

J.Q. Washowski
Eng 1310
Instructor: Kim Wells
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Research Proposal:
Iko-Iko: Traditional Cajun Party Meets Modern Day Families

The Topic

I want to write about a special kind of Cajun dance party that I experienced when I was a kid. From what I know, it sounds like a party specifically tied to the region in Louisiana called “Acadiana” or the place where “Cajuns” come from. I know a lot about the way the party works, but not much about the culture that contributes to its unique flair. I want to research Cajun music, food, and culture. What is Cajun; what is a *fais do-do*? What makes it any different from other culture in Louisiana, or for that matter, the South?

What I Know Already and What I Need to Research

Cajuns are only in a certain region of Louisiana. They speak a dialect of French called a Creole. I know I will need to look up what a creole is, to define what makes the culture so different from people who speak “high French” and even regular English. But at this point, I’m not really sure what a Creole dialect is. I don’t know if it has something to do with race, or class, or region. These things I need to know. I don’t know if people who speak Cajun/Creole are looked down upon by others or not, and/or if the language is “alive and kicking” or falling out of use.

I need to look into the kind of food that is popular in the region, since food is such a big part of the party. I think, for my oral presentation, I will try to bring both samples of the music and samples of the food. I need to know more about the dance styles– I think they mostly do a version of the Waltz and the Polka– but it seems slightly different. The types of musical

instruments that are used by the bands seem to be important— why accordions and spoons? Also, what are the themes in Cajun music? Love? Betrayal? I need to know what the songs are mostly saying, what the most popular songs are, and who the most popular artists are. When I began this research, I didn't actually know that there is a difference between Cajun music and Creole, and Zydeco. I've already learned a lot more about it than I thought I would!

My Research So Far

So far, I've found some great references, but one thing all these books have made me realize is that there is even more to find. A number of the websites that I found have links to other places, and I can tell that I need to do even more listening to the different kinds of music. I really did not know that the fais do-do was spelled that way— it's very different from the “traditional” French spelling, which would be *allez dormir*. The closest in French to fais do-do is “make sleep.” Which is actually a little different too! So there's a lot to learn about the difference between French and Creole French, that I'm just starting. I've also learned that it's not a simple thing to research the actual dance party. There is a lot out there about Cajuns, and the type of music, but very little about the specifics of the party. I expected there to be lots of websites. There is a bar in New Orleans called fais do-do, and a band, and a lot of songs by the name. So I will have some sorting out to do.

Introduction to the Essay and My Working Thesis:

Laissez le bon temps roulez! This expression (usually yelled over ca-chink-ca-chink music) probably sums up the attitude of the Cajun folks that I lived with for several years during my childhood better than anything I can think of. The phrase, Cajun French for “let the good times roll” can be heard everywhere from the streets of New Orleans' French quarter to the

smallest town that is barely more than a couple of churches, a school, and a couple of seedy bars. Nothing else sums up “laissez le bon temps roulez” better, though, than the fais do-do, an all-night dance party that could put today’s rave parties to shame. The Cajun fais do-do represents good times; it means family getting together to laugh, to eat and to stay up all night just for the sheer joy of living. Sure there may be a reason for the party, a birthday or a Catholic feast day, but most of the time, it’s a party of the sake of having a party. The party goes on so long that the kids all fall asleep under the long tables stacked with food, hence the name– Cajun French for “go to sleep.”

So if you’re lucky enough to be invited, and you look around, the first thing that you’ll probably see is a Zydeco band on a hastily constructed stage. Zydeco music is also called ca-chink-ca-chink music, for the steady beat that is a background in almost all of it. The zydeco band consists of several guitar players, a drum set, maybe a fiddle-player and definitely an accordion player (a required part of Cajun music is the accordion– but this “aint no polka” music). There might be someone playing an old-fashioned worn-out washboard with spoons, and a tambourine player, but these folks might just have stepped out of the audience to help with the beat. The singer usually wails his/her vocals in Cajun French, a mixture of formal French, Spanish, some of the Native Americans from the area with dialects from Africa mixed in for good measure. Cajuns speak a Creole of French and most zydeco music is sung in Cajun, with an English word thrown in now and then, just for good measure. The *Precinct Reporter* newspaper defines Cajun music as consisting of:

the fiddle and the accordion, accompanied by a triangle or spoons for keeping time are the traditional Cajun musical instruments. Cajun musicians have been influenced by country

and western Afro-American, swing, and blue-grass. Zydeco refers to the Creole counterpart of Cajun music, incorporating R & B, jazz, blues and recently urban soul. Much of its distinctive Afro-Caribbean sound comes from a percussion instrument known as the *frottoir*, a corrugated metal vest that the wearer plays with spoons, bottle openers or other metal scrapers (1).

Annotated Bibliography

Bernard, Kara Tobin and Shane K. Bernard. "Fais Do-Do" *Encyclopedia of Cajun Culture*.

October 26, 2003. <<http://www.cajunculture.com/Other/faisdodo.htm>>.

The whole website, called the *Encyclopedia of Cajun Culture*, will be useful for my project, but this entry on fais do-do is particularly helpful. It's a short definition, with two good photos. It describes the fais do-do as "a communal dance held traditionally in rural dancehalls, the fais do-do attracted Cajun men, women, and children for long evenings of dancing and socializing." I found the website to be a good place to find quick and easy definitions, as well as some useful photos. One thing that is very useful is the list of links to other references on the Internet, which can help me to expand my research beyond what I myself know already.

Bessman, Jim. *Arhoolie Vid Combines Cajun Music with Pig Slaughter and Feast*.

Billboard 11/07/98. np.

This is a very short article about a video, directed by Chris Strachwitz which describes a Cajun style party called a *boucherie*. The party sounds very similar to a faix do-do, and the article defines partly what the party is about. The review describes the video as a 30-minute music-filled tape, subtitled "A Cajun *Boucherie* And Other Louisiana Traditions" which Strachwitz directed, includes footage of the live Cajun music radio show emanating Saturday mornings from the landmark Fred's Lounge in nearby Namou, as well as the simultaneous Saturday morning jam session at the Savoy Music Center in Eunice, La., where Marc Savoy manufactures his prized Cajun accordions." I think I need to get the video, and will look for it.

But the article itself has been very useful in two things: letting me know that the video exists and showing me that there are other kinds of parties that Cajuns are big on, and so I can perhaps make the distinction in my paper.

“Cajun, Zydeco Festival Slated.” *Precinct Reporter*, 6/3/1993: C-3.

This is a very short newspaper article of approximately 365 words that mostly describes a music festival in the Long Beach Rainbow Lagoon. The article mentions that food will be served, lists the different bands which will be attending, music and dance workshops, children’s face-painting and other activities that will take place.

The way that it is useful for me is that it defines zydeco music.

Daigle, Jules O. *A Dictionary of the Cajun Language*. Swallow Publishers, 1984.

An extensive dictionary of the Cajun French dialect. A useful reference for those familiar with spoken Cajun French, but not with its written form, or for those who are just learning the language. Compiled by the late Jules O. Daigle, Catholic priest of Cajun ancestry who strove to save the Cajun dialect from extinction. This will prove useful in getting a feel for the Cajun language and for looking up any words I don’t know already.

Della Piana, Libero. “The Racial Gumbo of Louisiana: Libero Della Piana Samples the Culinary Traditions and Rich History of Creoles and Cajuns” *Color Lines* 1/31/2002. 15-16. This is a very helpful and crucial article, downloaded from the database available in our library called the Ethnic News Watch that provides historical background, definition, and details about what Louisiana creole culture is. It gives a specific distinction between Creoles and Cajuns and reports that the 1990

Census counted 407,319 Cajuns in Louisiana. It defines Creole from a linguistic standpoint, as well as a type of food and culture and music. It very interestingly discusses the racial divisions between the predominantly white Cajun and mostly black Creole culture of Louisiana. It is useful for me because it will help me define the cultures that practice the fais do-do.

Francois, Raymond E. *Ye Yaille Chere, Traditional Cajun Dance Music*. Swallow Publishers, 1990.

Includes words and music to 247 Original and Traditional songs. Cajun music is collected, transcribed, and annotated by Raymond E. Francois. *Ye Yaille Chere* is a comprehensive collection of music from southwest Louisiana from 1900 and earlier to nearly 1970. This book is a valuable reference for anyone interested in Cajun music and the Cajun culture. Tunes, turns, chord changes, and words are documented in manuscript for more than 240 selections, ranging from old songs which have nearly been forgotten to the classic songs of Cajun repertoire. Variations of many songs are included, and songs are cross-referenced to original and other recordings and to related songs. Reminiscences by Cajun musicians and extensive notes provide a musical and cultural setting for the selections.

Goldshlag, Nate. "Mamou Jitterbug Dance Instruction." October 26, 2003.

<http://home.comcast.net/~n.goldshlag/mamou_jitterbug_dance.html>.

This website was quite a find. It lists eleven dance steps that are done to Cajun music, from the "open basic" position to "integrating with the Mamou two-step." It gives "lead" and "follower" positions, foot steps, and "twirls," as well as hand

positions. Goldshlag is a dance instructor who likes to specialize in Cajun dance steps. The website will help me to define what it is that is different about Cajun dance.

George, Bob. "*Festival De Louisiane Salutes Cajun, Francophone Cultures.*" *Billboard* 5/28/94 1-3.

This is a magazine article on the annual *Festival de Louisiane* held at Lafayette, Louisiana celebrating the southwestern city's Cajun heritage. The article describes an expression of amity with Francophone cultures from around the world; it lists and describes several represented acts; the theme of the event; makes comparisons with New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival; and discusses the "family orientation" of *Festival de Louisiane*. One important element of the article for my purposes is its history of Cajun and zydeco music and the recording industry in area.

Hebert, Timothy. *Acadian-Cajun Genealogy: Step by Step*. Univ of Louisiana at Lafayette, 1994.

An indispensable handbook for amateur or professional genealogists conducting research on Cajun/Acadian genealogy. Shows step-by-step how to trace family trees from the present-day to the arrival of the Acadians in colonial Louisiana and even further back to the New World arrival of the "first families" of Acadia in the seventeenth century. Published by the Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, a trusted name in genealogical works.

Sandmel, Ben. "*Allons Danser; Cajun and Creole Hands Are Conserving Native Music.*" *The Atlantic* July 1987. 88-90.

A in-depth article which defines Cajun music, history, and culture. Discusses important Cajun musicians, the makeup of the bands and the way Cajuns are using things like the music and dance to preserve a culture increasingly in danger of being lost to American assimilationism. Useful in its simplicity and directness.

Stansbury, Lisa. "Where Black History Is More than a Footnote." *Miami Times* 6/17/2003: 5A.

A short book review, from a newspaper, of a book that gives historical background into black history, and especially the history of the Creoles in Louisiana. Discusses the various historic events that blacks in New Orleans took part in, including the Civil War and later, the article argues in part that Louisiana is a model for the racial community of the rest of the U.S. The article is helpful because it condenses a lot of historical information into a quick readable format; however, I think that it will not help me much with defining the fais do-do.

Stivale, Charles J. "Becoming Cajun." *Cultural Studies*. 14:2(2000). 147-177.

Focuses on the difficulties encountered in developing a scholarly project on French cultural studies. Difference of Cajun dance and music between cities and country sites; Consideration of the works of theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; Ways of cultural studies to travel geographically. Specifically, discusses and defines "cultural studies," and in particular, French cultural studies. One of the interesting parts of this article is that it combines the autobiographical account of the article's author, Stivale, with the studies that he performs, and therefore, makes the culture come alive. Very useful in defining "Cajun" but at times a bit on the "scholarly,"

“jargon-laden” side.

Wynn, Ron. “Improvisations.” *Tennessee Tribune*. 11/29/2000:6B.

An excellent short article that defines Zydeco music, some of the major contributing bands, and some of its greatest artists. A good part of the article is its list of songs that would be considered Zydeco, and several CD anthologies one would use to play this sort of music. May be useful for a general understanding of the type of music that is played at a fais do-do.