

“Allons à Lafayette”--Joseph Falcon (1928)

Added to the National Registry: 2007

Essay by Rick Koster (guest post)*



Cleoma and Joseph Falcon

For years rumors have emphatically suggested Beatles manager Brian Epstein bought thousands of copies of the group’s first single, “Love Me Do,” in order to bolster the song’s chart success. Very recently, the Republican National Committee stands accused of ordering \$95,000 worth of copies of Donald Trump, Jr.’s book, “Triggered,” to ensure its placement on the “New York Times” bestseller list.

Such ethically suspect but fervently ambitious “star-making” tactics aren’t at all unusual. In one form or another, “payola,” and derivations thereof, are just part of the entertainment biz--from music and radio to TV and film to publishing.

But there’s something considerably more charming and innocent about the 1928 star-making efforts of a small-town jeweler in Rayne, Louisiana, named George Burr. In fact, Burr helped make history--and all it cost him was an advance order of 500 copies of a 78-rpm recording of a song called “Lafayette” (“Allons à Lafayette”) by Cajun accordionist/singer Joseph Falcon and his wife.

The thing is, offering to bolster sales by bulk advance orders is one thing; in this case, the record wouldn’t have been made at all without Burr’s preemptive efforts.

The jeweler was in fact a friend and fan of the infectious Cajun dance music he saw and heard at dance parties and beer halls as performed by Falcon and his first wife, guitarist Cléoma (Falcon) Breaux. And when Burr heard Columbia Records was hosting auditions in New Orleans based on research that indigenous rural music forms in the South had commercial potential, he drove the couple across the state to audition for the label. Accompanying them was vocalist Leon Meche, who was deemed a superior singer to Falcon and could provide a strategic edge in a

situation where vocal chops might spell the difference in a tendered contract.

The audition took place in New Orleans's Godchaux Building on April 27, 1928. The Columbia execs, used to hearing and recording orchestras, expressed doubt when they met the Falcons and Meche and saw only an accordion and acoustic guitar. In an interview with folk music archivist Chris Strachwitz in 1962, Falcon remembered one of the Columbia artists-and-Repertoire men looking at the accordion and commenting, "That's not enough music to make a record."

At that point, Burr countered by saying plenty of folks in southwest Louisiana would buy the music. He made an offer to purchase 250 singles and then upped the bid to 500 copies--he claimed he could sell that many out of his jewelry store alone--and that was enough for the A&R guys to at least turn on the recording machine and listen to the musicians play a song.

Perhaps intimidated by the negotiations, Meche claimed stage-fright and suggested the tryout would go more smoothly with the Breauxs performing in their usual fashion.

What followed, in two-and-a-half feisty minutes, was an introduction to Cajun music and the explosive power of Falcon's accordion and the hypnotic seduction of the form.

"I opened that accordion, and it was a big building but it was closed," Falcon told Strachwitz. "[The accordion] sounded like it wanted to take the roof off ... they started talking to each other. They said, 'Lord, but boy that's more music out of two instruments that I ain't never heard in my life.'"

Sold.

"Allons à Lafayette" thus became the first Cajun song ever commercially recorded.

But, where the Breauxs' charisma and artistry gave Burr the confidence to bulk-order the as-yet-unrecorded single, history doesn't reveal why the couple selected "Allons à Lafayette" as their audition number out of a vast repertoire of traditional tunes they'd honed and stamped with their own musical personalities at countless gigs.

It's fair to make a few inferences, though.

"Allons à Lafayette" is based on a favorite archival tune from Falcon's boyhood called "Jeunes Gens Campagnard." The chief difference between the two is the lyrical content; there's a plaintive yet frisky tone to "Allons à Lafayette." In idiomatic Cajun French fashion, the singer, infatuated with a pretty young woman who is "too cute to be this bad"--and is seemingly as titillated as he is a bit disconcerted by her reputation--suggests they go to Lafayette to change her name and, as one could interpret it, provide anonymity for any erotic chicanery that might unfold.

It's the sort of narrative that has timelessly proven to be philosophically empathetic in a Saturday night setting of social interaction--and probably in direct proportion to beer consumption. Throw in that Falcon was known as an all-around nice guy, with a laidback vocal delivery to match, and the idea of him singing "Allons à Lafayette" would take on an even more delightful context to friends and neighbors who knew him.

The musical structures of Cajun songs are very repetitive. They're typically speedy, infectious one- or two-step dance workouts fueled by accordion and anchored by rhythmic heartbeats of guitar and/or fiddle and triangle. (Also popular were--and are--mournful waltzes interspersed into live set lists to provide breaks for slow dancing.) With regard to Falcon's instrumental prowess, he started playing as a kid, worked at it with a steady passion, and developed an astonishing technique that provided a hearty momentum punctuated by sparkling moments of pyrotechnic flourishes.

For all these reasons, it's certain that by the time of the Columbia audition, the couple would have had empirical data from countless gigs to ascertain the fan-favorite status of "Allons à Lafayette." It proved to be a perfect choice.

The record--and a subsequent re-release by Columbia imprint Okeh Records--did quite well throughout southwestern Louisiana and east Texas, confirming Columbia's theory that campaigns focusing on regional musical styles was solid. Joe and Cléoma became stars--at least throughout Cajun Land--and, over the next four decades, Falcon would record over four dozen singles, including releases from two different sessions in New York City. (Cléoma, who died at 34, was on most of those 78s.)

"Allons à Lafayette" remains very much an iconic tune in the Cajun archives. It's hard to imagine a Cajun music festival wherein at least one act doesn't perform the song, and, over the years, a number of musicians have re-recorded the song, ranging from Harry Choates and Jimmy C. Newman to Beausoleil and Hunter Hayes.

Oh, and two last bits worth noting....

When the single was released, though it was almost a decade after the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote, "Allons à Lafayette" was solely credited to Joseph Falcon. Most think it was significant unto itself that Cléoma--a woman!--was a regular fixture on a live music stage to begin with. (Maybe the other tune on that first single should have been titled "Me, Too Movement," or whatever the Cajun translation would be!)

And finally, it's sort of funny that, when Columbia released that first single, "Allons à Lafayette" wasn't even the A side. The label honchos instead chose another tune recorded at that first session called "La valse que ma porter a ma fosse." Translated? "The Waltz That Carried Me to My Grave." It's probably best "Allons à Lafayette" was the tune that resonated with the public rather than the funeral march.

Etched in popular music lore, then, “Allons à Lafayette” is simultaneously a happy accident, the product of a bit of creative manipulation, and the perfect song and performance thereof to perpetually represent the great tradition of Cajun music and one of its finest artists. After the National Recording Registry in 2007, in 2013, the song was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame and it’s also been included on Rate Your Music’s “1001 Songs You Must Hear Before You Die.”

Don’t listen to it *after* you die; that honor is reserved for “The Waltz That Carried Me to My Grave.”

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.