

“Bogalusa Boogie”—Clifton Chenier (1976)

Added to the National Recording Registry: 2015

Essay by Gene Tomko (guest post)*



Clifton Chenier

Every musical genre has its royalty. In the world of zydeco, the infectious accordion-driven Creole dance music of southwest Louisiana, its undisputed king is Clifton Chenier, who nearly single-handedly defined the genre in the 1950s and 1960s with his incorporation of current rhythm and blues into the traditional black Creole folk music of the region. Although he made many outstanding recordings throughout his long career, Chenier’s 1976 LP “Bogalusa Boogie” on the Arhoolie label is widely regarded by both music scholars and fans as a creative highpoint of his recorded legacy as well as being among the greatest studio albums in zydeco.

Born just outside of Opelousas, Louisiana, in the small farming community of Leonville on June 25, 1925, Clifton Chenier and his older brother Cleveland grew up speaking Creole French and were immersed in the region’s traditional fiddle and accordion-based Creole music, commonly called French la la or simply black French music at the time. The music, which was heavily influenced by the blues and African and Afro-Caribbean rhythms and melodies as well as traditional French two-steps and waltzes, dated back many generations in the southwest Louisiana Creole community and was often percussively driven by a washboard (or *frottoir*) to propel the beat. Chenier began playing the accordion as a child, learning from his father as well as by attending local performances at la la house dances by area musicians such as Claude Faulk and Sidney Babineaux. He was also greatly influenced by the late 1920s and early 1930s recordings of Creole accordion pioneer Amédé Ardoin, who was the most important and among the earliest to record the music.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Chenier and his brother Cleveland lived just across the border in the Texas Gulf Coast town of Port Arthur, working various day jobs in the oil industry while playing music nights and weekends and regularly traveling back to Opelousas to perform at popular dance halls such as Slim’s Y-Ki-Ki and Richard’s Club in nearby Lawtell. Heavily influenced by the popular black music of the day, Chenier soon began developing his own distinctive contemporary style when he started mixing current blues, rhythm and blues, and early rock and roll with the older Creole music of his parents. He also switched from the smaller diatonic accordion, which had been the standard in both Creole and Cajun music for generations, to the larger and much more versatile piano accordion. Soon he also began including the

instrumentation of modern rhythm and blues bands--adding drums, electric guitar, bass, and saxophone to expand his sound. Chenier's other significant contribution was his creation of the modern rubboard which was then popularized by his brother Cleveland, an over-the-shoulder vest-like design of the traditional utilitarian washboard that has since become ubiquitous in every zydeco band to this day (and also adopted by countless musicians of other genres including rock, blues, country, and folk).

Chenier got his first opportunity to record in 1954 when he was discovered by Elko Records owner and talent scout J.R. Fulbright upon the recommendation of Louisiana-born musician and bandleader Clarence "Bon Ton" Garlow, who ran a popular club in Beaumont, Texas, where Chenier frequently performed. His debut single "Louisiana Stomp/Cliston Blues" (erroneously credited to "Cliston Chanier, King of the South") would become one of the first zydeco recordings along with Boozoo Chavis' "Paper In My Shoe," which was released on Folk-Star that same year. Although the record sold poorly, Fulbright was able to get Chenier an audition with the much larger and widely-distributed Specialty Records which landed him a contract with the label in 1955. The resulting sessions produced Chenier's first and biggest hit, "Ay-Tete Fee" ("Hey Little Girl"), which gave the new zydeco sound its first national exposure through his recordings and subsequent tours on numerous rhythm and blues package shows alongside such prominent artists as Etta James, Little Richard, and Ray Charles.

Through the early 1960s Chenier continued performing extensively and cut two singles for Chicago's Chess/Argo label before returning to his home state and recording for producer J.D. Miller's Zynn label in Crowley. Then, in the mid-1960s, he began a long and very successful association with California-based roots music producer Chris Strachwitz of Arhoolie Records, recording numerous albums and singles for the label and touring extensively nationally and abroad where he spread the good word of zydeco worldwide.

By 1975 Chenier and his Red Hot Louisiana Band were at the height of their collective powers. Known for their marathon four-hour performances without a single break, Chenier's veteran band was made up of some of the finest sidemen in the history of the music and was arguably the greatest working zydeco band ever assembled. Joining Chenier's ever-present brother Cleveland on rubboard was bassist Joe Brouchet (a.k.a. Jumpin' Joe Morris), master guitarist Paul Senegal (a.k.a. Lil' Buck Sinegal [sic]), ace tenor saxophonist John Hart, and drumming powerhouse Robert St. Julien (curiously listed as "Robert Peter" on "Bogalusa Boogie"). True road warriors who performed together seamlessly, Chenier and his Red Hot Louisiana Band was indeed a force to be reckoned with.

On October 27, 1975, the band rolled into the famed Studio in the Country just outside of Bogalusa, Louisiana, and in just two hours recorded what would arguably become Chenier's finest collective studio work--all recorded live with the vast majority of it on the first take. As producer Strachwitz matter-of-factly related in his notes about the historic session, "Clifton Chenier makes records the way he plays dances: non-stop until the job is finished."

From beginning to end, "Bogalusa Boogie" marvelously captures all of the magic of one of Chenier's legendary Louisiana dance hall performances. The band chugs along like a well-oiled machine and the energy and enthusiasm they exude practically leaps off of the record.

Recreating the pace and all of the special ingredients of his highly acclaimed shows, the recording exemplifies Chenier's powerful formula of rocking boogies, dance-inducing shuffles, and propulsive two-steps, interspersed with an occasional lilting waltz at just the right moment.

Sung in both Creole French and English, the 11-track set showcases the full array of styles which Chenier masterly incorporated to create his groundbreaking and genre-defining sound: hard-driving blues ("One Step at a Time"), hauntingly beautiful waltzes ("Ma Mama Ma Dit (My Mama Told Me)"), popular rhythm and blues ("Ti Na Na" and "Quelque Chose Sur Mon Idee (Something on My Mind)"), traditional Creole and Cajun two-steps ("Allons à Grand Coteau"), and fast instrumental dance numbers ("Ride 'Em Cowboy" and "Bogalusa Boogie"), all of which radiate Chenier's jubilant and inimitable musical artistry.

But perhaps the most revealing and satisfying is the autobiographical "Sa M' Appel Fou (They Call Me Crazy)," which became a bandstand favorite and personal anthem for Chenier of his triumphs as both a man and musician coming from limited means. With a catchy title that belies its more serious message, Chenier proudly declares in his native Creole French that despite his rural upbringing and being routinely prejudged because of it, he is certainly nobody's fool:

Tout quelqu'un 'pelle moi fou, mais mon nom c'est Clifton Chenier
(Everybody calls me crazy, but my name is Clifton Chenier)
Tout quelqu'un 'pelle moi fou, mais mon nom c'est Clifton Chenier
(Everybody calls me crazy, but my name is Clifton Chenier)
Un 'tit bougre de la campagne, mais j'connais quoi j'suis après faire
(A little guy from the country, but I know what I'm doing)

Chenier later explained his positive philosophy in a 1978 interview: "I'm from the bayou country, where the crawfish got soul. It ain't from where you, you know, come from. It's what you is *now*."

Although he suffered from poor health in his later years, Chenier continued to perform and record as the reigning "King of Zydeco" until his death from complications of diabetes and kidney disease in Lafayette, Louisiana, on December 12, 1987. Chenier's son, C.J., who had originally joined his father's band in 1978 as a saxophonist, continued to lead the fabled Red Hot Louisiana Band after his father's death.

In addition to being entered into the National Recording Registry in 2015, "Bogalusa Boogie" was also inducted, in 2011, into the Grammy Hall of Fame, which honors recordings of lasting qualitative or historical significance. The release is also the only zydeco album to receive a five-star rating from "Rolling Stone," which the magazine deemed "indispensable."

But ultimately, the proof, as they say in Louisiana, is in the gumbo and it only takes but a listen to completely agree with Chris Strachwitz' proclamation that "Bogalusa Boogie" is, indeed, "some of the best zydeco you'll ever hear."

Gene Tomko is a writer and photographer based in Lafayette, Louisiana, and the author of “Encyclopedia of Louisiana Musicians: Jazz, Blues, Cajun, Creole, Zydeco, Swamp Pop, and Gospel” (Louisiana State University Press, March 2020). His work has appeared in numerous publications worldwide including “Living Blues,” “DownBeat,” and “Juke.” He is also the creator of the “Louisiana Music Map,” which visually documents the birthplaces of more than 1,650 native musicians. His website is www.genetomko.com.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.