

“Evangeline Special” and “Love Bridge Waltz”--Iry LeJeune (1947)

Added to the National Registry: 2009

Essay by Ron Yule (guest post)*



Iry LeJeune



Original label



Early LP

“The Opera Recordings of Iry Lejeune”

Cajun accordionist Iry Lejeune’s postwar, seminal recording of “Evangeline Special” / “Love Bridge Waltz” helped reintroduce the sound of the diatonic Cajun accordion into commercially recorded Cajun music. The 10+ year absence had concluded with Lee Sonnier’s recording for J. D. Miller’s Fais Do Do label only a few months prior to Iry’s session. It was not greeted with a great fanfare like Iry’s. Sources within the Lejeune family indicate that the session for Bennie Hess’s Opera label occurred in the spring of 1947 prior to Iry’s move to Lacassine to live with the Milton Vanicor family and prior to a car wreck in the fall of 1947 in which he suffered a broken back.

Iry seemed groomed for this monumental event. His family was filled with fiddlers and accordionists who had played songs of their heritage for dances and socials throughout the Point Noire area during the early 1900s. Near blind (with some peripheral vision) from birth he used his musical talent to provide a source of income. Reared on a farm near Church Point, he attended the Louisiana School for the Blind in Baton Rouge in the early 1940s, with a final focus on playing music as a means of making a living. Following his brief schooling, he began moving throughout the Acadia, Evangeline, and Jefferson Davis Parish area, playing with numerous noted Cajun musicians, such as J. B. Fuselier, at every opportunity, honing his skills.

While visiting with his brother Whitney (also blind) in New Orleans in 1946, he met The Oklahoma Tornadoes, a country band that formed during World War II. They were playing in New Orleans’ Magazine Street music scene. The fiddler/guitarist Floyd Leblanc, who happened

to be from near Lake Charles, became friends with Iry, and upon their return to Southwest Louisiana, they began to play together frequently. Other band members included singer/record producer Benny Hess and guitarist/producer Virgel Bozman. Both were instrumental in the upstart of recorded Cajun music following World War II, with Hess producing Iry's first recordings and Bozman producing the Pine Grove Boys' "Pine Grove Blues," as well as two recordings of Cajun fiddler legend Harry Choates whose performance of "Jole Blon" was added to the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry in 2005.

After returning to southwest Louisiana, Iry joined the Tornadoes at a local club near Jennings, and Floyd invited him to a recording session they had scheduled in Houston. Ervin, Iry's son, recounts the story that was told to him by Floyd's son, Joe:

Floyd told him, "Iry, tomorrow we're going to Houston to make a recording." They were in two vehicles. Iry said, "I'd sure like to go. I've got some recordings I need to do." He (Floyd) said, "Well come over with us." Daddy (Iry) said, "I ain't got no money." He said, "We'll play over there and we'll pick up some money up there." And, that's how that came about.

These recordings were produced on Hess' Opera label and included country songs without Iry. But two cuts with Iry, "Love Bridge Waltz" and "Evangeline Two Step" (Opera 105A/B), two traditional Cajun melodies with words by Iry, had the most impact commercially. They were recorded on a "D" Monarch accordion with Leblanc on fiddle and Bozman on guitar. Other Tornadoes thought to be on the recording are Ben Oldag (bass), Dudley Champagne (drums), and Bennie Hess (guitar).

Regionally, the recording impacted Cajun audiences and accordionists much like Harry Choates' recording of "Jole Blon" had only a few months prior. "Love Bridge Waltz" / "Evangeline Two Step" became some of the most influential Cajun recordings after World War II. They were sought out by accordionists who wanted to learn Iry's unique style, a style which had drive, rhythm, and a defined melody line, often times with a bluesy feel. The excitement generated can be noted by Milton Vanicor's account upon Iry's return to Lacassine:

He (Iry) began to tell them of a recording he'd made while he was in Houston. They didn't know whether to believe this or not, but gave him the benefit of the doubt. He told them, "I made a record. A waltz; the "Love Bridge Waltz." On the other side was the "Evangeline Special." Iry continued to play dances while he lived with the Vanicors (in Lacassine), and after one trip back home he told them he'd finally heard that the record was going to come out and was going to be played on the radio on a Wednesday at 3:00. Everyone prepared for the Wednesday afternoon showcasing. Odile (Milton's wife) and Milton were hoeing cotton that day. Milton thinks it must have been sometime in May or later. Iry said, "They will announce that the song is going to come on and I'll call you and you can come in from the field to hear it."

When they announced it, he ran out on the porch and hollered. They were about 25 rows out in the field hoeing and they dropped their hoes and ran for the house. Milton recalls, "They put the waltz on. It made my hair straight. I could have cried."

Demand for Iry increased with booked dances from Breaux Bridge to Southeast Texas. By the late summer of 1947, he was appearing on KPLC radio in Lake Charles. From the Vanicor's home in Lacassine he played dances with numerous bands, including the Lacassine Playboys and Earl Demary's Musical Aces, as well as playing many gigs with only a guitarist like Ivy Vanicor or Houston Fruge.

After mending from a car crash in the fall of 1947, which broke his back, Iry returned to the road, following his dream to record and play even more. By 1950, he had contacted Eddie Shuler at soon-to-be Goldband Records and recorded additional sessions with the Lacassine Playboys, with "Duckhead" Cormier's Calcasieu Playboys, and his own unnamed group. Borrowing and creating from many different sources such as Jimmie Rodgers, musicians within his family, and the players in his band, Iry recorded many now famous tracks such as "Durald Waltz," "Grande Bosco," and "Convict Waltz," to name a few. Each song impacted generations to come, including the accordionists and vocalists of today, who still search for new ideas and direction for their playing in Iry's music.

The impact of the original Opera recordings also continues to influence today's generation of accordion players and can be found in the repertoires of most Cajun musicians. The "Love Bridge Waltz" is frequently the first tune many aspiring accordionists learn in their initial lessons. The recordings of "Love Bridge Waltz" and the driving "Evangeline Special" will continue to be some of the most significant in Cajun music history.

Ron Yule is a fiddler and country musician who independently researches Louisiana's many genres of country music including bluegrass, Cajun, country, and fiddle. He has performed workshops on fiddling and has written numerous books and articles on Louisiana's folk music tradition.

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