers perform, they embody meaningful aspects of the contemporary Cajun culture. Thus, they re-affirm their identity when playing to members of their community at home or to Cajuns who are scattered around the globe, and when they perform outside of their local context they draw people into momentary participation with their culture. Re-affirming identity and offering others a sampling of Cajun identity is powerful. It keeps people who are a part of it appreciative of the unique nature and the unique value of the culture and it provides people outside Cajun culture a sharper appreciation of it. The Ramblers are very much in the business of raising the consciousness of its value and the threat to the culture.

³⁶ Lost Bayou Ramblers website: <http://www.lostbayouramblers.com/wetlands.asp>.

³⁷ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (Sierra Club Books, San Francisco 1977) 43.

CHAPTER TWO: PERFORMANCE

AUSTIN, TEXAS



Come with me to take a peek. Squint your left eye and look through that small peephole I've carved out. What do you see?

A stage is fronted by a crowd of people at its base. A speaker system stands above and two walls frame each side. The room is dark. Spotlights aim directly at the activity on the stage drawing the eye toward the performers. The back wall of the stage is decorated with a red curtain and an oval sign resembling the shape of a flattened penny that reads, "Continental," the name of the bar, The Continental Club in Austin, Texas. The sign is the color of worn copper, but it shines with the bright white lights that border it. Above, within and below the sign are three misshaped gold stars. There is a large painting on the right wall. It is of an arched bridge above silky nighttime waters, perhaps depicting The Rialto in Venice or a scene in San Antonio. To the left of the stage, there is a narrow walkway. This is useful for those positioning

themselves against the wall sipping beer. Others press themselves closer to the stage, but off of the dance floor proper. The restrooms are located along this wall. The walkway leads to another room in the back with a lighted Exit sign above it. This is the area where the performers hang out before the show or where people go for some space or a smoke, taking a break from the crowd. Finally, hanging above the Exit sign is a neon blue image of Mercury with wings coming out of his head. This image, about twice the size of a human head, shines brightly in the dark.

Situated on the stage are five young men, the members of the Lost Bayou Ramblers, each of whom is flanked on one side by an instrument. To the far right, next to the bridge painting, stands Alan Lafleur holding the neck of his upright bass with his left hand and resting his right hand on the strings in the middle of his instrument. He is looking out on the crowd, locking eyes with someone, familiar or otherwise, and smiling. Alan is often noted for the rockabilly sound he infuses in his performance and his appearance compliments this motif. His short black hair is styled to curl at the center of his head and his face is framed by sideburns. Alan wears a white undershirt, which reveals the colorful tattoos spread down his right arm and peeking out on his chest.

Next to Alan is Cavan Carruth. With his guitar blithely hanging on his shoulder and a beer in his left hand, he looks toward Louis. Tonight a black hat, in a style that falls between that of a bowler and a fedora, tops his head. It is a variation from the cowboy hat he typically wears. He has grown a beard and is the only one with any significant facial hair. Cavan lives in both Austin and Lafayette and tonight his parents are in the audience. The sleeves of his white button down shirt are rolled halfway up his arms.

In the middle of the stage, standing under the “in” in the middle of “Continental” is Chris “Oscar” Courville. He leans back slightly on his left leg and rests his drumsticks on the drum rim, staring into the crowd with glazed eyes as though deep in thought. Chris is

consistently alert to audience interaction. Perhaps his vantage point as a standing drummer instead of being seated lends itself to this perspective. He is the un-assuming star, dressed in a beige t-shirt and jeans, whose talent jumps out at you from behind this veil of comfort, a testament to the adage, “show not tell.”

Seated to Chris’s right, near the front of the stage, is Andre Michot. He face looks down intently at the instrument laid across his lap, the lap steel, and his hands prepare it for upcoming action, like Chris. Andre dresses inconspicuously, this night garbed simply in a loose black t-shirt hanging over brown pants, the color combination reflecting that of his own curly hair. His other instrument, an accordion, rests next to him on the floor, near a beer on which he will sip throughout the night.

His younger brother, Louis Michot, stands next to him on his right, behind a microphone at the far end of the stage. Louis has sandy blonde, slightly curly hair and a small patch of hair between his lower lip and chin. On his t-shirt is the smiling face of an alligator with a golden crown on its head. Louis is looking at Cavan and in that moment, his chin is momentarily unattached from his fiddle, though his left hand keeps a firm grip on its neck. The bow is cocked, readied to sweep across the strings.

----Everything is still----

Bienvenue. Welcome.

Let us proceed into the diorama, into the scene, amongst the people. Please join me.

“ . . . dans grand Austin, Texaaas.”³⁸

The song fades and is replaced by the appreciative sound of clapping. Louis’s fiddle creates a few more sly notes; an intermission between songs. The dancers settle to a stop, the tails of their shirts and the hem of their skirts extending for one final salutary motion.

³⁸ The Lost Bayou Ramblers. “The Austin Special.” Performance, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

“Ah yeah, *The Austin Special*.”³⁹

Two beer bottles clink together neck to neck, dripping wet in the thick atmosphere as the waitress scoops them from her tray and hands them over to a member of the crowd. Empty beer bottles are tossed into the large garbage cans scattered throughout the room and the glass makes a percussive sound when it breaks at the bins’ bottom. People turn to their dance partners and smile with gratitude for a turn on the dance floor; others gauge whether they will stay with the same partner or choose another for the next song. The dance floor begins to resemble the moment a subway car empties itself of its passengers as they quickly and determinately scatter in different directions. Some remain in place, awaiting the next song. Others head to the bar, to the bathroom, or away from the activity of the dance area to a darker, more removed locale. I prefer the spot I’ve carved out for myself alongside the wall, propped up on the back of bench, where I can continue to watch the unfolding performance.

“Always hot in here, ya’ll – in a good way. It’s so hot I can’t stay in tune!”⁴⁰

Chris’s instinct alerts him to the inevitability of Louis delivering such a line and follows it by coming down on his drum with a dah dah dah swoooosh.

“I’m gonna tell y’all, we’re very glad to be back in the South of America.”⁴¹

Louis plucks at the fiddle while he speaks.

“Last weekend we were up in New Hampshire and those Hamptons and Long Island and all those places. We had a good time, but you know what? It ain’t *nothing* like the South.”⁴²

³⁹ Louis Michot. Performance, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Having hit their sweet spot, the audience, fully goaded, cheers. Chris too signals the significance of this speech and pats on the drum to further emphasize and communicate musically the band's sentiment. Louis gives a momentary fiddle interlude to signal the promise of another song. Andre switches out the lap steel he used for the last song, replacing it with his Louisiana-made, button accordion.

“J’étais au bal hier au soir. On vas retourner encore à soir. Si l’occasion se présente, on vas retourner demain au soir.”⁴³

Louis tugs us a bit further down South, from Austin, Texas to Cajun Louisiana. After pumping up the audience with a song about Austin to further stimulate the audience and contextualize the developing performance, Louis strikes up a popular and well-known Cajun tune. This turn back toward Louisiana serves to emphasize their Cajun identity and the musical tradition out of which they come. In anticipation of our pending return the following morning to Lafayette, he draws us ever closer to where belonging will be realized, home.

“Allons!”⁴⁴

Let’s go.

J’étais au bal hier au soir
Je vas retourner encore à soir.
Si l’occasion se présente,
Je vas retourner demain au soir.

I went to the dance last night
I’m going back tonight.
If I get the chance,
I’m going again tomorrow night.

’Gardez donc les jolies filles,
Celle-là que j’aime autant.
Moi, je connais tout l’amour
Que moi, j’ai eu pour toi.

Look at all the pretty girls,
That’s the one I love so much.
I know all the love
That I’ve had for you.

J’étais au bal hier au soir
’Tout habillé en noir,
C’est ça l’habit que moi, j’aime

I went to the dance last night,
All dressed up in black.
That’s the suit that I like

⁴³ Louis Michot. “J’étais au bal.” Performance, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

⁴⁴ Louis Michot. Performance, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

Pour courtoiser la belle.

To court the pretty girls.

À la fin, 'tite fille,
Quoi faire tu me fais comme ça?
Quoi faire donc tu veux
T'en revenir à la maison?

In the end, little girl
Why do you treat me this way?
Why then do you want
To come home with me?⁴⁵

In this moment nothing is still, all is in motion. On stage, every instrument bounces up and down, led by those holding them. At a certain point, Louis and Andre's feet pound on the stage in tandem as they persist with thumping out the energetic rhythm of the one beat. That one beat is what most clearly and technically distinguishes Cajun music from other music. It's an emphasis on the rhythm up against the melody, about which the Ramblers are adamant. Perhaps that contributes to Matthew Doucet's description of the power of their performance. When I asked him to describe what distinguishes the Ramblers from other young Cajun musicians, he says,

If I had to describe the Lost Bayou Ramblers, it would be like turning your amp to 11 and it only goes to 10 . . . Those boys just pump out this raw energy. They let it air out. Whatever they have, they put it out there.

Louis is a *fearless*, fearless individual when it comes to playing. He doesn't care. He knows what he's about and he's fearless. He doesn't care if he has perfect intonation. He doesn't care about that stuff. It's a lot deeper. Louis has a tremendous amount of soul. I think that is his strongpoint is his soul and his ability to really capture what's going on in that brain of his and put it out. He is definitely not the cleanest fiddle player out there, but that's not his style. Louis has a more aggressive, old style . . . It's more focused on making people move. There's something genuine and pure about his playing that I find that really brings you back home to where we learned, in the kitchen. That's what I call it, kitchen top music. I call it old man music. If you close your eyes and really listen to them, they sound like they're in their eighties and that's something really neat. That's a stylistic thing that not everybody can do, but Louis can do it really well.

And Andre's accordion playing is just unbelievable. Match that with Louis, being that they're brothers, and there's definitely that biological connection that they have. Andre plays so beautifully. He leaves so many gaping holes with his melodies that he plays that he is actually saying everything with the breaths in

⁴⁵ Traditional. "J'étais au bal." Performed by the Lost Bayou Ramblers, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

between the notes and then that allows Louis to slip in there and create this wall that is just this beautiful thing.

Then they have this incredible rhythm with Chris Courville who has been the drummer in every single one of my projects that I've ever had. Chris is a walking metronome. You see him playing on his foot with the drumsticks before we've got to go play. He's just always beating on something – incredible sense of rhythm . . . I said you're not born with rhythm – I take that back. I think Chris was born with rhythm, for real. He's just amazing.

Cavan Carruth playing steady guitar really adds a lot of energy. Alan having a rockabilly kind of style [as the] bass player really with interesting walks adds a lot more energy. So the whole band collective is just this wall that pretty much is raw energy. If you can't move to that, you're dead.⁴⁶

Louis speaks to the rhythms that drives them and explains,

The thing is, to me, the only thing that matters in music is rhythm . . . The rhythm to me is where we push it. To me, that's where we feel it and that's where people feel it. It's not the melody . . . All that matters is how you play the melody - how rhythmically, how together with whomever. For me and Andre, to us our best time is when we can play the song at exactly the same time together, not how many notes we can play and how high we can play it or whatever.⁴⁷

Andre adds to Louis's point by attributing the emphasis on rhythm to the presence of dancers. He says,

Like I said, all the instruments are hitting a heavy, heavy downbeat . . . The rhythm is always there on the accordion/fiddle with the bass and the drum, but the melody is secondary . . . It's so much about rhythm rather than a pretty melody that just floats . . . I was just always taught when I started playing guitar and T-Fer with my dad and his brothers, keep it simple. Keep it on rhythm and simple and that's for the dancers. That's what they would always say and that carries over into whatever else they play. You play for the dancers. It's not everywhere you play and there are dancers, so you play that for yourself too. It keeps it solid and it keeps it a solid music, which is what we like.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Interview, Matthew Doucet, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 9, 2007.

⁴⁷ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

⁴⁸ Interview, Andre Michot, Broussard, Louisiana, August 7, 2007.

Cavan and Alan turn to face one another and let the sounds of their instruments ricochet off of the other. They both bend down slightly, tipping their instruments, in a playful nod to the other, aware that they are building toward the same conclusion.

J'étais au bal hier au soir
Tout habillé en noir,
C'est ça l'habit que moi, j'aime
Pour courtoiser la belle.

I went to the dance last night,
All dressed up in black.
That's the suit that I like
To court the pretty girls.

À la fin, 'tite fille,
Quoi faire tu me fais comme ça?
Quoi faire donc tu veux
T'en revenir à la maison?

In the end, little girl
Why do you treat me this way?
Why then do you want
To come home with me?⁴⁹

Matthew Doucet is a classically trained musician who is expert at playing the violin and the Cajun fiddle, though the two have divergent sounds. He underscores Louis and Andre's point that rhythm is the key to playing Cajun music when he tells me about an invaluable lesson he learned from the legendary fiddler, Canray Fontenot, who would occasionally visit Doucet's father, Michael. He recalls,

Canray Fontenot actually gave me my first lesson on Cajun fiddle.

He was like, "You play an instrument?"

And I was like, "No sir."

And he was like, "Well you will one day."

And I was like, "Yeah, I think so."

He said, "I'll tell you the secret to Cajun music."

And I was like, "What's that?"

"You got to tap your foot. If you can't tap your foot, you can't play music."

That's so true. That always stuck with me. So when I got into classical playing, I'd always tap my foot and it would drive my instructor insane because when you

⁴⁹ Traditional. "J'étais au bal." Performed by the Lost Bayou Ramblers, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

play classical music, you have to internalize the music whereas in Cajun music, it's okay if you tap that foot. I would tap my foot when we were doing Bach and that was basically sacrilegious right there, you know. It was a clash of the worlds . . . Cajun music is all about rhythm. If you don't have rhythm, you don't have music at all, period. I don't care how good you are. If you do not have rhythm, you cannot play this music hands down. Like Canray say, if you can't tap your foot and play, you can't play. That is the god-awful truth. That is the fundamental thing about Cajun music because it's dance music. If you can't keep your dancers in a rhythm, then forget about it because you can't dance to something that's all over the place. That's what it is, is dance music.⁵⁰

The sound of the song shifts upward, to a higher key and has a Middle Eastern tinge to it. This alteration is something Andre developed while improvising years back that they have since incorporated in their version of this standard Iry LaJeune tune. Louis says of this syncretistic innovation,

My brother played "J'étais au bal" and you've heard it, it goes da na na na da ner ner ner ner ner and the only reason he did it like that was because he played the note on the accordion a button higher or lower or something and it came out as this funky little thang. We have a friend called Fariad. He's Persian and my crazy rock n' roll band in high school was named after him: Fariad. His name means the cry that will bring on the revolution and overthrow the Muslim regime in Persia and bring back the Shah. It's ancient. Anyway, that's what his name means and we just called that little part after him . . . We do all these different rhythms, just switch it up on people. It's different. It's not traditional at all, that, but it will be one day if we keep doing it long enough, you know? That's just the way tradition works.⁵¹

Musicians play the songs we think of as traditional, sometimes they write new songs and, as in the case of "J'étais au bal," the Ramblers build in a riff. Andre speaks to the way a traditional song can be enlivened and understood through performance,

You kind of get the feeling of what the song is supposed to be like and you do it. You're playing to that feeling instead of playing those specific notes that they were playing and I think that's a lot like Cajun music. I mean it is like Cajun music. No one – well, a lot of people never play the same song twice the same way. It's very, very similar. You go for the feeling of the song, not necessarily the

⁵⁰ Interview, Matthew Doucet, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 9, 2007.

⁵¹ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

correct notes. You go in that general area, but you want the feeling to be there and that's the most important part.⁵²

Louis elaborates on the role of innovation within this musical genre, claiming that even under the rubric of tradition, there is plenty of room for improvisation. He says,

To me, improvisation is a lyrical thing, it's like poetry, but the song you don't touch. If it's that beautiful to where it's around, you want to do your best to play the song as it is and to do that song justice. There's nothing wrong with change at all, but as far as melody goes, you don't need to play too many notes. The song is beautiful as it is. You don't have to make it too complicated. That's not where the improvisation is. It's not like your turn to solo or show off, it's your turn to play the song and, to me, playing the song involves that – it involves the song itself and it involves the rhythm . . . Of course we all have our own voice and play the song like we want to play it – have our own little style – but the song remains the same.⁵³

To my ear, Louis plays his fiddle like a snake charmer, calling the animal forth from the basket. If they had not fully done so up to this point, they have successfully hooked the crowd's attention now. Having been witness and participant at many of their shows, I can confidently claim that the Ramblers are expert at knowing how to reach an audience and as they do so, guiding its members into a trance-like state. Louis confessed to learning at an early age how to please a crowd. In response to being asked why he chose the fiddle as his main instrument, Louis admits,

My grandpa had one that he had never played (my Melatin grandpa) that his mom had given him when he was like four years old. He kept it his whole life. It was an old German fiddle. My dad had it and I picked it up. I don't really know! I can't remember why . . . I had taken lessons when I was real young – five, six or seven – but it was Suzuki, very standard and that's *totally* not me. I can't *stand* - not structure - I can't stand reading music. I just want to play, you know. I'm just very "sans culottes," as we say, by the seat of your pants. Just do it. So, that helped for sure when I took lessons when I was young. Actually, I was so bored with it. I would just play and my mind would go off and I would know the tunes. I wasn't reading the music, but I'd play it because I could hear it. I'd start playing it, dan dan dan dan, dan dan dan dan or however it goes and I would get so

⁵² Interview, Andre Michot, Broussard, Louisiana, August 7, 2007.

⁵³ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

bored at the recitals where you had to go up that I would start shaking my ass so that all the people in the audience would laugh. I would start shaking my butt at like six years old and I would hear the giggles and I'd keep shaking it and I'd be like, *yeah*, let me see if I could work up the crowd. That was the beginning of my [*laughter*]...and still to this day, people remark on how I shake my butt and I don't even try, it just shakes. [*laughter*]⁵⁴

Louis is masterful at learning songs and absorbing tunes into his repertoire – a talent I'm tempted to say he was born with, but which in fact may be attributed to his honed ear. That he learns music by ear is a quality of the oral tradition out of which he comes. According to Ray Abshire, "Once you play by ear and realize where the sounds come from, you can get in your car or truck and hear a new tune and shut down, keep that tune in your head. When you get home, you can play it because you know exactly what he's doing from the sounds. You know what's going on. That's what we call playing by ear."⁵⁵ Not only can he play what he hears, but also the music speaks to Louis in a way that it may not to non-Cajuns or those who come across it and reproduce the sound. The music reveals aspects of Louis's story and that of his people. Deborah Kapchan claims, "There is an agentive quality to performance, a force, a playing out of identities and histories."⁵⁶ Whitney Broussard articulates this when he says, "I think that's one of the things that draws us to Cajun music because Cajun music - one of the fundamental things is that it is a sense of belonging, a connection to history and to something bigger."⁵⁷ Cajun music communicates elements of what it means to be Cajun and evokes their environment, history, heritage and collective memory.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Interview, Ray Abshire, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 13, 2007.

⁵⁶ Deborah Kapchan, "Performance" in *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture* (University of Illinois Press, Chicago 2003) 121.

⁵⁷ Interview, Whitney P. Broussard, III, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, August 10, 2007.

Nowadays, people are accustomed to “hearing with their eyes,”⁵⁸ according to Doucet. Image has become foremost in much of today’s popular music. People’s expectations about what constitutes a performance have changed with this emphasis on image and entertainment. Perhaps this has climaxed with the practice of lip-synching, where the singers and musicians are not even performing music, but only performing the performance of music. Doucet goes on to say, “A lot of people like to see people bouncing around stage, getting all cutesy, rocking out and everything. If the music hits you and you want to bow around a little bit, that’s great, but . . . you can definitely tell when it’s fake or it’s real. There’s no question about that.”⁵⁹ To get up on stage and play music rooted in the right intentions, communicating the gut-wrenching feelings that are at the core of this music, distinguishes the Ramblers from many of their peers.

The Ramblers’ entertainment approach - or tricks to delight their audience - asserts a stylistic mark on their performance that is unique to them. There are a few tricks that the Ramblers do, such as Alan propping himself up on his bass while playing or Louis standing on Alan’s bass and fiddling. As Louis says, “We don’t make it too fancy. We have our fancy ways and our tricks and all of that and they all come in good fun.”⁶⁰ However, if the Ramblers throw out any tricks, it is spontaneous and, as Louis claims, with the intention of “ . . . finding out new ways to make it new and fresh and fun for ourselves and for everybody.”⁶¹ In the end, the Ramblers are insistent on allowing the music to be the thrust of any performance.

The song ends with the lingering sensation of being lulled into a trance. He plucks at his fiddle for several seconds then guides us into a song written by his uncle David Michot of Les

⁵⁸ Interview, Matthew Doucet, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 9, 2007.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Frères Michot entitled, “Moi J’Connais Pas.” Of this song, their friend who is a Cajun culture scholar, Erik Charpentier, writes, “Lyrically, Dav weaves his personal philosophy and experiences rambling around North America into chestnuts like, ‘Moi, Je Connais Pas’ (I Don’t Know), a song that scoffs at the pervasive fanaticism clouding the judgment of America’s politicized factions.”⁶² Louis calls out to the crowd the title of the song, inviting anyone to sing along.

“It’s a philosophy of life. Sometimes you just have to proclaim, You Don’t Know!”⁶³

Y’en a qui dit c’est comme ci
Y’en a qui dit c’est comme ça
Y’en a qui dit pas rien
Mais moi j’connais pas
Moi j’connais pas
Moi j’connais pas
Y’en a qui dit c’est comme ça
Mais, Moi j’connais pas⁶⁴

As the crowd loosens and becomes more unhinged throughout the night, Louis’s fiddle strings provide ample evidence of this phenomenon, no longer bound to the bow, but hanging frayed like individual pieces of hair. The sound emanating from the fiddle rises and falls as though an athlete in training, sprinting up and down a spiral staircase. Louis’s words arch above the din of the scene. The end of each word falls prey to Louis’s unique pronunciation of them, mimicking the sound of a wet finger placed over a lit candle to extinguish it. Tssss.

Y’en a qui dit c’est trop
Y’en a qui dit c’est pas assez
Mais moi j’tu dit que c’est trop parrielle
Mais, Moi j’connais pas
Moi j’connais pas

⁶² Erik Charpentier, “Get Lost,” in *Accordions, Fiddles, Two Step & Swing: A Cajun Music Reader* (Center for Louisiana Studies, Lafayette 2006) 497.

⁶³ Louis Michot. Performance, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

⁶⁴ David Michot. “Moi, J’Connais Pas.” Performed by the Lost Bayou Ramblers, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

Y'en a qui dit c'est comme ca
Mais, Moi j'connais pas⁶⁵

Louis backs away from the microphone and lines up alongside the other members of the band, giving way to the interplay of the instruments. With his eyes closed momentarily, he nurses the fiddle like a child with colic, calming it in a sweet and sweaty grip, though its cries persist from underneath his chin. Louis looks up, mindful that he is carrying us all, and not just the precious instrument in his arms. He signals his pleasure of the dancers and the unfolding performance with a smile, lips tightly closed and spread across his face. He returns, singing in English.

Some say it's like this
Some say it's like that
Some say nothing
But me, I don't know
I don't know
I don't know
Some say it's like this
But I don't know⁶⁶

Louis lets his fiddle rest against the side of his leg while he cups his hand to his ear, listening for the audience to sing along with him.

"Y'all got one more chance."⁶⁷

Some say it's too much
Some say it's not enough
But me, I say it's all the same
But I don't know
I don't know
I don't know
Some say it's like that
But I don't know⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Louis Michot. Performance, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

⁶⁸ David Michot. "Moi, J'Connais Pas." Performed by the Lost Bayou Ramblers, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

A yearning cry rises with his voice and lingers in the air until, in unison, it is stomped out by the beat of their feet on the stage.

“Alright!”⁶⁹

Louis reaches in his pocket, pulls out a rag and wipes the bow clean. Andre again switches out his accordion for the lap steel and laughs at something Cavan has just said under his breath. Cavan leans closer to Louis, catches his attention and lets him know that he has something in mind for the next song. Louis listens intently and gives Cavan a wink, communicating agreement. Alan watches the interaction and begins to pluck at his bass to the tune of a White Stripes song he is fond of playing, “Seven Nation Army.” His bass produces the sound, do, do do do do do do. Do, do do do do do do. When he pauses, Chris chimes in on drums with his own interlude; da na, da na. It’s clear to any New Orleanian in that room that he is providing his own rhythmic wink in the form of “Who Dat?,” a sports cheer popular because of its reference to the culture. I catch the hint at both songs and can see that they speak to a quality of the person who plays them. Alan communicates that he is knowledgeable about contemporary popular music and in particular the rock n’ roll music of The White Stripes. Chris communicates his connection to New Orleans, where he lived for some time. After another few seconds of in-between time, Louis announces the next piece.

“Alright. We’re going to do a little something off out Bayou Perdu album.”⁷⁰

Alan coaxes us, “A nice, pretty, slow song.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Louis Michot. Performance, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

⁷⁰ Louis Michot. Performance, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

⁷¹ Alan Lafleur. Performance, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

When they start the song, it is clear that it is anything but slow. They crank up the energy several notches and lay into the crowd with an instrumental stunner called, “Pilette High Society.” Alan crouches down and hunches closer to his bass, looking at Louis like the fairy tale character, Rumpelstiltskin, who derives pleasure by taunting the princess before she guesses the answer to the riddle of his name. Louis comes back at Alan with a fast-paced fiddle, unwilling to be duped by the trickster. Though the sounds are completely complimentary, the beat builds to a quicker pace, as if the musicians were competing with one another to make it to the finish line first.

In between notes, Alan stand up tall, swings his bass around in a twirl and catches it, pounding out the next set of notes. Louis calls out playfully,

“Hey, watch yourself out there, now!”⁷²

Just as it seems the song is moving toward its natural end, there is a pause where a conclusion would be. They jump right back into it, this time playing even faster. Louis stomps his left foot firmly. Cavan and Louis approach the front of the stage and Cavan points his guitar toward the audience like a flashlight in the dark. I watch as Alan tips his bass forward and climbs on top of it, his left leg bent and his right more outstretched, somehow managing to balance his body up against the angle of the instrument. He smiles broadly, though his lips do not part and, peering up at him on stage, I catch a glimpse of his dimple. Alan’s right hand slaps the bass fiercely and his head bounces up and down. While watching Alan’s trick, I failed to notice that Louis and Cavan had moved into the audience and were playing amidst the sea of dancers. This riles those on the floor up to a greater degree and people begin jumping up and down with excitement, their hands waving in the air. A man hooks arms with a woman nearby and together they skip around in a circle. Andre looks up from his lap steel and watches the crowd swarm

⁷² Louis Michot. Performance, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

around his younger brother, but remains focused on his task. I asked Andre what he thinks about when he plays and he says,

I think about the rhythm. That's basically 95% of what I think about – being right in the pocket with the rhythm. That's it, really. I mean I think about home sometimes. Sometimes you see people dancing and you think about how funny it looks or sometimes you think about how nice it is that they're right on the rhythm with you and you can kind of watch them and feed off of them. Mostly I just think about playing.⁷³

Chris looks at the audience and smiles, noticing there is no more order to the dance floor. People are unabashedly releasing themselves in their own dance moves, whether they abide by Cajun standards or not. Cavan holds his guitar higher in the air so that it barely rests against his body, bites down on his lower lip and scrunches his nose, banging out the notes. People cheer louder for this performance development, knowing the song was growing to a close. Louis keeps his cool and when he swipes his bow across the fiddle dramatically for the last note, he breaks into a laugh. Everybody claps and some manage to slap him and Cavan on the back before they climb on stage. Rather than dally, Louis, aware of the energy they have built, launches right into the next song.

“Ah, yeah.”⁷⁴

⁷³ Interview, Andre Michot, Broussard, Louisiana, August 7, 2007.

⁷⁴ Louis Michot. Performance, The Continental Club, Austin, August 4, 2007.

LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS



Allow me to take you now to Lowell, Massachusetts where the Ramblers performed each of the three days over the course of the Lowell Folk Festival this past July. The Lowell Folk Festival is a product of the National Folk Festival, created by the National Council for the Traditional Arts. This year is their twenty-first annual event in Lowell. The rigorous schedule of a festival such as this one has almost become old hat for the Ramblers, who have grown accustomed to multiple performances within a succinct period of time.

In the history of Cajun music, festivals have proved extremely momentous, and now extraordinarily common, events. In fact, it was the Newport Folk Festival of 1964 that helped spark a “. . . Cajun grassroots pride and empowerment movement.”⁷⁵ At the behest of Ralph Rinzler and Pete Seeger, three Cajun musicians, Dewey Balfa, Gladius Thibodeaux and Louis “Vinesse” LeJeune, performed to a massive audience. This event was the first time Cajun music

⁷⁵ Shane K. Bernard, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson 2003) 101.

was played in such a context and their performance earned them a standing ovation. Balfa later said, “I had no idea what a festival was . . . I had played in house dances, family gatherings, maybe a dance hall where you might have seen as many as two hundred people at once . . . And in Newport, there were seventeen thousand.”⁷⁶ The reception of such an outstanding response from the audience propelled Dewey Balfa to become a tireless cultural impresario. He was a fierce supporter of Cajun culture and worked to instill a sense of pride in the Cajuns at home while simultaneously promoting it to the outside world. One of the things that resulted from Balfa’s activism was the historic formation of a Tribute to Cajun Music Festival in 1974, held in Lafayette, Louisiana. It evolved and joined forces with two other local festivals to become what is now known as Festival Acadiens, a wildly popular annual festival produced by the folklorist, Barry Ancelet.

Festivals changed Cajun music in several ways. Robert Cantwell describes such a process in his essay on folk festivals, explaining that “a folk festival is itself a context; this fundamental recontextualization *must* occur – hence, always, a folk *festival* – because the concept of the folk cultural performance is implicitly *decontextualizing*.”⁷⁷

For one thing, audiences previously unaccustomed to that music are given opportunities to experience it live, without necessarily having to visit Louisiana. For some, it might be their first experience of this roots music and the introduction to this culture. Festivals put on at home offer locals a space and time to celebrate the crafts of their culture.

Finally, the ways the music had been performed – that is, for members of the community at social gatherings such as dance halls – alters in a festival context. Performing to

⁷⁶ Ibid, 102.

⁷⁷ Robert Cantwell, “Feasts of Unnaming: Folk Festivals and the Representation of Folklife” in *Public Folklore* (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington 1992) 297.

such a large crowd means making decisions about how to interact with this type of audience. Richard Bauman refers to this phenomenon when he writes, “The emergent structure of performance events is of special interest under conditions of change, as participants adapt established patterns of performance to new circumstances.”⁷⁸ The purposes of attending a musical event for the audience members, that is, to dance and court one another, changed outside of Cajun country. According to Ancelet, “Traditional dances always ended with a waltz to give courting couples one last close dance together, but they found the festival performances end better with a rousing two-step . . . more likely to generate a rousing burst of applause and maybe an encore, concepts that were unknown in the dancehalls.”⁷⁹ Contemporary performers, such as the Ramblers, are no longer strangers to festival etiquette. Because it is an important circuit in which to perform, the Ramblers are well versed in knowing how to interact with their audiences.

The audience arrives early that morning and fills the row of outdoor seating arranged for them. Those who intend to dance stand in the back, under the scalloped, white awning. Here to introduce them to the Lowell crowd is Ryan Brasseaux, their long-time friend and scholar of Cajun culture. Brasseaux is pursuing his doctorate of American Studies at Yale University and often accompanies the Ramblers to conferences, festivals and other events to educate the public about the history of this roots music and the Ramblers’ particular stylings. Playing fiddle with the Ramblers during this trip is Matthew Doucet. When I asked Doucet how the Lost Bayou Ramblers engage different audience depending on location, he responded,

⁷⁸ Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Waveland Press, Long Grove, Illinois 1977) 42.

⁷⁹ Barry Jean Ancelet, *One Generation at a Time: Biography of a Cajun and Creole Music Festival* (Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette 2007) xi.

How we engage the audience outside of being at home is explain the songs and tell them what the songs are about. Back at home, you just kick off a song, like they know “J’étais au bal,” they know what the song is about, they understand the words. So, it’s fun to do stuff like that. When you’re home, people are more interested in your repertoire, like what kind of songs are you playing as opposed to what the songs are about and stuff like that. When you’re on the road, people want to know what the songs are because they don’t understand what you’re saying. Even like, people from France are like, what kind of French do you speak? We get that because it’s its own style of French. I think people like to be informed what they’re listening to. If it’s a sad song, then you tell them it’s a sad song. It’s more of an educational thing, is one way of looking at it. When you are on the road, you want to bring it to the best light that you can possibly bring it to, you know. It’s like, “This is a song we learned from so and so who was a great fiddler, accordion player,” and how we learned the song. Back home, nobody cared about that – just shut up and play, no talking. We want to dance, let’s go. But you can’t play the song too fast because all the old ladies will come up to you and say, “Baby, you play that song way too fast, cher. Now you need to slow it down.” They know how that song should be played.⁸⁰

When outside of Cajun country, it becomes contingent on Louis as the band’s leader to orient the audience to this music as he sees fit. Regarding the role of a performance disclaimer, Bauman notes that it “serves both as a moral gesture, to counterbalance the power of performance to focus heightened attention on the performer, and a key to the performance itself.”⁸¹ The first thing Louis is apt to do is remind people of their band name and where they are from. He provides further orientation cues when he signals the beginning of songs, naming them in French and English. Sometimes he offers contextual information such as the artist who wrote the piece, what decade it was written in, what type of rhythm to expect (i.e. Cajun swing or waltz), which album of theirs it comes from, and why it holds particular meaning for them. All of this is part and parcel of their educational thrust, especially when on the road.

Brasseaux begins, “Well, bonjour Lowell. Good morning. How’s everybody doing?”⁸²

⁸⁰ Interview, Matthew Doucet, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 9, 2007.

⁸¹ Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Waveland Press, Long Grove, Illinois 1977) 21.

⁸² Ryan Brasseaux. Performance, The Lowell Folk Festival, Lowell, July 28, 2007.

The audience chimes in with approval.

“Good. Welcome to the 2007 Lowell Folk Festival.”⁸³

A few residual whistles and claps egg Ryan on.

“Yes! It’s nice and warm out. It’s humid. It feels like Southwest Louisiana, which is appropriate because we have a young Cajun band from Lafayette, Louisiana.”⁸⁴

People pipe up with more encouragement. Brasseaux launches into his introduction,

I should make a quick mention that contrary to popular belief, New Orleans is *not* a Cajun city. You have to move about one hundred and forty miles west to Lafayette where this young group hails from. It’s also the same city that produced the Cajun super group, Beausoleil. Today, all of these young musicians are performing a style of music that has been percolating, developing, synthesizing over time in Southwest Louisiana, which started primarily as a fiddle-based music as Acadian deportees eventually made their way to Southwest Louisiana. By the nineteenth century – the late nineteenth century – the accordion is introduced and through interaction with other cultural groups; Afro-Creoles, country music comes through Southwest Louisiana [and] leaves quite an impression. Rock ‘n roll later comes and plays a role in Cajun music’s development. Today, you are going to hear the product of all these cultural interactions. On the fiddle we have Matt Doucet; vocalist, band leader, fiddler Louis Michot; on the diatonic, button accordion handmade in South Louisiana, Andre Michot; on the drums, Chris “Oscar Courville”; on guitar, Cavan Carruth; and on the slap, rockabilly bass, Alan Lafleur. Please help me welcome to the Lowell Folk Festival, The Lost Bayou Ramblers!⁸⁵

The burst of clapping mingles with the first notes of their opening song, “La Roue Qui Pend,” which translates to “The Hanging Wheel.” It was written by Tommy Michot of Les Frères Michot and is the eponymous title of their second album. According to the album’s accompanying booklet,

La Roue Qui Pend (“the hanging wheel”) is the name of the Michot family camp. In South Louisiana, the term “camp” refers to a secondary residence, usually located in a natural or undeveloped landscape, that is used as a base for outdoor

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

recreation, for social functions, and as a refuge or retreat from urban life or the workplace. La Roue Qui Pend is in the extreme southern portion of Lafayette Parish, near the Vermilion Parish line, on the banks of Bayou Vermilion. Louis Michot (father of the Michot Brothers) bought the camp in the early 1960s along with several partners, including the late Monsignor Alexander O. Sigur. The Michots had family functions there when the brothers were young, and the brothers hosted Boy Scout camping trips in the adjacent bottomland hardwood forest. The camp was about 10 miles from the Michot home in Pilette, close enough so that, when the boys got older, they were able to ride horses or bicycles there for camping trips, hunting, frogging, hiking, and swimming. There was always plenty of music played at La Roue Qui Pend. Many a night were passed with a fire in the hearth, a gumbo on the stove, and the music of the fiddle, accordion, and guitar played until the wee hours of the morn.⁸⁶

In my experience, the Ramblers often kick off a show with this tune. Not only is it written by Louis and Andre's father, and about their family environs, but it also represents a Louisiana way of life. The state license plate reads, "Sportsman's Paradise" and points to the hunting, fishing, trapping and farming occupations of many in the state, in addition to outdoor sports, and in particular to the many who rely on its waterways and wetlands for subsistence. Many Cajuns, like the Michots, retreat to their camps to relax, spend time together, feast on local cuisine and play music. The "camping" that genuine Cajuns do is not anything like what so many modern urban dwellers now do by giving themselves a sense of returning to the great outdoors, but in fact remain entirely distanced and detached. For example, on Pecan Island, Louisiana, situated between Lafayette and Lake Charles, off of the Gulf Coast, oil and gas executives will bring their guests to their duck hunting camps. Valets meet them at their cars and bring their equipment inside for them; their favorite beverage or cocktail is likely to be handed to them at the door. They are taken to a blind the next morning without ever getting their feet wet. Many times the Cajun guide will fire simultaneously with the guest and bring the duck down, leaving the guest to think that he (usually the guests are male) has made the kill. When the Michots and their family and friends go to the camp, they are genuinely engaging their environment, not for the sake of

⁸⁶ Les Frères Michot, accompanying album booklet, "La Roue Qui Pend." Swallow Records 2003.

nostalgia or to be able to say they have “been there,” but for the sake of being who they are, natural people of the land.

Cajun songs are reflective of their Louisiana context and persisting lifestyle. When I spent time talking with Louis and his wife, Ashlee, we discussed the expectations and process behind writing new Cajun tunes. Ultimately, Louis decided there is value in keeping songs relevant for all generations. Louis and Ashlee discuss writing contemporary Cajun music claiming,

Ashlee: Somebody was quoted in the paper saying it was particularly hard to write a Cajun song these days because it just doesn’t sound like it used to sound or something. The subject matter is different because they used to write about their lives back then and our lives are different.

Louis: But it’s not.

Ashlee: What I’m getting at is the ones you write you can’t even tell they’re not old in a way.

Louis: I mean, I didn’t say I pulled out my cell phone and she called me. She was a myspace beauty, but when I finally got to know her, she was ugly as a horse!
[laughter]⁸⁷

Cajun tunes are sung about social gatherings and celebrations, Acadian heritage, working the land, being poor or mistreated, drinking, dancing, romance, longing, the outdoors and going to Texas. The songs the Ramblers sing and those they write follow suit. Louis commented on musical subject matter saying,

Music has a lot of place within our society and every society. It tells you stories, it tells you about the past – *a lot* about the past. It tells you a lot of history, a lot of stories. It tells you people’s personal lives and personal stories . . . It keeps something alive through that music . . . Some people write songs about what happened in the world, some people just sing whatever the hell is on their mind. I do that a lot because in a lot of songs in Cajun music, there’s a way to sing it, but it’s not necessarily in stone . . . That’s how the great songs were made. They sang what was on their mind and got recorded. And then people started singing like them, but it was their story. But, yeah, okay, it’s their song, but it’s your story

⁸⁷ Interview, Louis Michot and Ashlee Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

when you play it . . . We can claim the songs, but we can't claim the experience. What's important is we are out there singing them and we are making our own.⁸⁸

Louis continues to sing in French and sometimes English because he believes the French language to be part and parcel of Cajun music since it works in tandem with the rhythm. Not only that, according to Louis, "You can say whatever you want [in French] and it just sounds better."⁸⁹

The song begins and Louis serves as the audience's usher, rhythmically escorting us to his family camp, *La Roue Qui Pend*.

Allons à la Roue Qui Pend	Let's go to The Hanging Wheel
Pour manger de la bonne cawain	To eat the good turtle
Toi ma cher petit fille	You, my little darling girl
T'es la cause j'suis soul la tête	Are the reason I am the drunk in the head
La belle, elle veut plus moi	The beauty, she doesn't want me anymore
J'suis partie pour m'en aller	I left to go
M'en aller aussi loin	To go far
Ouais là-bas dans Grande Milton	Yeah, over there in Grande Milton ⁹⁰

For an audience outside of Cajun country or sometimes even at home, Louis will typically change one line of the song to one that is laced with a double-meaning – a string of words that only one familiar with vernacular Cajun might notice. On the other hand, when their live performance was recorded at The Liberty Theatre in Eunice, Louisiana for "Rendezvous des Cajuns," it is worth noting that they used the original version of the song for their Cajun audience.

In 1972, Elizabeth Brandon wrote an article entitled, "The Socio-Cultural Traits of the French Folksong," published in the *Revue de Louisiana* (Louisiana Review), in which she states,

⁸⁸ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Tommy Michot. "La Roue Qui Pend." Performed by the Lost Bayou Ramblers, The Lowell Folk Festival, Lowell, July 28, 2007.

“The Cajun rejected almost all of the above taboos; he loves to drink, gamble, dance, sing, play the fiddle and fish on Sunday, but in the discussion of lovemaking he has undergone the Puritanical influence of his American neighbors. The freedom with which a French song treats matters of sex is missing in Louisiana.”⁹¹ Be that as it may, Louis manages to insert a mischievous phrase within this song, thereby asserting an identity, one related to the concept of group. This is both group in the sense of the band and the larger Cajun cohort of which they are a part. They granted me “membership” in this “group” when they revealed the meaning of the words, of which I otherwise would not have been aware. Such membership positions the initiated over against those who may have a familiarity with or appreciation of Cajun music and culture, but who, in fact, stand outside of it. This coded language serves as a secret handshake of sorts. When the band is consistently expected to share their cultural riches through performance, I imagine it may be delightful to retain something veiled for oneself. That the band plays this song at the outset of any show, almost like an initiation rite, pleases me. They will go on to do so as guests of the Kennedy Center’s Millennium Stage performance venue the following September, in front of a live Washington, DC audience as well as this morning, for the eager Lowell festival goers.

Tit fille quand je vas mourir
 Enterre moi pas dans le cimetière
 Enterre moi donc au bord du bayou
 Au bord du Bayou Vermillion
 Chaque fois je pas devant
 Devant la porte de la Roue Qui Pend

Nonc Dav après jouer
 Avec son pipe au bec qui rit

Little girl when I die
 Don’t bury me in the cemetery
 Bury me along the bayou
 Along the Bayou Vermillion
 Each time I am not in front
 In front of the door of The
 Hanging Wheel
 Uncle Dav after playing
 With his pipe bill laughs⁹²

⁹¹ Elizabeth Brandon, “The Socio-Cultural Traits of the French Folksong in Louisiana” in *Accordions, Fiddles, Two Step & Swing: A Cajun Music Reader* (Center for Louisiana Studies, Lafayette 2006) 68.

⁹² Tommy Michot. “La Roue Qui Pend.” Performed by the Lost Bayou Ramblers, The Lowell Folk Festival, Lowell, July 28, 2007.

“Merci bien. Alright.”⁹³

Uncle David Michot, known as “Dav,” met up the Ramblers at the festival and played triangle in each show. For months at a time each year, Dav will leave Louisiana and travel by himself, exploring the world. He seldom maps his journey ahead of time, so his nephews rarely know where he is during these trips. Considering the wandering nature of the Michots, it is hardly surprising that Dav has wanderlust. Louis speaks to this when he says,

We were always a very worldly family too. We don’t fit into the “I was born and raised here, just like my grandpa.” We’re very country in the way we don’t waste [things]. My grandpa was also a Sergeant in the Marines – so you don’t turn on your hot water for too long. You don’t waste *any* food. You burn your trash. It’s very country, but at the same time very worldly . . . I don’t know where the rambling comes in, but this has been seven generations and we’ve been from France to Haiti to Cuba to New Orleans to Marksville, Lafayette to Mamou and now I’m in St. Landry Parish which is kind of a first.⁹⁴

That Dav arrived in time for the Ramblers’ first show on Friday night was a great surprise for them, and in particular Louis and Andre. Dav plays with Les Frères Michot and was in fact an original member of the Ramblers, before Alan and Cavan joined the cast. Louis attributes a trip that Dav took off on as a reason for the existence of the Ramblers. He recalls,

When I learned how to play bass I was fourteen or fifteen. I was at home and my dad pulled out the bass because my uncle Dav took off down the road and the next night I was on stage and I’d never played bass – just learned, you know. It’s really because of that that Andre and I play.⁹⁵

It was another such unexpected journey of Dav’s years back which left the Ramblers without a guitar player for an upcoming concert in California, so they quickly called on Jon (pronounced “Jean,” as in French) Bertrand as a replacement two days before they left.

⁹³ Louis Michot. Performance, The Lowell Folk Festival, Lowell, July 28, 2007.

⁹⁴ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

According to Louis, this was the only time the band took the opportunity to practice for a show.

He says,

In general, the only time we practiced in the last years and years it seems like is when Uncle David left the band. [Jon] came over to the camp where I was living and we practiced. I thought of as many songs as I could think of and then we left for the tour. So that was like the only practice. [*laughter*]⁹⁶

Jon ultimately joined the band for several years and plays on two of their four albums before deciding to join the Pine Leaf Boys as a full-time member. When Jon left, Cavan, who had also previously played with the Ramblers from time-to-time, replaced him. Since each one of the Ramblers has played with Les Frères Michot at one time or another, Louis did not have to look far to find the appropriate talent for the band. It is his self-professed bias to surround himself with musicians who know how to play the fundamentals before they can proceed with any fancier stuff. Louis believes rhythm is most simply grasped by learning how to play triangle. What the Cajuns call the T-Fer, which translates to “little iron,” meaning the triangle, is for Louis the source of understanding what Cajun music is all about. It is taken as significant to the people that this little instrument is made from one of the sweeper teeth on a harvesting machine, speaking of the sense in which rhythm is especially earthy, connected to the very soil and what it yields for human nourishment. On this point he says,

That’s a Michot thing too – all that matters is rhythm. We were initiated on triangle and the triangle is what flows through our blood . . . You can’t play Cajun music if you can’t play triangle. Some of the best young, new players out there have come up and sat in with us and tried to play triangle and not been able to and that totally let me down for them. I totally have a different view of them – I’m like, wait, you started at the top. No, you start at the bottom. I’m not saying that I’m perfect, but I was fortunate enough to play triangle from a young age, and before I played bass full-time, and as playing bass also, I played triangle *a lot* and I was lucky. So did my brother, so did Oscar, all with Les Frères Michot. So did Cavan play guitar with Les Frères Michot, so did Matt Doucet, so did my

⁹⁶ Ibid.

friend, Adam. Alan has played with Les Frères Michot. Something about Les Frères Michot for all of us has taught us how to play simply.⁹⁷

“Alright, thank y’all. Merci beaucoup. If you weren’t here earlier, we are the Lost Bayou Ramblers from Lafayette, Louisiana. We’re glad to be here in Lowell, Massachusetts for the first time. Well, yesterday was the first time, but we’ll be here until tomorrow. Ah, I love it.”⁹⁸

Alan reminds Louis to thank the dancers. The presence of dancers at a show out of town seems to be a boon to any unfolding performance, as their presence heightens the overall energy of the show and reveals the depth of engagement between the performers and the audience members. Ray Abshire speaks to the special relationship of musician to dancer when he says,

When I’m playing, I will always look for the feet. Everywhere, there are usually one or two or three couples that you can lock onto. We lock into good dancers. It’s hard to explain. Dancers, when they lock onto the music back then, they feel it and they’ll give you a holler or stomp when you do that little, special thing. It was always something going on in these dances. The dancers and the musicians were talking to each other, and that’s the way each dance band had its own crowd . . . But if the dancers liked what you were playing, they were going to follow you. That’s what they wanted. It’s like one of your favorite restaurants. It’s so different from today. I don’t find bands are so much playing for the feet anymore. Well, the feet are flying in so many directions, it’s hard to play for them . . . But, hey, they’re having a good time. They’re having fun. I’m not knocking it, but that marriage of instrument and feet is not what it used to be either . . . People are having a good time, but for different reasons . . . I don’t know, ‘cause they weren’t raised with it, you know. Those dancers could pick out a bad band like that [*snap*]. Boom. They’d go one time, and that was it. They weren’t going to come back. Some bands played two-steps to the waltzes or vice versa [*just sound*] – it’s not for me, I’m gone. It was that close, man. To keep the job, you had to be able to read your crowd.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Louis Michot. Performance, The Lowell Folk Festival, Lowell, July 28, 2007.

⁹⁹ Interview, Ray Abshire, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 13, 2007.

According to the folklorist, Deborah Kapchan, “Performance is always an exchange – of words, energy, emotion and material.”¹⁰⁰ Therefore, encouraging the dancers seems appropriate at this moment.

“Oh yeah. We’d like to thank the dancers out in the street hooking it up. Well, they’re not dancing right now, but they will be in a second. [laughter] Alright! We’re going to do a little something called ‘Une Piastre Ici, Une Piastre Là-Bas,’ ‘A Dollar Here and a Dollar There.’ It’s a Hackberry Ramblers tune. I don’t know if you know the Hackberry Ramblers, but supposedly they’re the oldest band in America.”¹⁰¹

Edwin Duhon and Luderin Darbone formed the Hackberry Ramblers in 1933. According to fellow musician and folklorist, Ben Sandmel, the Hackberry Ramblers, “were the first band to blend the traditional Cajun repertoire, sung in French, with Anglo-American country music sung in English. They were also the first musicians to bring electronic amplification to area dancehalls.”¹⁰² Their music was meant for dancers and was at the forefront of the Cajun Swing Era, lasting from 1933 to 1947. Over the course of such a prolific musical career, the band did not play to national or international crowds until the early 1990s. Unlike the Lost Bayou Ramblers, the Hackberry Ramblers were accustomed to playing mainly to Louisiana audiences. When the Lost Bayou Ramblers perform this song, they are not only paying homage to their predecessors, but they are also evoking this era.

Quand j’ai eu vingt et un ans,	When I turned twenty-one years old,
Mon père m’a dit que c’était le temps	My father told me that it’s time
Que j’arrête de dépenser	That I stop spending

¹⁰⁰ Deborah Kapchan, “Performance” in *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture* (University of Illinois Press, Chicago 2003) 133.

¹⁰¹ Louis Michot. Performance, The Lowell Folk Festival, Lowell, July 28, 2007.

¹⁰² Ben Sandmel, “The Hackberry Ramblers” in *Accordions, Fiddles, Two Step & Swing: A Cajun Music Reader* (Center for Louisiana Studies, Lafayette 2006) 389.

Une piastre ici, une piastre là-bas. A dollar here and a dollar there.

Ça fait que j'ai marié It's a fact that I married
Une petite fille que moi j'aimais, A young girl that I love
À cette heure je sais que ça va être At that hour I know that will be
Une piastre ici, une piastre là-bas. A dollar here and a dollar there.

Ma petite femme est en train de faire My young wife is in the process of
making
Des habits pour le bébé Clothes for the baby
Et la je sais que ça va être And I know that will be
Une piastre ici, une piastre là-bas. A dollar here and a dollar there.¹⁰³

Brasseaux stands to the right side of the stage, looking up at his friends, the musicians, with one hand propped on his lower lip. Momentarily spellbound by the way the song takes shape on stage, his face reflects his admiration and awe. Louis's fiddle produces notes that consistently climb toward a peak, but he keeps us ever rising, in what feels to me like teasing. When they hit a certain note, Brasseaux breaks into a smile and turns to Dav, exclaiming "Damn!" Laughing, he stomps his foot in appreciation.

"We're going to do a little something since we're from South Louisiana, almost to the marsh, more than a swamp, but we're going down to the marsh. It's called "La Valse de Meche Perdue." Le Meche Perdue is the lost marsh. If you don't know, we're losing land as we speak. That's alright. There are a lot of people doing a lot of things about it. Hopefully this song will help - yes - help inform some of the people out there."

This waltz is another song Tommy Michot has written about the disappearing marsh. It translates in English to mean "The Lost Marsh Waltz," adapted from an older song, "La Valse de Meche." Regarding the genesis of this song and its ecological resonance, the liner notes for the song performed by Les Frères Michot say,

¹⁰³ The Hackberry Ramblers, "Une Piastre Ici, Une Piastre Là-bas." Performed by the Lost Bayou Ramblers, The Lowell Folk Festival, Lowell, July 28, 2007.

Tommy, a wetland biologist by profession, wrote this song to depict the link between the loss of wetlands and the loss of the Acadian French culture in coastal Louisiana. The inspiration for the song came when Tommy was interviewed by a writer who was doing a book on wetland loss in coastal Louisiana. After a day in the marshes, Tommy invited the author to Mulate's Restaurant, where the band was playing at the time, and Tommy dedicated an old, traditional song, "La Valse de Meche" (Marsh Waltz) to the writer. He later asked Tommy if the song was about coastal marsh loss. Tommy said no, it's about a man who lost his woman so he went into the marsh to find solace and solitude, but there ought to be a song about coastal marsh loss, and I think I just may write it!¹⁰⁴

Since the ecological reality of coastal loss pervades the consciousness of most in Louisiana and particularly in what is called the Bayou Country of South Louisiana, it is fitting for those who have an opportunity to share the message in any way possible, particularly while on the road, to do so. This music, then, becomes a powerful educational tool.

"I know you're in your chairs, but you can still dance on the floor if you want. Y'all need to do your feet a little waltz; one, two, three, on the side or dance in the aisles. Out in the street, y'all are definitely welcome to dance. You know how to do the waltz? You know it's a little one, two, three. Very easy, very easy . . ."¹⁰⁵

Louis moves across the stage holding his instrument like a dance partner, drawing attention to his sliding feet by looking down at them.

"By the way, I will mention that Matt Doucet and I will be here right after this on this stage for a fiddle workshop with some great fiddlers from around the world. Very honored to be up there. In French . . ."¹⁰⁶

Oh, mon cher garçon, tu connais ça m'fait de la peine
Quand je regarde la meche et je vois que c'est perdu.
Quand j'étais petit c'était miles et miles des herbes.

¹⁰⁴ Les Frères Michot, accompanying album booklet, "La Roue Qui Pend." Swallow Records 2003.

¹⁰⁵ Louis Michot. Performance, The Lowell Folk Festival, Lowell, July 28, 2007.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

A cette heure tous les meche c'est comme un mer d'eau salée.

[Oh, my dear boy, you know it hurts me
When I look at the marsh and I see how much of it is lost.
When I was young it was miles and miles of grasses.
Now all the marsh is like a sea of salt water.]

Quand les Acadiens sont arrivés dans la Louisiane,
C'était par rapport aux meche qu'on était isolé.
Isolé de l'influence des Américains.
Isolé pour préserver notre langue et notre culture.

[When the Acadians arrived in Louisiana,
It was because of the marsh that they were isolated.
Isolated from the influence of the Americans.
Isolated to preserve our language and our culture.]¹⁰⁷

Louis's plaintiff cry resounds in our ears and signals to us an aching or longing that could force such a sound. Those of us who don't know the actual meaning of lyrics are as likely as me to be swept up in the emotion he conveys in this performance.

Après la grande eau haute de dix-neuf cent vingt-sept,
L'armée a commencer à bâtir les levees.
Et toute l'eau douce qui devrait courir aux meches,
Elle court entre les levees jusqu'au Golfe du Mexique.

[After the Great Flood of 1927,
The Army began to build the levees.
And all the sweet water that should flow into the marsh,
She flows between the levees to the Gulf of Mexico.]

Sans les sédiments et la nourriture du fleuve,
Les meches ont commencer à s'abaisser et à mourir.
Combien des années avant (que) notre culture suivra les meches?

[Without the sediments and the nutrients from the River,
The marsh began to subside and to die.
How many years before our culture will follow the marsh?]¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Tommy Michot. "La Valse de Meche Perdue." Performed by the Lost Bayou Ramblers, The Lowell Folk Festival, Lowell, July 28, 2007.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

The collective experience of forced migration and monumental exile is lodged deep within the cultural memory of the Cajuns. Indeed, the reality of land loss, which can be measured in facts and figures as well as understood simply by watching the landscape change daily is an pressing issue for natives of coastal Louisiana. Andre Michot told me that his family used to fish at a prime spot, a small island around which the current moved. This twenty-foot by twenty-foot island disappeared in less than two years. The reality is that the Louisiana Wetlands are being destroyed at the rate of a tennis court every 13 seconds, one football field every 38 minutes, the rough equivalent of Manhattan (25 square miles) every year, and the river is not replenishing what is lost. Mike Tidwell, in his important book, *Bayou Farewell*, says of this catastrophic land loss, “It’s an unfolding calamity of fantastic magnitude, taking with it entire Cajun towns and an age-old way of life.”¹⁰⁹ Tidwell goes on to share his own feelings of sadness over this destruction,

Mine is the sorrow of saying goodbye to one of the last interesting regional cultures surviving in a nation once full of them, harking back to a time when “diversity” was much more than just a hip slogan we mumbled on the way to the same melting pot mall. It’s a sorrow for wilderness landscapes everywhere which once survived intact, free from assassination by greed and thoughtlessness, supporting both wildlife and working people of integrity.”¹¹⁰

This land that the Cajuns have lived on, sustained, and on which they heavily rely for sustenance is disappearing and with it, they fear, their exceptional culture. This is a culture that has survived several misbegotten attempts of obliteration. According to Doucet, the Cajuns are an obstinate people whose value system and approach to life is not going to be stamped out. They will find a way to save the Wetlands and their way of life. He claims, “Cajuns are so resilient, they just don’t even realize it. They’re not going to change. We’re stubborn people.

¹⁰⁹ Mike Tidwell, *Bayou Farewell* (Vintage Books, New York 2003) 6.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 64-65.

Hey, you got a Hurricane 5 coming through? We're going ride it out. You want to come over and drink a beer, baby? It's a way of life."¹¹¹ This way of being in the world, of understanding one's place in the universe as directly related to belonging, this being "a people," makes them very special. Perhaps the music and these collective memories will be the totemic survivals if the rest of America allows the land finally - and inevitably - to succumb.

¹¹¹ Interview, Matthew Doucet, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 9, 2007.

LAFAYETTE, LOUISIANA



Now I would like to invite you to join me for the final leg of the trip. We'll leave behind the Northeast and go to a place known for its seasoning, celebratory spirit, bayous and prairie land, and of course, funky patois. Yeah you right. We're heading to Cajun country, Louisiana after a fairly long stint on the road. We will join up with the Lost Bayou Ramblers as they perform at the popular Lafayette venue, Grant Street Dancehall.

I arrive at Grant Street in downtown Lafayette with Rose Courville after I take time to drop off my bags at home and take a quick shower. The boys do not have the luxury of lag time in between arriving in their tour van and setting up for the Grant Street show. When Rose and I enter the venue, we sit down at the bar and order a drink from a bartender with whom she is familiar. Before I have time to wave to the boys, Ashlee Michot, Louis's wife walks in. She teaches French at an elementary school, Beau Chêne, meaning Beautiful Oak, named after the gorgeous and grand oak tree located in front of the school. Ashlee runs up to give us a hug and

then quickly excuses herself to go find Louis and welcome him home. Though she is officially used to him traveling, she still bounces away like a schoolgirl, demonstrating that this moment of homecoming is something to be savored. Seconds later, Heather Michot, Andre's wife, followed immediately by Amy Lafleur, Alan's wife, arrive and the ritual is twice repeated. I do not witness the reunion of husbands and wives from where I sit at the bar, but I know just how excited the band is to be back with their people and their loved ones. Andre shares with me how it feels to return when he says,

When I come home, I guess it's a relief for some reason . . . The overall attitude of home being Broussard and Lafayette, the overall attitude of the people . . . It's a very unique place . . . I see the South as the South and to me you could live in Jackson, Mississippi and you could go somewhere else – just taking the cultural part of it – maybe you could go to Birmingham or Mobile and it would be very similar, but there's nowhere you could go if you're from South Louisiana . . . where you're going to have the same food or accents. It's not even like stuff on the surface like that. Living here there's nowhere else you could go and have the same feeling . . . It's just a relief. I've never said that before, but it's like Ahhhh. Whoa, this feels good. You know what I mean? You take a breath and enjoy it.¹¹²

While Rose is greeting Chris, I take a walk around the room, moving closer to the stage. There are two stages at Grant Street and because it is a Sunday night, the band will play to a more intimate crowd in the smaller of the two rooms. It is a shotgun-like design, which architecturally means that it has a long, rectangular room or hall from door to exit that someone could potentially shoot a shotgun through without hitting anything, with side spaces or rooms off of that. There is a long bar located along the left side of the room. The walls are red brick and one gets the feeling that the space is a converted warehouse. In the left hand corner of the room is the stage, which is nothing more a wooden platform raised a foot off of the ground. A large quilt comprised of earth-tone colors hangs on the left wall and serves as the backdrop to the band. Across from the stage is a couch and several bar chairs. I sit down on one of the tall

¹¹² Interview, Andre Michot, Broussard, Louisiana, August 7, 2007.

stools and await the show. Rose and Ashlee grab the other two stools and sit next to me, facing the band, and away from the middle of the dance floor. Heather and Amy visit with friends who have “met up” with them for the show. This is not only a reunion, but also a social event. Before the show has even begun, a number of familial and social networks are gathered.

Joining them tonight is their friend, Whitney Broussard, who drives in from Baton Rouge to play triangle. The six musicians are positioned close together tonight on the stage. For Broussard, a native of Cajun country, playing with his friends, the Ramblers, is an inimitable experience, especially when they play at home. He speaks to the ways in which Cajun music communicates something deeply rooted and communal about place, noting,

One of those ways [that sense of place] comes through is in the music. For me, when we’re in the pocket and we’re all stomping at the same time with the same rhythm, there’s something there that’s bigger than we are and it takes more than just a couple of people playing music. It takes a community of people getting together, celebrating the music. You’ve got dancers and you’ve got conversation and connection and music filling the space and a little beer to lube it up [*laughter*].¹¹³

Despite the fatigue that may have overtaken them while traveling, the Ramblers look extremely relaxed and in gear to start the night’s performance. Several people buy their first round of drinks and mill about the bar. Others have already gathered their dance partners and wait idly in the center of the room for the music to begin. Louis laughs at something Whitney says, clenching his eyes shut and tossing his head back slightly. He replies, “Dude,” then chuckles again with his eyes wide-open, emphasizing his enjoyment of the exchange. Whitney steps back into place up against the wall, behind Louis. He wraps his left hand around the top of the triangle and waits for the music to begin, along with the rest of the group. Louis foregoes introducing the song or even the band and begins with an instrumental tune.

¹¹³ Interview, Whitney P. Broussard, III, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, August 10, 2007.

The dancers start up and immediately give breath to the title of this song, “The Bayou Teche Two Step.” Bayou Teche runs for one hundred and twenty five miles, and on my return to New Orleans, I will drive alongside this brown, milky waterway for much of the trip. The word “Teche” in French means “snake.” In their sly hip gestures and two-step savvy, the dancers are on tonight, snaking their way around the dance floor.

Two females in their late twenties, one of whom waves to Ashlee, cling closely to one another as they make deliberate turns in a circle. One of the women steps back, pushing out from the other, though their hands remain locked together. She kicks out a few steps and twirls her partner. They return to their original position. It is completely appropriate for girls to dance with one another as well as people of the opposite sex. I notice another couple whose ages are incongruous. He could be twice her age, but the rules of the dance floor are well established and roles defined. According to the author, Mark DeWitt, “Such values include the importance of having fun, though not at the expense of others . . . A ‘better’ dancer may be recognized for a variety of reasons, including not only a repertoire of flashy moves but also gracefulness, partner communication, improvisational spontaneity and emotional expressiveness.”¹¹⁴ It is a place to respect your partner and the ultimate goal is the absolute enjoyment of dancing to this music.

A middle-aged couple sweeps past me, and I notice how little movement there is in their upper bodies and shoulders. While that part of the body is quiet, the action is taking place in the subtle movement of the hips and the feet. Though the good dancers make it look simple from my observational vantage point, this dance maneuver proves extremely difficult to me each time I attempt it. The skill with which this particular couple masters the steps affords them a ghost-

¹¹⁴ Mark F. Dewitt, “Heritage, Tradition, and Travel: Louisiana French Culture Placed on a California Dance Floor” in *Accordions, Fiddles, Two Step & Swing: A Cajun Music Reader* (Center for Louisiana Studies, Lafayette, Louisiana 2006) 123.

like presence on the dance floor and they delicately float around the room to the notes the Ramblers produce.

As should be apparent by now, to musicians such as the Ramblers, performing is largely a matter of participation or engagement with the music itself, with one another, and with the audience. When they are home, engagement is easier, almost expected. They do enjoy playing to audiences outside of their community, perhaps at a festival, which may be there to just listen or pass some time, but they most prefer dancers and people who know and love the music they know and love. The locals are unlikely to let them down and they are determined to fulfill hometown expectations. It is at these times that the band itself feels more automatically together, and probably more closely together in simple physical terms. Matt Doucet, Ray Abshire, Louis Michot, and Andre Michot each elaborate on this point, claiming,

When you're playing a local gig and at you're at a club your stage is not that big and it's a pretty good size dance floor, but when you get outside of that and it's a huge stage, and you're playing in front of thousands of people and you look over and your bass player is like a half mile away from you on your stage, it's kind of hard to really feel connected . . . You occasionally glance over with your binoculars and you're like, "Hey, you doing alright over there buddy?" But, it is, it's a different situation, it's a different setting and you have to learn how to adapt and still be true to what you're doing.¹¹⁵

In some of the places, people were raised with the music. You know you have to play it right. You have to sing it right. They'll give you a, "Hmmm?" Like I said, you have to be more honest here . . . You can pretty much do what you want on the road once you get the crowd and the comfort zone, but here it's a little more difficult.¹¹⁶

[Playing at home versus elsewhere] is completely different. At home, depending on where you play and what kind of function it is . . . it will be the time of your life because everyone there is cool and knows exactly what's going on with your music. It's not some kind of novelty. It's like, "Oh yeah, the band is here. We're getting down tonight!" And they're like, "Play this or play that." You're home and if you can't play those songs, it's like, "Who the hell are you and what are

¹¹⁵ Interview, Matthew Doucet, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 9, 2007.

¹¹⁶ Interview, Ray Abshire, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 13, 2007.

you doing here?” It’s just natural. But playing outside of state, I mean it can be anywhere from outrageously unbelievable, like I don’t believe what I’m seeing, to a very good time. [laughter] . . . The worst is when people come up and start telling you about Louisiana, like you don’t know. That’s the far end of the spectrum, like we are *not* coming back to this place . . . Like, “I was with so-and-so at so-and-so’s place” and then you’ll say, “Oh yeah this,” and they are like, “No no, it’s actually called this” and they are correcting you and stuff and you’re like, “Whoa, dude.” Namedropping. And they front up to you like how Louisiana are you?¹¹⁷

[In Lafayette] they’re there to see you and to dance to you and there’s a tremendous energy going back and forth. Sometimes you play at dances and they’re there to dance with themselves to your music and so you’re providing the music for them to dance to. There’s less of a social thing to it. You’re the entertainment more. At other places, they’re talking to you and yelling at you and it’s more interaction.¹¹⁸

And at the other end, which is our favorite, what we like to travel is we play for these people who A. just like music, including Cajun and Zydeco and B. most importantly, the ones who don’t even know what the hell Cajun and Zydeco is when we’re out of state and they like it and they dance and have a good time, like in Brooklyn. Brooklyn is our favorite place for that. That’s the best thing is showing these people that we’re American too and look what we’re doing.¹¹⁹

The far end is people/crowds that are there to come dance for you and you can’t tell if they care who the band is. They’re just there cause it’s Friday or it’s Thursday or it’s Sunday and their dance club is having their weekly or monthly dance. They have a change of clothes and they change their clothes into their dance get-up which is just foreign to us. It’s not wrong. It’s not bad. It’s just foreign. There is nothing to drink, you know. We have to bring our own liquor and we have our own little party on stage while these people are out there [doing] “Zyderobics” . . . A lot of the situations where it’s dance-oriented and out of the state, it is a hobby and you are just like a tool or something. [laughter] A lot of them like you a lot and it’s real personal.¹²⁰

I’d rather go and travel and play for 10 people who are waiting for me when I get there to hear – they’ve studied, listened or practiced authentic, Cajun music – than go play for a thousand while drinking – I don’t even remember who we were with, what we were listening to. I’d rather go sit in with those ten people and just chooooo. Just play and do what we love to do. I have the luxury of

¹¹⁷ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

¹¹⁸ Interview, Andre Michot, Broussard, Louisiana, August 7, 2007.

¹¹⁹ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

being able to do that. It's a huge release now for me. And I'm doing it for other reasons. I really want to keep that sound alive, I really do.¹²¹

The combination, and juxtaposition, of these statements points to the preference on the part of the Cajun musicians for an interactive experience as an integral part of a performance. After all, the music is a component on the performance, not its entirety. The music is the offering, the entertainment, so to speak, but the individual and collective experience of that music exemplifies the performance. Furthermore, the music cannot be detached from the culture out of which it is born. Through this rich, rhythmic expression, Cajun culture is manifested and, as Abshire underscores, kept alive.

The next song strikes up, again without an introduction. It is a punchy tune, also extremely fun to dance to called, "Blue Moon Special." The Blue Moon Saloon is another popular Lafayette music venue and the locale where the Ramblers recorded their Grammy nominated album, *Live à la Blue Moon*. Louis adapted an older Austin Pitre song, a musician they admire from the dancehall era. Andre Michot admits that he and Louis always had an affection for the era of the 1930s and 40s Cajun music, and eventually got into the dancehall 50s style, circa Austin Pete (Pitre), Lawrence Walker and Nathan Abshire. This version certainly enlivens the Ramblers' own experience of the place they patronize most frequently. He begins lyrically laying out our options.

Ti peux boire du scotch
Ti peux boire du Schlitz
Ti peux boire du whisky
Ti peux boire la limonade

You can drink scotch
You can drink Schlitz
You can drink whisky
You can drink lemonade

Ça fait pas rien
Mais quoi ti bois
Autant que ti bois
À la Blue Moon

It don't matter
What you drink
As long as you drink
At the Blue Moon

¹²¹ Interview, Ray Abshire, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 13, 2007.

Ti peux danser le waltz
Ti peux danser le two step
Ti peux danser le slow drag
Ti peux danser le Zydeco

You can dance the waltz
You can dance the two step
You can dance the slow drag
You can dance the Zydeco

Ça fait pas rien
Mais quoi ti dances
Autant que ti dances
À la Blue Moon

It don't matter
What you dance
As long as you dance
At the Blue Moon¹²²

Ashlee comes back from refilling her drink at the bar and re-joins Rose and me. She sips on her drink and watches the song unfold on stage. She catches Louis's eye and he keeps his gaze locked into hers, producing a huge smile in return.

Aller tout seul
Aller avec ta mère
Aller avec ton beau-frère
Aller avec ta soeur
Aller avec ton grand-père
Aller avec monsieur
Aller avec mes amis
Aller avec ta belle

Go alone
Go with your Mama
Go with your brother in law
Go with your sister
Go with your Grandpa
Go with Mister
Go with your friends
Go with your girl

Ça fait pas rien
Qui ti va avec
Autant que ti vas
À la Blue Moon

It don't matter
Who you go with
As long as you go
To the Blue Moon¹²³

After the performance, the Ramblers dismantle the stage and carry their instruments into the back room. It could be termed the “green room” since there are light green walls, huge black leather couches and a sink full of chilled beer. The wives and friends of the Ramblers stuff ourselves in the room and shut the door to the dance floor and bar, where people stick around afterward and converse. The musicians are admittedly worn out, and being in a room with people most familiar to them allows them to decompress momentarily. We stick around for ten

¹²² The Lost Bayou Ramblers, “Blue Moon Special.” Performed by the Lost Bayou Ramblers, Grant Street Dancehall, Lafayette, August 5, 2007.

¹²³ Ibid.

more minutes and the group starts to disperse. Goodbyes and hugs are passed around, and I thank the band for allowing me to tag along on the road. Louis and Ashlee give me a ride back to their house, where my car is parked. When we jump in the van and travel the twenty-five minutes toward their Cajun cabin, it is in relative silence. We collectively acknowledge a peaceful feeling that settles over us, knowing that a good night of sleep awaits us in our “own beds.” Louis moans joyfully when we hit the gravel road that leads to their house. He exclaims, “Oh my God, yes.”¹²⁴ He and Ashlee look forward to the next few days at home together, before the Ramblers hit the circuit the next weekend where they are featured performers at a three-day dance camp in Maryland. I hug them both goodnight, then return to the Courville’s in Lafayette, to find Chris and Rose fast asleep.

¹²⁴ Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 5, 2007.

CHAPTER THREE: PARTICIPATION



In response to the question of why anybody would tell a story, the celebrated author, Madeleine L'Engle, replied, "It does indeed have something to do with faith - faith that the universe has meaning, that our little human lives are not irrelevant, that what we choose or say or do matters, matters cosmically."¹²⁵ Telling stories does far greater than entertain. It reveals something about ourselves, it advocates for social change, it re-affirms identity, as well as provides meaning to our lives.

The folklorist, Roger D. Abrahams, in introducing the Rhetorical Theory of Folklore, points to one of its great interpreters, Kenneth Burke, who states in his work that "words have power and that performance therefore is a way of persuading through the production of pleasure

¹²⁵ Douglas Martin, "Madeleine L'Engle, Children's Writer, Is Dead." The New York Times, September 8, 2007.

as well as the assertion of an idea or course of action.”¹²⁶ I try to offer the story of the Lost Bayou Ramblers by letting them do the telling in their own words together with descriptions of their performance intentions, techniques, and style, and with the way they entertain, persuade, and inform their audiences. They are not merely actors, but activists, artistically engaged with the forces of globalization, resisting when necessary and cooperating when possible, in order that their culture and the land which supports it, survive. The value of their performance rests in the way the Ramblers offer a compelling performance, producing an effect on the audience that moves its members, educates them and pushes them toward transformation. Delivering a paper at the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness Conference in 2001, the anthropologist, Edith Turner, says of music,

Between each person exists a power. It grows strong with music, and produces – calls out – the soul in each, performers and audience, and becomes a connecting entity, as the god Krishna did when Radha and the milkmaids danced. He danced in the middle of their circle playing on his flute, and also at the same time appeared to each one of them personally, a blue god for each. That is rather over-concretizing it, but one gets the feel that something like that is happening when the “music and the audience become bonded.”¹²⁷

How effective the Ramblers are is anchored in the energy they breathe into this traditional expression, transporting, producing, and extending their culture through music, which serves as a powerful symbol, drawing people into participation with it. By applying the Rhetorical Theory of Folklore according to Roger D. Abrahams, I will now illustrate the value and meaning of their performance by pointing to them as a fine example of a group of cultural practitioners.

¹²⁶ Roger D. Abrahams, “Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore” in *The Journal of American Folklore* (81:320 1968) 45.

¹²⁷ Edith Turner, “The Power of Sound, Music, and Drumming to Change Consciousness” delivered at the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness Annual Conference, Seattle, 2001.

Abrahams analyzes other theories by placing them in three categories in terms of their focus. Some theories concentrate on understanding the way in which the artist goes about creating the work of art; other theories are primarily concerned with the artistic expression in and of itself; still others look at the way a particular art object or artistic expression affects an observer or an audience phenomenologically. He argues for a theory that he calls the Rhetorical Theory, which takes all three into account simultaneously. In the case of the Ramblers, this would mean that the folklorist is to examine (1) the musicians as artists, their intentions, strategies, and everything about what they are producing, that is, the creation of their musical art as performers, (2) the performance and the music as an art object, and (3) the ways in which



performance and audience influence and shape one another. This encourages consideration of both the form and function of Cajun music by examining the Ramblers, their music and their impact on any given audience.

In examining the importance of a particular artist, it is significant that the Ramblers are the ones producing and in fact re-producing these Cajun tunes for the very simple fact that they are members of the Cajun culture and are able to represent it from that vantage point. At this first level their art is seemingly innate, created before they have to think through issues of strategy and intention. This is also true of their audience when the Ramblers perform at home, and seek to have the particular effect upon the crowd that they wish. It matters that the members of the Ramblers have a long-standing relationship with the region, can point to their Acadian ancestors, identify with that particular ethnicity, and have experienced the joys and sorrows of that place. They feel strongly that the culture is theirs and they are of the culture. As

Matthew Doucet acknowledges, one must possess the feeling behind the music to play it properly and to move others. That feeling is grounded in location. Growing up in the oral musical tradition and learning how to hone their ears, receiving rhythmic education on the T-Fer which forced them to understand that Cajun music is first and foremost about engagement with the dancers, and reminding others about the things Cajun culture really values and wants to continue to value - that which they do not want to lose, especially in the face of globalization, all contributes to the magnitude of feeling behind their music. Ryan Brasseaux says about the Ramblers,

Whether performing in their native Louisiana or abroad, the Lost Bayou Ramblers passionately embrace their cultural and musical heritage, playing music intimately likened to the agrarian, working class lifestyle. Their music originates from a time before electricity, when the Gulf Coast's incapacitating heat only amplified the backbreaking stresses associated with the exhaustive toil necessary to sustain a successful farm. Indeed, South Louisiana's work ethic was the natural force that ground through the Cajun ego, liberating in song the fervor and spirit of a people. The Lost Bayou Ramblers are like a snapshot of a bygone era. Their music is emotionally raw, intense—in a word, authentically Cajun.¹²⁸

Then, it is true that the techniques the Ramblers use to assert their sway and ultimately make their impact upon the audience are deliberate. Their traditional expression is displayed with curatorial affection. Abrahams suggests that the rhetorical approach explores “all levels of style simultaneously in order to show how they interrelate through the direction of an argument.”¹²⁹ The Ramblers, as I have tried to illustrate in the previous section, work to be in relationship with their audience, to evoke sympathy, and to excite energy, regardless of whether they are at home in Cajun country or outside of it. Abrahams considers the techniques or levels that create sympathy from the audience a prime function of “a strategy” that uses “[a] manipulation of

¹²⁸ Ryan Brasseaux, The Lost Bayou Ramblers Press Release.

¹²⁹ Roger D. Abrahams, “Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore” in *The Journal of American Folklore* (81:320 1968) 146.

materials (words, gestures, dramatic movements).”¹³⁰ This occurs in the choices the Ramblers make in their song selection, the arc of the performance as they move between two-steps and waltzes, the way the songs are introduced or not introduced, the non-verbal interaction using facial gestures such as a smile or a wink, the way with which they connect to one another on stage, the playful antics that entertain, and the enthusiasm from the audience that drives them.

Context does inform a performance. Alan Dundes, Abrahams notes, urges us to consider what he calls “the structure of context.”¹³¹ Depending on time, location or circumstance, the Ramblers attempt to reach their audience through different means. The function of music has changed over time. The Revivalist generation achieved increased recognition of Cajun music, reminding Cajuns of its value and import while spreading it to national and international audiences. This occurred alongside a significant push to defend the uniqueness of the Cajun identity and restore a sense of pride, ensuring generational continuity. The Ramblers, on the other hand, inherited the benefits of the Revivalist campaign. Buoyed by the success of the preceding generation in raising consciousness about this traditional art form around the globe, the Ramblers face a different task. Their argument is to preserve the culture in the face of new threats, like that to the land itself, and to a rapidly growing movement of globalization that could reduce all cultural diversity and create an unfortunate homogeneity, sans Cajun culture.

Location and circumstance also dictate the thrust of any given performance and the Ramblers are expert at taking this into account. At a music venue in Austin, though it is located in the South and suits a certain age range, it is not specifically Cajun culture, and therefore

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

demands a unique “method of attack,” according to Abrahams.¹³² In a festival environment, the audience is comprised of a hodge-podge of people, ranging in such things as ethnicity and age. In Lafayette, the Ramblers are in their home culture, where they cannot “kid the players” with anything less than that which is genuine and authentically Cajun art, but neither do they have to educate or win them over to Cajun music and the artistic expression of Cajun culture. They can be who they are, but nothing less than at their best. For example, in a venue like in Austin, Louis will attempt to trigger pride in a broader group’s identity, according to location and occasion. There he acknowledged his relief in being back in the South, as opposed to the North, touching on that deep-seated regional rivalry. At Lowell, he spoke less about being in Lowell, Massachusetts and more about being part of a folk festival, as members of that momentary, mixed community. In Lafayette, on the other hand, he called out to specific members of the crowd and at one point the band sang “Happy Birthday” to a friend of theirs whose birthday it was that evening. By exploring their performance at the Lowell Folk Festival, in Austin and in Lafayette, we can discern ways in which the Ramblers adjust their strategies and alter their performance to make their argument and, in the process, gain the sympathy of their audience.

The Ramblers know very well that their music can be powerfully evocative for those who are outside of the Cajun culture, and who may be getting a first introduction to it, who tap into the music through dance or performance participation, and thus find themselves participating in the culture, even in the Cajun community. Richard Bauman speaks to this potential in music when he writes, “Through his performance, the performer elicits the participative attention and energy of his audience, and to the extent that they value his performance, they will allow themselves to be caught up in it.”¹³³ Matthew Doucet understands

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Waveland Press, Long Grove, Illinois 1977) 43.

this phenomenon as the son of the Cajun musician, Michael Doucet, of Beausoleil. Doucet reflects on this when he says of Cajun music,

[Beausoleil] has played everywhere from Carnegie Hall to Saudi Arabia – you name it. That’s what I say about those guys. They’ve played everywhere ten times. Right now my dad [Michael Doucet] is in Alaska. Who would have thought they have to fly over a mountain to get to a town of 400 people to play a gig – a single engine plane. It stretches. It’s become a huge thing. People get a lot of enjoyment out of it because I really think and what transcends any art form – painting, music, dance, anything like that - when it’s something soulful and it comes deep within and it’s your true essence coming out, the human essence, as far as a release. This music was designed for the workers. After they worked the fields, they wanted to let go. It’s a music that’s uplifting, that’s in your face, that’s not going to sit back. It’s right there and in your face that’s going to make you want to dance and when you dance and move and have a good time, you forget about how hard your life is. I think that transcends through the music wherever people go and people pick up on that. For a forty-five minute set, they totally lose themselves and they’re in the music and they’re dancing. Now, you get to New England, they’re going to sit down and watch you, but that’s New England. You might have a couple people in the back hiding out, not wanting to be seen, but they’re dancing away. But it’s a different thing every part of country that you go to, that you play at. It’s a form of release. People really enjoy being taken away into your world. For them, it’s kind of a mystical, mystery type thing. It’s like, wow, this exists in our own country. It’s a neat thing.¹³⁴

The Ramblers begin their performance at the Lowell Folk Festival with an introduction from Ryan Brasseaux. This serves to contextualize the band, informing the audience about the style of music they play and the community out of which it was created. He includes details



about the location of Cajun country, for example its distinction from the culture of New Orleans, a common confusion of two individual but related cultures made by many only vaguely familiar with Louisiana. Brasseaux explains that Cajuns are unique, even in Louisiana. He begins by welcoming

the audience, asking them a question to which they respond favorably. He draws them into

¹³⁴ Interview, Matthew Doucet, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 9, 2007.

participation with the performers on stage, and then hands them over to the Ramblers who take the reigns.

When the Ramblers perform “La Roue Qui Pend” at the outset of the show, there are several things at play. They invoke a place reminiscent not only of Louis and Andre’s childhood and that of their father, but of the broader Acadian lifestyle, which sets them apart from most of their audience. Furthermore, at the many performances outside of Cajun country they may decide to change the lyrics to use vernacular language laced with a sexual reference that only Cajuns would infer. This coding may be for their own amusement, not only because they can “get away with it,” but also because it affirms their group identity, similar to the pleasure of an inside joke. If they did so at home, they have told me that the older women would scoff and they would immediately lose the sympathy of their audience. This helps to create a group attitude and somehow facilitates their ability to “manipulate” an audience that does not quite “get it.” Finally, the song is lighthearted and fun - a good choice for both exciting and loosening up an audience from the get-go.

At the folk festival, the Ramblers picked songs that directly refer their Cajun musical heritage and home place, and in so doing, they strive to meet the expectations of those at a folk festival who want to be brought into a culture, if only momentarily. The Hackberry Ramblers song, “Une Piastre Ici, Une Piastre Là-bas,” is typical of the Cajun Swing Era that promotes dancing. The other two songs of note, “La Valse de Meche Perdue” and “Bayou Perdu,” signal the reality Louisiana’s disappearing landscape and inherently generate a level of sympathy, raise consciousness about the phenomenon, and make a bid for individual or collective responsive action.

The Ramblers continue to build energy with the crowd, growing closer to them and drawing them increasingly into participation in the performance, and thus into Cajun cultural

expression, by pausing in between songs to encourage people to dance, to rise from their chairs and join the dancers in the street. It is worth noting that at that particular performance, hardly anyone took advantage of the space in between the stage and the rows of chairs to dance. Those who did dance preferred to do so out of sight of the majority of the audience, in the rear of the outdoor space. This arrangement meant that the Ramblers were farther removed from the



Dancers at The Lowell Folk Festival

dancers and the energy they lend to a performance. In this situation, the Ramblers responded in two overt ways, by interacting with the dancers and in the song choice. Louis, at Alan's suggestion, greets the dancers and persuades others to follow suit. As each musician admitted to me,

participation from the crowd enlivens any performance, both for those in the audience and for the performers, who are working hard to connect. Ormonde Plater, a deacon of the Episcopal Church, who has written a book entitled, *Cajun Dancing*, in which he explains how different beat and rhythm of Cajun music relates the musician to the dancer.

The standard structure for a verse is 16 measures, divided into 4 groups of 4 (2-beat or 4 beat) measures, to sing a verse of four lines. e.g., the song "J'étais au bal": ("I went to the dance")

J'étais au bal hier au soir.
Je vais revenir encore à soir.
Si l'occasion se presente,
Je vais retourner demain au soir.

Before and then after each sung verse, the band plays the 16-measure melody followed by a variation on the melody. So the structure goes:

Sung verse (16)
Melody (16)
Variation (16)

And so on until all the verses are sung. Usually a song lasts about three minutes, the length of the old 78 record, even though current recording methods allow for much longer. Sometimes these days they stretch it out. But mainly the band is considerate of the dancers and avoids tiring them.¹³⁵

The Ramblers have played at The Continental Club in Austin several times in the past and have stirred up a following. The audience is a fairly young bar crowd, who are out drinking with their friends on a weekend night. The band, therefore, expects people to attend the shows at this venue, to enjoy themselves and to dance, whether their dance style conforms to Cajun standards or not. The Ramblers automatically summon sympathy from the audience by playing “The Austin Special,” and naming the city in which they perform to excite Texas pride. The energy that the Ramblers continued to drum up that evening was contagious, as they employed several of their tricks, including standing on the upright bass and playing amidst the crowd. This infuses the traditional material with an element of surprise, and thereby increases audience participation and amusement. Yet, because the music is the thrust of the performance, not necessarily the musicians, the Ramblers jump back on stage and continue with the next song, grounding themselves in the movement of the performance.

When the Ramblers return to Lafayette for their performance, the audience is typically made up of their family members, friends, and those from their community. When they look into the crowd they see their loved ones and are encouraged – and indeed relaxed - by their presence. The Ramblers are no longer a novelty, as Louis acknowledges, but a part and parcel of the environment. The band is more apt to launch into a song without naming it or giving it context because the crowd is less interested in being educated in that regard, many already familiar with the story behind the songs. They are typically interested in the business of dancing. The expectation from this crowd is that the Ramblers will not only play songs that drive them to

¹³⁵ Written communication, Ormonde Plater, December 28, 2007.

dance, but also that they will play them skillfully. The Ramblers thus evoke sympathy by performing to this standard.

Music is powerful for those who are part of the Cajun community, especially because the culture is as unique as the music. When the Ramblers play “Blue Moon Special,” for the

Lafayette crowd, it not only refers to a venue in Lafayette with which most everyone is familiar, but it underscores a value system composed of celebration by drinking, dancing and being with your community. That is, regardless of what you drink, how you dance, or whom you are with, what



matters is that you are there. In describing the effect a rite, in this case the performance, can have on a community, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim says, “. . . the group periodically reanimates the feeling it has of itself and its unity; at the same time, the nature of the individuals as social beings is reaffirmed. The glorious memories that are revived before their eyes, and with which they feel allied, give them a feeling of strength and confidence.”¹³⁶ Therefore, when the Ramblers play music at home, they have the potential to affirm identity, draw a link between the present and the past while activating imaginations, and awaken a feeling of solidarity.

No matter where they perform, the Ramblers have an argument that they are making to their audience and trying to win their point. Thus one effect on the audience the artists seek in their art is to persuade them to the value of Cajun music and Cajun culture, and more specifically to the value of saving the land and the culture that is under threat from ignorance, greed, and

¹³⁶ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001) 280.

unfettered globalization. Abrahams elaborates on this, claiming, “Folklore, being traditional activity, argues traditionally; it uses arguments and persuasive techniques developed in the past to cope with recurrences of social problem situations.”¹³⁷ Part of the purpose of traditional expression is to reveal conflict through performance. Cajun music, in this way, has a dynamic that can exist or be re-enacted by many performers. Yet, it is also grounded in the current landscape or social drama. In other words, it articulates its own conflict and seeks help. The



Ramblers point out the tenuous future of Louisiana’s terrain and thereby their culture at a time when maintaining cultural identity is already in question under the influence of globalization. Continuing to play traditional Cajun music, Abrahams adds, acts “as a cohesive force.”¹³⁸ Folklore, therefore, by triggering technique and symbol, becomes an acting agent of change and conversion, if only for a moment.

At the same time that a conflict is revealed, the Ramblers adjust the level of discomfort that is inherent in social drama, and return to playful revelry. Abrahams calls this tension, “the essence of play: the objectifying and impersonalizing of anxiety situations, allowing the free expending of energies without the threat of social consequence.”¹³⁹ When introducing “La Valse de Meche Perdue,” Louis comments on the reality of situation, then follows with an admission that people are actively trying to improve the situation. In this way, Louis follows Abrahams’

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 149.

protocol for introducing conflict then resolving it. By doing this Abrahams claims, “the illusion is created that it can be solved in real life; and with the addition of sympathy, of ‘acting with,’ the audience not only derives pleasure from the activity but also the knowledge.”¹⁴⁰ The Ramblers launch into this beautiful song and thus continue to encourage others to dance, stimulating imaginations and entertaining. As Abrahams notes, “The rhetorical approach therefore asks the observer to see the control of both the esthetic object and of the context to witness how the two interrelate in creating pleasure and proposing action.”¹⁴¹

At its highest and most powerful level of communication, when it has the greatest effect on an audience, music delivers that which can be symbolical and thus is capable of something more than what seems to be on hand. Because the Ramblers’ music represents something of the Cajun culture and makes it so immediately available, it is highly charged with historical significance. It is this symbolical and historical significance that the Ramblers are seeking at their highest level of endeavor as artists. The Ramblers can affect an audience this profoundly because the band is made up of cultural practitioners, and together they express something of their culture that, as only symbol can, draws a willing audience into appreciation and even a sense of participation of the cultural reality they are offering. In order to fully bring to bear the power of this symbol, they must be able to invoke the might of historical and cultural vitality, and through my observations I have become convinced of their ability to accomplish this.

Clifford Geertz explains that the realm of culture “denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 148.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 149.

about and attitudes toward life.”¹⁴² Urban T. Holmes III was one of the most prolific theologians of the last half of the twentieth century, the son of the preeminent scholar and Kenan Professor of Romance Philology at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Urban T. Holmes, Jr., and close colleague of Anthropologist, Victor Turner. In *Ministry and Imagination* he explains certain features of the symbolic that are relevant to our ability to understand the effect I wish to explore. The symbol becomes a power that draws us into participation of that to which it points, what it represents. A symbol overwhelms with meaning that cannot be explained, or even invented. The attempt to create or articulate a symbol does not invoke it. It either is or is not, and if it happens, it just is. A symbol imparts it nexus of meanings that are united in their multiplicity. It is so complex that the symbolic has to be made simple. Holmes puts the matter this way: a symbol is “a representation that is multivocal and multivalent, meaning that it is highly ambiguous.”¹⁴³ Its dynamism is felt in the many voices and values contained within it. In order for meaning to resonate, according to Holmes, “the possibility of any clarity of any meaning which can be shared is dependent on our willingness to draw on a common source of possible representation of our experience.”¹⁴⁴ Alfred North Whitehead calls this the “lure of feeling.”¹⁴⁵

Holmes says of symbol that it is “a social event; that is, it emerges from various social configurations.”¹⁴⁶ By looking at five characteristics of symbol offered by the British scholar, Philip Wheelwright - what he calls “grades of comprehensiveness” related to the social nature of

¹⁴² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, New York 1973) 89.

¹⁴³ Urban T. Holmes, III, *Ministry and Imagination* (The Seabury Press, New York 1976) 46.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 48.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 47.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

symbols - I will point to the powerful use of symbol as manifested through the music of the Lost Bayou Ramblers.

First there is the presiding image of what can be thought of as a particular “poem.” This concept refers to the way everyday experiences are understood and captured through that which speaks to a person poetically. The poetic is paradigmatic in that it creates a driving image in one’s mind that remains symbolic for that person. It becomes symbolic in that it has the power to draw one into that reality toward which it points. Since this “poem” exists in one’s own head, it seems too anchored in the individual to be symbolic to or of a culture and therefore less relevant to the discussion for our purposes.

A personal symbol, the second characteristic, conjures the deeper meanings of one’s life as grasped by the self, the things that have been formative and important in that life. It can remind one of profound events and relationships, such as a high school dance, a best friend, a lover, or a graduation, a smell that transforms one back to the familiar country of childhood. The symbol that evokes the formative contains a set of values, a unique way of being in the world, such things as the texture and colors of the land, the architecture, the smells and the people. This can produce simple nostalgia or maudlin sentimentality, but on the other hand it can emphasize identity. In the introduction to the book, *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, historian Fitzhugh Brundage argues:

So tightly bound together are collective memory and self-identification that memory is the thread of personal identity. It is at the personal level that collective memory is sustained by what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall calls “the everyday performance of self.” The narrative conventions of a group’s historical memory provide individuals with a framework within which to articulate their experience, to explain their place, in the remembered past.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2000) 13.

This personal experience of the symbolical reinforces personhood and certainly sense of place. Andre Michot reminds us of the effect of personal symbol through his encounter with Cajuns outside of their culture who are drawn back into it by the music, saying,

Man, when we play wherever, Austin or a lot of times the Northeast, you'll meet people from down here. They weren't into the Cajun music or culture or whatever at all when they're down here. Of course when you're going to eat the food or listen to the music you can't help it because it's all around you, like I was talking about, but they weren't into it. When you go up there they say,



'God, I'm so glad y'all are here. I needed to hear something from home or eat something from home.'

I guess you don't realize it until you're not there that you miss it. Yeah, that's definitely interesting.¹⁴⁸

Cajun music can carry people who have been raised in that culture, affiliate with it or grasp something that it is speaking to musically. Music has great potential to stir personal symbol, even in the case of Whitney Broussard who was struck by the memory of a song he had never before heard, that existed somewhere deep within his person. He goes on to say,

You can remember something without every experiencing it before. You can hear a song and know that song. A few months ago I put on some Iry LaJeune. I heard a song I'd never heard before come and get me and I mean, it just hit me. Boom, like a 2x4, and I said I *know* this song. There's that sense that you can remember something in the back of the mind – some would say consciousness, some would say cultural root. There is that memory and music has a way of reminding us.¹⁴⁹

Next there are the symbols of ancestral vitality. Cajun music is bigger than any one of the musicians and they feel themselves to be carrying on their given tradition, passing it along. For

¹⁴⁸ Interview, Andre Michot, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 7, 2007.

¹⁴⁹ Interview, Whitney P. Broussard, III, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, August 10, 2007.

Louis and Andre, especially, it is in their gene make-up and belongs to all that produced them. Part of what they love about playing it is the sense that they are paying homage to those who have preceded them and given them their culture, especially in terms of values and art. Music for the Ramblers becomes a way to channel tradition, their history and even particular ancestors.

The French sociologist, Emile Durkheim noted this sort of cultural phenomenon in which the validity of their beliefs is supported and the essential elements of the collective unconscious are revived. That is, Cajun music re-affirms Cajun identity. Durkheim observes that such an event can transport the individual beyond him/herself. He touches on the emotional dimension to aesthetic experience, what he calls “effervescence.” Durkheim states, “Once we are acquitted of our ritual duties, we re-enter profane life with more courage and enthusiasm, not only because we have put ourselves in touch with a higher source of energy, but also because our forces have been reinvigorated by living briefly a life that is more relaxed, more free and easy.”¹⁵⁰ Afterward, the Cajun re-enters ordinary experience refreshed. Broussard senses how hard it is to get one’s finger on the symbolical, but how real it is when he captures the feeling of connection to the past through performance.

That’s the sense of connection to something bigger than just a song. Well I shouldn’t say that. Really what the song is, it’s a vibe that’s coming from the source and you catch a hold of that and you are holding on and riding it and you aren’t thinking about what you’re doing, you’re just listening to that song that’s coming from somewhere else. And it’s coming through you and helping to communicate that. So there’s that sense of connection to something that’s indescribable – it’s outside, it’s inside, it’s that core gut feeling that you’re getting to something deeper. For me, I hear my ancestors playing that same rhythm and I get chills just thinking about it [*he rubs the back of his neck*] – you grab a hold of that thing that’s been around for hundreds of years. And it takes a while I guess to feel that. But that’s also not to say that you can’t at the same time. I think it’s amazing that so many people can dig on the vibe, for lack of a better word, that they can come and dance and play and enjoy the music. It’s interesting; there is something that’s indescribable, that’s hard to put your finger on.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001) 285.

¹⁵¹ Interview, Whitney P. Broussard, III, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, August 10, 2007.

Ray Abshire received his musical training at the feet of Cajun music legends, Dewey Balfa and his cousin, Nathan Abshire. He recently released an album entitled, “Arrête Pas La Musique,” meaning, “Don’t Stop the Music,” which features Andre Michot on guitar. A generation older than the members of the Lost Bayou Ramblers, Abshire has seen Cajun music evolve and shape-shift over time, especially with the increased access to technology, though he remains true to the traditional folk form by playing acoustically and in French. He sees his mission as one of preserving the music and does so not only out of a love for the music, but also for the camaraderie it creates with those who have gone before. According to Abshire,

Folk music is real music and you’re not only keeping the music alive, you’re keeping the artist alive. You’re keeping your mentors alive. When I play my cousin Nathan’s stuff or the Balfas, we’re keeping them alive. As long as we’re playing their music, people can listen to them and talk about them, and they remember them. My son is a fourth generation accordionist in the family, so when I’m gone and he’s playing some of my tunes, I’m still alive. People remember. Anybody. Louis [Michot] and them [the Lost Bayou Ramblers] are keeping their uncles and dads [Les Frères Michot] alive when they play their music. Okay? It’s one generation at a time and you hand them the torch. You keep it going. So we’re not only keeping the music alive, we’re keeping the artists alive, in that sense. That’s just as true as it can be.¹⁵²

Fourth, there are the symbols of cultural range. Before an individual has any say in it, certain things are simply going to provide that person the nexus of meanings that convey more than all of those things can mean when put together as a mere collective. These symbols provide an immediate sense of the particular quality of, and one’s personal part and participation in, a particular culture. For some it may be the American flag; for Christians it may be water, bread, and wine; for Cajuns it can be a certain musical sound and beat. I wish to offer an illustration of the potency of music, in this case produced by the Lost Bayou Ramblers, to provide meaning and re-affirm identity to those even as far away as Europe. My younger brother, Andrew, was a

¹⁵² Interview, Ray Abshire, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 13, 2007.

student at the Grotius Institute of the University of Leiden last fall. He was part of a special group of about twenty accomplished attorneys and highly selected law students engaged in a masters degree program in international law. He found them to be a great group, what he right away called his Leiden family. From all over the world, they had quickly formed a briefly lived, but tight knit community.

Andrew was thrilled to learn that the Lost Bayou Ramblers were going to be in Amsterdam about half way into his semester, especially excited to be able to share them with his new friends. And already, by the time he got this news, the New Orleans boy was hungry for something different than the food of Holland, taking into account all that food implies to Louisiana's people. The anticipation of Cajun music came to his ears like the siren call of a homeward bound train. This was not only Cajun music, however, these were friends. He was going to be able to introduce his new friends to home friends, and the two would become one, as it were.

On and on Andrew gushed about the Cajun culture and especially the Cajun music. His Leiden friends were going to have a real and different treat. When asked why Cajuns were going to play in an Irish Pub, he saw the opportunity to explain the way Celtic and Cajun music enjoyed shared roots. He remembered how, when our family was in Spain and we visited Galicia, that green part of the northwestern Spanish corner just below France, we had heard a fiddle that sounded like it could have been playing in Ville Platte. Yes, he explained, Spain was known better for the strange mixture that came of the multiple invasions of peoples like the Visigoths and the Moors, but before then some Celtic peoples had paused in their movement across Europe and stayed. Others, settling along the southwestern coastlands just above Galicia as cultures parted and formed, had become French, and from there many had eventually made their way to what is today Nova Scotia, but which they called Acadie, and which name they then

gave to the marshlands and bayou country when they found themselves in Louisiana. That particular fiddling sound was what they could hear in Louisiana and in Ireland, cousin fiddles so to speak.

Louis tells about a moment while he was traveling in Ireland when he understood that because of international circulation of popular musics, which can often result in their incorporation into other musical forms, similar strains exist between Irish and Cajun music. He recalls,

I went to a pub and all the people there were playing a song called Blackbird and I would be damned if I didn't know this song by heart. I wondered, what the hell? . . . We go to this jam and I'm like, man, I know this song. How do I know this song? I don't know Irish music. He said, "Yeah, it's a Cajun tune that was made an Irish hit – the Happy One Step we know it as – and they call it Blackbird or something." It inspired me. I thought Gaelic was so beautiful and somehow it struck a chord in me. I started playing fiddle right after that.¹⁵³

How sensible, then, that while in the Netherlands, the Lost Bayou Ramblers should be invited to play in a cousin pub of Ireland.

Andrew was beside himself with excitement. When the time arrived, however, none of his friends met him to go to the performance. His disappointment was closer to the feeling of anger than sadness, because he knew what they would be missing and he was afraid that they might never find out, not the way he felt he could teach them to experience it.

A man with whom Andrew became acquainted while studying in Leiden, a Cajun by heritage who had lived for thirty years in Holland, met him at the train -- not even a member of his own group. The wife was less than enthusiastic, but willing enough, so clearly was her husband about to jump out of his skin with anticipation. So it was that only two people walked into the pub with Andrew. He was embarrassed.

¹⁵³ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

The room was small, with a platform hardly big enough to squeeze in the members of the band. There was no dance floor, the space taken with tables and chairs. People were standing around stiffly or sitting at tables, taking in small groups while the band was warming up instruments. Andrew paused in the doorway to adjust his eyes, when the drum banged and a voice shouted out, “We have an A. Doss!” Just as quickly as he realized that Chris had recognized and announced his entrance, Rose was jumping into his arms. Andrew summarized his memory this way: “Suddenly, faster than a speeding superman, I was home. I never felt so much at home, in all of the time I have spent in Europe, as that moment. It was warm and life giving, a rope thrown to a tired swimmer.”¹⁵⁴ Andrew continues to expound on his experience,

The music was just what I needed, a healing balm to juice you up with new energy. I *had* to dance. So, I made room and Rose and I started dancing. Everybody loved it, and urged us on, but no one else danced. Odd...The Dutch, I guess. There was one woman who was jumping around and trying to get her man to dance, but he wouldn’t do it. She really, really wanted to and she did everything she could to get him to dance with her, but he wouldn’t. He just stood there, smiling and being sweet about it, but adamant. The band could see that she needed help and so they banged it out so hard and with so much drive and passion that no one could say “no” to a pretty woman who wanted, who needed, to dance, except someone from northern Europe, I guess. Rose and I looked at each other and we wondered silently if I should do what I wanted to do, go grab that lady and dance. But, I was worried about being in a foreign culture and doing what was inappropriate, like showing up a guy in front of his girl, or wife or friend. He was fine; he was glad to be there; he was enjoying the music; still, no, no, no, no dance. It just wasn’t his way.¹⁵⁵

A woman approached Andrew, noticing that he knew the Ramblers, and explained that she lived far away and had made a special trip to see the band. She had loved Cajun music for years and knew all about the Lost Bayou Ramblers. In fact, she knew all the Cajun bands and their music. She knew much more than Andrew, who would have been glad to take her on about

¹⁵⁴ Phone Interview, Andrew Doss, October 8, 2008.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

music in New Orleans, but knew when to yield. It turned out that there were several people there who were real fans, knowledgeable and thrilled with the quality of the performance.

The Lost Bayou Ramblers had played at the same venue the night before, which was on a Friday. Andrew discovered that the crowd then had been very different. The tables and chairs were out of the way and still the room had been jam packed tight. There had been lots of dancing and fun interplay between the band and the audience. “Me,” he tried to say it like a Cajun talks, “I think this performance is ecstasy itself tonight,” but was told that he should have been there the night before (while, unfortunately, his class was in session). Andrew’s lasting memory of the event is clear: “I was a happy Louisiana boy.”¹⁵⁶

Andrew’s experience reveals that culture can be transported or carried, as with the Ramblers, but music, especially when understood as a symbol force, can re-call place. In that sense alone, it can be symbolical. The Ramblers enjoyed having an audience member who understood their culture and could lock into the performance in a different way than someone like the Dutchman who would not dance, despite being goaded by the woman. Similarly, Andrew needed to feel understood and accepted as a Louisianian, momentarily drawn back into that place through the music.

Whitney Broussard acknowledges the significant cultural role the Ramblers live out through their performance, claiming,

When I was growing up it was like,

‘Oh that chicky chank, what you want with dat?’

You know? We were taught that you shouldn’t listen to that.

‘Dem days are gone or dat’s for the poor or the lower class or that’s not how you’re supposed to act.’

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

You go to school and you get an education and you live the American dream and that was not part of the American dream. It's just something to see today – the young professionals, I guessed we're being called – having our own coming-to and our own revival and that's because we know that there's something special there and we know there's a lot of people who agree with us out there. That's why the Ramblers go to New York and Europe and all these places because there are people who appreciate it and know that it's something special.¹⁵⁷

To complete our analysis in terms of the five characteristics of a symbol according to Philip Wheelwright, archetypal symbols are the fifth characteristic. As mentioned above, a Christian culture can make a meal into something so special, it becomes a symbol. When the symbolical points to and leads to participation in the divine, it can be termed a sacrament. But, in fact, sharing a meal together is a universal symbol of being part of a community, creating a sense of belonging to one another in one “body.”

In the same way, water can be a symbol of new birth in baptism, but that comes out of the universal sense of water as representative of dying and rising, or cleansing old life and bringing forth new life.



Cajun music deals with the basic stuff of human life, the down-home everyday, the grit and the grind, but it takes one into the universally human experience. The subject matter of the songs revolves around the things that are deeply symbolical for the human condition, including its joys and despair. This is perhaps one reason that when Louis writes Cajun songs, he chooses to universalize the lyrics, making them relevant for more than just his generation. As he said, he would not find it appropriate to make references to “myspace” or other technological terms because they are fleeting fancies. The broader sentiments are what remain over time and can be kept alive throughout the

¹⁵⁷ Interview, Whitney P. Broussard, III, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, August 10, 2007.

generations, such as romance and loss. Furthermore, the music creates that “lure of feeling” by dealing with the very concrete problems, realities, and enjoyment of the basic and fundamental things in life. Louis Michot elaborates on the potency of Cajun songs,

Music has a lot of place within our society and every society. It tells you stories, it tells you about the past – a lot about the past. It tells you a lot of history, a lot of stories. It tells you people’s personal lives and personal stories – really a lot. Some people write songs about what happened in the world, some people just sing whatever the hell is on their mind. I do that a lot because in a lot of songs in Cajun music, there’s a way to sing it, but it’s not necessarily in stone. So, a lot of times, you just sing whatever the hell you’re thinking about. It’s like a free-form poetry, you know, to me. And that’s how the great songs were made. They sang what was on their mind and got recorded. And then people started singing like them, but it was their story. But, yeah, okay, it’s their song, but it’s your story when you play it. That’s how it does it – it keeps something alive through that music . . . There are some songs that are so beautiful you wouldn’t want to sing them any other way. But, all in all, improv is what makes it so beautiful. It’s not stagnant, it’s not sterile, it is alive and moving. When the music happens, it’s not because they’ve practiced a part, it’s because they’ve reached down into whatever the hell is going on in their lives and sang it.¹⁵⁸

One escapes the mundane by using the music symbolically. It transforms and universalizes in order to acknowledge that in fact this – be it sorrow or happiness, romance or heartbreak, celebration or a heavy workload - happens or is true for everybody. It buffers your pain and draws you out of it.



There is active life in a symbol. According to Holmes, “A symbol is . . . physiological and tends to be related to the body, its feelings, needs and mystery.”¹⁵⁹ Music is extremely physical,

¹⁵⁸ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

¹⁵⁹ Urban T. Holmes, III, *Ministry and Imagination* (The Seabury Press, New York 1976) 47.

affecting a response in your heart, mind and body. The rhythm and beat is integral to Cajun music, particularly that of the Ramblers. According to Abshire, it is the combination of “rhythm and syncopation with the core instruments: the fiddle, guitar, and accordion, and sung in French”¹⁶⁰ that creates what he would call “authentic” Cajun music. When that beat strikes up, its musical genre is clear. For those who are trained musicians or dancers outside of the culture, that syncopated beat has the potential to free their imaginations and reveal a different way of playing or dancing. Abshire tells a story about such an experience with a neophyte audience in Nevada,

We were in Reno a while back, this place called The Martin. It was intimate. They only sell ninety tickets on Saturday night and they invite folk groups. By the end of our first set the chairs were gone and they were dancing and the guy said,

‘I’ve never seen this before in here. Nobody dances in here.’

I said, ‘Hey man [*laughing*] you’ve never had rhythm in here before.’

He said, ‘This is crazy. Man, I don’t understand this.’

Hey. They came to be entertained, but it grabbed them, caught them, you know. Hell, just me and Andre [Michot] and Courtney Granger, a little three-piece trio, but boom boom boom, in their face. It was great. It brought back memories from the old days. But up there, it was north of Reno, they had basically never heard of Cajun music, except in the airwaves and there’s no musicians who play Cajun music there. We caught them off-guard. We actually caught them off-guard. That was a great – it was really good.¹⁶¹

The power to unlock imagination underscores that a different culture can be valuable.

This music, then, draws one into a new feeling about art and culture and finally, makes one want to physically jump in and participate, mainly through dance.

Part of the urge to participate rests in the need to be a part of community, to open oneself to a wider world, one previously unimagined, to move beyond the daily round and

¹⁶⁰ Interview, Ray Abshire, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 13, 2007.

¹⁶¹ Interview, Ray Abshire, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 13, 2007.

routine of one's life and to enter into the unexpected. These are universal needs of fellowship, sense of belonging, and rebirth or a fresh start. Peacock explains, "One shares a sense of community and identity beyond national, geographic, or other restrictive boundaries. In so doing, one edges toward empathy, necessarily identifying somewhat with the other without becoming the other."¹⁶² Broussard emphasizes this, noting,

I think that's a fundamental human thing. So when you have that [sense of belongingness], that's real. I felt like there are a lot of people who want it and don't have it and wish they did. I think that's one of the things that draws us to Cajun music because Cajun music - one of the fundamental things is that it is a sense of belonging, a connection to history and to something bigger.¹⁶³

Robert Rand published a memoir about his battle with panic disorder and learning to overcome it through Cajun and Zydeco dance entitled, *Dancing Away An Anxious Mind*. A man with a self-professed need to order and control all aspects of his life, found himself riddled with panic shortly after entering his successful career at NPR in Washington, DC. He had too long denied himself the release that he later identified as possible in social dance, amongst the community of those who followed Cajun music. In a conversation with his therapist, Dr. Steven Gilbert, Rand said, "By that point in our therapy sessions, I had come, I think, to understand that I needed to find things in my life that would allow me to be a little boy, to be imperfect, to be silly. I think that's the word you used. Silly. The perfect antidote to perfection obsession."¹⁶⁴ Rand began taking Cajun dance lessons with a private instructor, then emerged on the DC dance scene, and finally took an important pilgrimage to the heart of Cajun country to fulfill his quest toward silliness. Rand overcame his disorder by opening his imagination to new possibilities and play – what he may call "silliness." Rand writes, "The man on that dance floor was me, and I

¹⁶² James Peacock, *Grounded Globalism* (The University of Georgia Press, Athens 2007) 49.

¹⁶³ Interview, Whitney P. Broussard III, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, August 20, 2007.

¹⁶⁴ Robert Rand, *Dancing Away an Anxious Mind* (The University of Wisconsin Press Madison 2004) 44.

remember thinking back then, amidst the rush of the experience, that I had somehow – finally – pummeled my life into a happy state of submitting to unbridled pleasure.”¹⁶⁵ He relinquished his physical and emotional control, gave himself over to something, and therefore was able to loosen up, both on the dance floor and in life. He admits, “But the socialization aspect of dancing – the sense of belonging to a dance community, of making the acquaintance of dozens of new friends – was an important element of my recovery.”¹⁶⁶

Symbols invoke numerous feelings, among them effervescence, as in the case of Rand. His was a feeling of moving beyond his own boundaries and becoming “more.” Cajun music carries the power of a cross-cultural experience that exposes new ways of being in the world. Music not only points to something beyond itself, but as a symbol, it draws you into participation with it. Doucet reflects on that transcendent quality of music and says,

My favorite places to play are at home because you see all your friends out there having a good time. You see your friends dancing. Your friends know what to expect of you so when you’re really getting after it, it’s really strong, it’s a weird thing. It happens to me a lot at home and on stage, I don’t hear any sound – as weird as this may sound, I don’t hear any music. I get into this little dream state – it doesn’t last for long, maybe just a couple of seconds or so, but all you see is just the dancers moving and you look over at your friends in your band and you smile and they smile back at you. It’s just a neat thing. I’ve always done it just for the – I love the melodies, I love the music, I love the instrument, and I just love watching people enjoy themselves and that’s why I play music because I like being a part of that.¹⁶⁷

The Rhetorical Theory illuminates the dynamic exposed in the Lost Bayou Ramblers, the way they go about creating their performance, the art of their performance, and the powerful effect it has on the audience and the performers. Finally, we can surely recognize by now how profoundly the Ramblers are engaged in grounded globalization.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 9.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 214.

¹⁶⁷ Interview, Matthew Doucet, Lafayette, Louisiana, August 9, 2007.

James Peacock's *Grounded Globalism*, helps us understand how the Ramblers exemplify how important it is to appreciate the dynamic, perhaps dialogical, between being engaged with and reflective of the whole world, and having well-defined particularity, maintaining healthy identity boundaries. Negatively stated, it will not do to be narrowly parochial any more than it would be to abandon the sense of what is special about one's own place and culture. To few groups is this more clearly crucial than to Cajuns. The term "grounded globalism" says what is needed very well. The term suggests a relationship - what Peacock calls an interplay - of the two elements or terms, noting that globalization has to be happening somewhere, in a location, on the ground, as it were. He claims that regional identity does not get lost or replaced, rather it connects in new ways and is reconfigured. Peacock establishes what he calls a "model of movement from regional to global identity," which develops over seven steps: "regional identity, opposition to national identity, rebellion, defeat, resentment and oppression, transmutation by global identity, and grounding of that identity in sustained regional identity."¹⁶⁸

This is not merely an historical treatment, but it takes only the slightest knowledge of Cajun history and a moment of reflection to discern how this culture and its musical expression have developed up to this point and the direction the Lost Bayou Ramblers are helping to take things. We have a people who took a distinctive way of living along the coastal region of seventeenth century southwestern France to a corner of the new world in French Canada; they refused to sign an oath of allegiance to the British King and were cast out and scattered along the eastern coast of the British colonies and the Caribbean; they regrouped to populate the forbidding wetlands and bayous of the only remaining French speaking part of North America; they developed a separate way of living from the Creole and Anglo immigrants; they were overrun and looked down upon by the English speaking population throughout Louisiana; they

¹⁶⁸ James Peacock, *Grounded Globalism* (The University of Georgia Press, Athens 2007) 4.

became an oppressed minority and were finally forced to use English as the only language in school in an attempt by the majority to eradicate the language and their ability to speak French and thus the distinctive culture of Acadians, by now termed Cajuns; their soldiers returned from World War II with a new vision and appreciation of diversity, determined to revive their Cajun language and culture; their leaders and educators teamed up with France to institutionalize the plan; they became the dominant political power in the state, they began exporting their food and music, and now they are on their way to becoming globally grounded in precise accord with Peacock's schemata.

In an interview with Louis Michot, as mentioned earlier, he relates how it was a trip he took to Ireland that gave him his first clue that he was part of a distinctive and valuable culture. Not only did he recognize an Irish song that was part of the Cajun repertoire, which connected him instantly with another culture, but he also understood himself to be part of the world, while simultaneously feeling even more connected to a place, his place, than before. In a sense, this touches on a feeling of opposition to the rest of America, as being different from, yet integrated in, the nation. Louis experienced a broadening of what it means to feel at home in the world while re-affirming his regional identity. He identified with many others, an empathy of sorts, without becoming the other. This cross cultural affinity beyond regional affiliation, the recognition that your culture may be different than others in the world, but that you are also the same in your humanity and boundedness, Peacock says, transforms identity: "A global identity is transformative, drawing a person into a deeper, broader experience. Such an experience is empowered and mediated by concrete situations, in immersion in a foreign culture . . ."¹⁶⁹ The Lost Bayou Ramblers belong to the world and yet retain a grounded identity. Louis Michot elaborates on this phenomenon when he says,

¹⁶⁹ James Peacock, *Grounded Globalism* (The University of Georgia Press, Athens 2007) 9.

It's hard to know Cajun until you step outside. I didn't know Cajun until I went to Ireland. I had no idea what Cajun music was except that I played music with my dad, I sang in French, but I still didn't think it was Cajun music. I just thought it was what we played . . . I went to Ireland after my last year in high school and it was a trip. In high school, I was thinking America sucked. I'm in America, so I suck. We have no culture, we have no anything and not even looking at where I am because how are you going to look at yourself from where you are. So I listened to Earth Beat every Sunday night on KRVS . . . and they'd have Indian music, African, Chinese and I was like, man, it really interests me. I would say myself, I wish I was from one of these places because they have something. They have a music. They cook rice in pottery, something crazy like that. It intrigued me to see a way of life where people lived tribally and communicatively and that's always turned me on. I've always been interested in and had a romantic vision of tribal living since I was little. So I wanted that. It wasn't until I started traveling that I realized, wait, I do have something. The more I traveled and still do to this day, the more I realize how unique this place is where I come from and how completely different from anywhere else around it. That's what made me embrace that. I guess Cajun has become now what distinctifies you from America because you're in America, but you're in your own country.¹⁷⁰

Music stirs within us the knowledge that more than just what we see exists, which confronts mystery. It is a form of language that translates and makes present the transcendent or "more than," evoking the yearning for fellowship, relationships, romance and release. The Lost Bayou Ramblers will continue to perform around the world, making sure to excite imaginations, move others to articulate identities, and be present to the mysteries that can be revealed through the magnetism of this aesthetic symbolism.

¹⁷⁰ Interview, Louis Michot, Arnaudville, Louisiana, August 2, 2007.

CONCLUSION



At each Lost Bayou Ramblers performance that I attend, the band plays the song “Bayou Perdu.” It has the clippy and energetic beat that they want to establish as a special part of their identity, but the lyrics speak to something even more fundamental about the Ramblers, specifically, and about their understanding of human experience, generally.

J’ai halé mon ti bateau
Pour payer sur le bayou
J’ai tourné une autre coulée
J’étais Perdu, J’ai trouvé

I pulled my little boat
To paddle down the bayou
I turned another coulee,
I was lost, I found

J’ai demandé avec le nèg
Ma maison je veux la trouver
Elle est pareille comme cette maison-là
“C’est drête-là,”
Il a dit à moi

I asked the man on the shore
I’m trying to find my house
It looks like that one, there
“Well that is your house,”
He told me¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ David Michot and Louis Michot, “Bayou Perdu.” Flat Town Music (BMI) 2005.

The liner notes to the album explain that the lyrics to this song were derived from the actual experience of their friend and Cajun storyteller, Sydney Bourque. While in his eighties, Bourque paddled down the Bayou Vermilion in search of his home after a day of fishing, having lost his way. The man upon whom he stumbled reminded him that he was facing his home after all. The analogy is in fact not an analogy at all. It is exact. Home, for Bourque, does not just resemble that house to which he points; it *is* his home. This charming story speaks to something real and complex about home, a place we know so intimately, but that knowledge is fragile in itself, especially when there is a sense that things are changing or being threatened.

Standing apart from one's home, looking for it, looking at it with questioning eyes can be de-familiarizing and sometimes disorienting. Like Louis's experience in Ireland, it can reveal something about one's culture, which would otherwise remain was unknown. Or, it can be frightening, as in the case when Hurricane Katrina disordered and reshaped the whole landscape.

The narrative reveals something poignant about the changing complexion of the bayou, which may in fact appear different each day because it is so rapidly changing shape.

"Bayou Perdu" strikes at the heart of what the Ramblers express through their performance in the phrase employed by James Peacock: "place matters."¹⁷² While this comes across in their performance as something obvious and simple, it is in fact a cry of pride, a cry of defiance, a cry of anguish and fear, clearly a cry for help. The sharing of what their place is and why it means so much to them speaks profoundly to who they and to who their people are. Peacock elaborates, "The phrase 'sense of place' suggests the perception of a locale as more than just a physical space, as a territory but also a psychological space, a place imbued with history

¹⁷² James Peacock, "From Space to Place" in *Space – Place – Environment* (Stauffenberg Verlag, Germany 2004) 88.

and memory, community and experience.”¹⁷³ Place, ultimately, really does matter, especially when damage done to the land threatens to wound or even destroy the culture. The music of the Ramblers as experienced through their energetic and compelling performances has the power to express this and to move people to a desire for it to thrive.

The Revivalists understood that Cajun culture has a value system that they wanted to retain, that which was - and still is - particularly valid and true for them. Among other things, this includes personal generosity and appreciation for a social way of life as seen in the many ways Cajuns gather for food, drink, music, worship and dancing, a way of life that is actually counter-cultural to the individualism of other parts of America. This generation identified Cajun music as representative of something unique to their culture, which they valued and fiercely upheld.

The deliberate decision on the part of the Ramblers, as members of this generation facing the forces of globalization and an intensified threat to the land itself, to re-articulate this value system and these ideals which they enact through performance should be seen as radical, not old-fashioned. While “progress” tugs us away from familiar ways of doing things, the Ramblers remind us of the power of tradition as it emerges within a contemporary context. Through their music, they point to that which is becoming, unfolding, that is, in the shaping of a future culture during its process of development. T.S. Eliot in his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” claimed, “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.” The Ramblers engage the past and the present using exceptional skill and vitality. By performing traditional Cajun music, and thus raising consciousness about this cultural expression as well as the plight of the land, the Ramblers are transforming culture.

¹⁷³ James Peacock, *Grounded Globalism* (The University of Georgia Press, Athens 2007) 102.

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