

Cajun-Creole Columbia releases--Amedé Ardoin and Dennis McGee (1929)

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Essay by Ann Savoy (guest post)*



Amede Ardoin



Dennis McGee

The deep south has always been controversial in its racial relationships—complex; at times, comfortable; at times, evil. The friendships that were spun, the music that was made, men of two different races slaving together side by side in the poorer areas of the south, like southwest Louisiana, are often overlooked in the face of the overwhelming negative history of southern racial relationships. The friendship and musical partnership of Dennis McGee and Amedé Ardoin tell a positive human tale of good things that came out of the south.

To set these recordings on a map of the 1920's, picture prairies as far as the eye can see, men plowing fields with mules, extreme heat, mosquitoes, people enduring all of this extreme misery for their survival and that of their families. With other forms of entertainment being nonexistent, it is a small wonder that the Cajun's love of their music was fueled by the fact that it was a release from the incessant work of their daily lives. The music created a social scene with the house dances and provided a medium for the musicians to express extreme emotion, joy, and sadness. Musicians, especially accordion players, were revered for what pleasure they could offer. Even though, at this time, electricity was scarce to nonexistent in Louisiana, people could enjoy music by playing the 78 rpm's on hand-cranked Victrolas. These records were considered as priceless objects and duplicates were sometimes purchased in case an accident would destroy the original copy. The adoration of the music was also focused upon the artist and very quickly it propelled them to almost god-like status.

Both Ardoin and McGee were born in the prairie region of southwest Louisiana at the turn of the twentieth century--McGee in 1893, Ardoin in 1899--and both were orphaned at early ages, though Amedé actually lived with his mother until her death when he was 21 years old. Both men started to learn their instruments when they were very young. Ardoin, the baby of his family, was given an accordion by his father because his father couldn't play it, and McGee was bought a fiddle at the age of nine years old by a kind cousin, Theodore McGee, with whom he was living at the time. It is incredible that these two poor young men ended up with their own instruments at early ages, as it marked the key to the rest of their lives as both of them blossomed with natural musical talent and shortly thereafter discovered that music was a key to an income obtained in a more appealing way than picking cotton all day in the hot sun.

Ardoin was a small man, five feet tall, and had a pleasant, jovial personality. He was known as a respectable person and was much sought after for his musical abilities. When working on farms,

because of these musical talents, he was often given the “desk jobs” of field workers--light work, feeding chickens, a little gardening and handy man work. He opted to never marry because he didn't want to support a family, but his songs are full of love, rejection and broken heartedness. He was known for making up words to songs on the spot, and often in his songs he is leaving and walking down a lonely road.

Ardoin's preferred way to play music was to have a fiddle backing him up. He played with various fiddlers in the area, some were black men such as Douglas Bellard, B  b   Carri  re, and Alphonse Lafleur, and some were white men, Sady Courville, Shelby Vidrine, Bijou Frug  , and Denus McGee. Ardoin, though he played for his own people, generally preferred to play at the white dances because more money could be made there than at black dances.

When McGee met Ardoin, he was something of a lady's man, on his third marriage with a house full of children. He moved from job to job trying to make ends meet. An accomplished singer with hundreds of songs and tunes in his repertoire, he was among the first to appear in the early Louisiana recording sessions after winning a talent contest at a Tri-Parish fair. These contests often had representatives from Brunswick, Victor, Vocalion, and Columbia record labels in the audience looking for artists to record. The prize was fifty dollars, a huge amount of money in those days, plus a chance to make a record. So prior to McGee's sessions with Ardoin, he had already done three sessions with other artists in New Orleans.

McGee and Ardoin began to play music together in about 1921, meeting while working together at the farms of Oscar Comeaux and, later, Celestin Marcantel. Dennis was an excellent fiddler who was not only good at rhythmic backup on the fiddle but could match Ardoin's melody lines in perfect unison. Both were wonderful singers and knew how to play many styles of music. They were stars in the eyes of the Cajuns, and their musical gifts placed them a notch above mere mortals.

It is not clear how it came about that Ardoin was asked by Columbia to record on December 9, 1926, but he asked McGee to accompany him to New Orleans to play back-up fiddle on his recordings. Certainly the recording executives must have thought that Ardoin and McGee were a winning combination because these recordings were made during the Depression and the companies needed something sure to sell. These recordings would have been made at either the St. Charles or the Roosevelt Hotel, where record companies would rent whole floors and set up recording studios to record acts from all over the region. The executives were primarily engaged to record gospel artist Blind Willie Johnson and had had him driven over from Texas to record him. Other Louisiana musicians on these sessions were accordionist Dewey Segura (whose uncle had lobbied at Columbia's sales offices to obtain a session for him) and two singer-guitar players, Sydney Landry and Didier Hebert.

McGee probably drove Ardoin over in his Model T. It had been a particularly cold winter and the long drive over the rough, muddy roads must have been a harrowing journey.

Describing music with words is difficult, but there are several factors that made these six recordings so appealing. For one thing, the combination of a descendant of an African slave and an Acadian-Irish-Native American making their own unique blend together was charged with energy and possibility. The almost fierce rhythmic quality of the tunes is accentuated by the fact that the bass side of the accordion was amplified louder than the treble side, creating a driving force. Meanwhile McGee's intense, rocking bowing, so perfectly synced to Ardoin's rhythm, drove the rhythm forward.

Most of the six songs are played with both men playing the melodies in unison, except for “Two Step de Prairie Soileau” which has a very repetitive melody so McGee accompanied it with the figure eight bow rocking seconding style so popular in early Louisiana music. Ardoin always

preferred to sing with an accordion in the key of D because it showed off his emotional vocals, the beauty of his voice ringing out over the instruments.

This cultural mixture, deep friendship, and musical virtuosity of a black man and a white man, for the first time on a recording in Louisiana, created a power and a blend that influenced all the Cajun artists who were to follow. Famed Cajun musical heroes Nathan Abshire, Iry LeJeune, and Austin Pitre all speak of listening for hours on end to these six recordings, winding up the old Victrolas and playing the scratchy 78 discs over and over, learning them on their accordions, adjusting the lyrics to their lives. If you listen to the music of any of these men you will hear snippets of these six recordings, stylistically and melodically.

All stars were aligned for these six recordings to be made, a moment in time, never again recreated.

Ann Savoy is a musician, photographer, writer and documenter of Cajun culture. She is the author of the award-winning book “Cajun Music: A Reflection of a People Vol. I” (and Vol. II to be published 2020). One of her most acclaimed projects is her duet CD with Linda Ronstadt. She has received four Grammy nominations. Today she lives in an old Savoy family home outside of Eunice, LA, with her husband, Marc Savoy.

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