

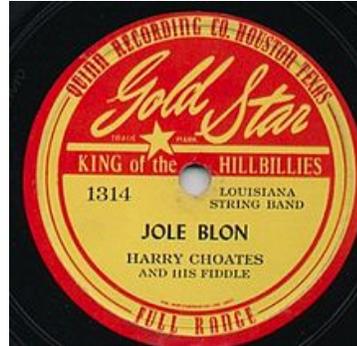
“Jole Blon”—Harry Choates (1946)

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Essay by Ryan Brasseaux (guest post)*



Harry Choates



Original label

“Jole Blon” (“Pretty Blond”) is a French-language Cajun waltz considered by many to be the “Cajun National Anthem.” Fiddler Harry Choates most notably recorded the song in 1946 on the Gold Star record label. The recording’s sweeping influence in the decades following World War II effectively inscribed Cajun music in the American musical songbook.

“Jole Blon” emerged from local tradition before becoming a national phenomenon. Though fiddler Wade Fruge famously suggested that the melody circulated in Louisiana as early as the 19th century, members of the Breaux family—Amédé (accordion), Ophy (fiddle), and Cléoma (guitar)—first recorded the waltz as “Ma Blonde est Parti” in Atlanta, Georgia, on April 18, 1929 for Columbia Records. Fiddler Leo Soileau followed suit in 1935. Soileau introduced the first accordion-less string band arrangement of the melody titled “La Valse de Gueydan.” His innovation spurred the song’s evolution while providing the musical blueprint that would captivate listeners for generations. In 1936, the Hackberry Ramblers rebranded the waltz by recording their own string band rendition under the title “Jolie Blond.” These permutations set the stage for Soileau’s apprentice, a virtuosic upstart named Harry Choates who would make his mark on the musical world with his interpretation of the waltz.

Harry Choates’ “Jole Blon” is perhaps the most improbable Cajun song to ever reach a national audience. Despite his arresting fiddle work, Choates was a chronic alcoholic who performed only on the dance hall circuit straddling the Louisiana-Texas border. He recorded “Jole Blon” for an obscure Gulf Coast label that, by chance, found national distribution through a small Los Angeles-based company. On March 31, 1946, the Cajun musician joined Jimmie Foster and his Texas-based Swingsters as a sideman for a recording session at the fledgling Gold Star studio in Houston, Texas. Gold Star’s founder and amateur producer, a transplanted New Englander named Bill Quinn, “required at least a dozen takes” before he was satisfied with Choates’ rendition of “Jole Blon.” Quinn then held onto the master until Choates returned to his studios on July 17, 1946, this time with a Louisiana-based Cajun ensemble the Melody Boys. On a

whim, Quinn released the Melody Boys' "Basile Waltz" as Side A, and the Swingster's version of "Jole Blon" as the record's B-side. The producer also misspelled the French *jolie blonde* and Choates ("Shoates") using English phonetics, thus forever altering the song title among Anglophone audiences. "Jole Blon" animated listeners across the region when a Houston disk jockey began to play the B-side. Skyrocketing record sales prompted Quinn to license the record with the Los Angeles-based Modern Music to keep up with unprecedented demand. Between 1946 and 1947, the song twice reached number four on "Billboard's" "Most Played Jukebox Hits." By 1947, Quinn expanded his licensing to the East Coast DeLuxe label as "Jole Blon" continued to circulate well beyond the Gulf Coast.

Dozens of celebrated musicians—including Moon Mullican, Bob Wills, Hank Snow, and Roy Acuff—recorded their own versions of Choates' hit. This cross-cultural transference initially occurred along the Gulf Coast. Mullican, a regular on the Louisiana/Texas circuit alongside Choates, released the first novelty adaptations of the waltz beginning with "New Pretty Blond (New Jole Blon)" (1946) and "Jole Blon's Sister" (1947). Mullican outlined just how the Cajun waltz became part of the Anglophone repertoire, at least at the local level, in the lyrics to the final song of his "Jole Blon" trilogy, "Jole Blon Is Gone, Amen" (1947). "Many years ago, down Louisiana way/I stopped into a honky tonk and this is what I heard 'em play," sings the Texas-born pianist before a fiddler articulates the "Jole Blon" melody. "The melody was haunting, as I recall that day/When a little man got up and sang a song in his own peculiar way." Mullican's band member, Clyde Brewer, then sings a French verse of "Jole Blon" before the bandleader continues: "These words they sound peculiar/No they didn't sound my way/So I just sang this 'Jole Blon' in the old Moon Mullican way." Mass media's reach beyond the region's honky tonks and dance halls further expanded the ways artists and audiences encountered "Jole Blon." While most English-language interpretations grew out of the country-and-western idiom, "Jole Blon" transcended region, culture, and genre, in part, because of the song's longevity. In 1958, rock and roll pioneer Buddy Holly convinced his bassist, the future country star Waylon Jennings, to record a French-language version of "Jole Blon." Jennings obliged. It launched Jennings' solo career. As late as 1981, the song reemerged on the rock scene thanks to a collaboration between Bruce Springsteen and Gary U.S. Bonds on the album "Dedication." Their duet titled "Jole Blon" was based off a Moon Mullican interpretation.

Through the process by which the Cajun waltz became a national phenomenon, Anglophone songwriters shifted markedly away from Cajun portrayals of the "Pretty Blond" character populating different adaptations of the song. French-language arrangements depict the mysterious woman as a heartbreaker who, sometimes acting on the advice of her hesitant family, "tu m'as quitté pour t'en aller...avec un autre" (left me for someone else). Several English language versions, on the other hand, depicted the Blond as uninhibited, sexually assertive, even perverse in the tradition of "Tobacco Road" and "Lil' Abner." Songs like Jack Rivers' "Shame, Shame on Jolie," Bud Messner and His Sky Line Boys' "Slippin' Around with Jole Blon," Betty Amos' "Jole John," and Sheb Wooley and His Calumet Indians's "Peeping Through the Key

Hole (Watching Jole Blon)” either flirt with hokum innuendo or openly describe how the character “makes whoopee” while going “wild on the bayou.”

Like the Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s “Livery Stable Blues” and Vernon Dalhart’s “Wreck of the Old 97”--the first hits in jazz and country respectively--“Jole Blon” changed the national conversation about a southern musical genre, even before the commercial breakthrough of Hank Williams, Sr. later the same year, paving the way for his Cajun-influenced hit “Jambalaya” and opening the doors for Cajun musicians like Jimmie C. Newman and Doug Kershaw, both of whom enjoyed ample mainstream success. “Jole Blon” ultimately made Cajun music nationally relevant in ways that helped forever change how Cajuns imagined their place in America.

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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.