

# SAY HELLO TO ZYDECO

**CREOLE MUSIC BORN IN SOUTH LOUISIANA**

BY CHERIE YURCO

■ Zydeco is a style of music with an infectious dance groove that was developed by the Creole (French-speaking African Americans) living in Southwest Louisiana. The style evolved from rural house parties called *la la's*, which began around 1900 in prairie towns like Opelousas, Lafayette, Eunice, and Mamou. At these gatherings, *juré*, the syncopated music style of singing and clapping common among black fieldworkers, merged with other Creole and Cajun influences.

Europeans also played a role in the evolution when Italian and German immigrants introduced Creoles to the accordion, which became a staple of the genre. By the late 1940s, Creole musicians were further inspired by the rhythm and blues and jazz they heard on the radio and juke boxes. They blended it with French sounds and homegrown *la la* music to create zydeco.

Opelousas is often referred to as the birthplace of zydeco. This is probably because Clifton “King of Zydeco” Chenier, one of the first musicians to popularize the genre outside of Louisiana, was from Opelousas. His hits from the mid-1950s included “Les Haricots Sont Pas Salés,” which means “the snap beans ain’t salty,”—a reference to tough times and being unable to afford salt pork to season the beans. The name zydeco then evolved from this phrase.

Even before the genre got its name, zydeco bands had already phased out the fiddle and begun using the vest frottoir (or rubboard)—an innovation introduced in the 1940s by Cleveland Chenier, Clifton’s brother. This percussion instrument was inspired by the traditional rhythm produced by notched sticks or scraped animal jaws. Most modern zydeco bands consist of accordion (piano and/or button box), frottoir, electric guitar, bass, drums, and sometimes keyboard and/or brass instruments.

The zydeco we hear today continues to evolve, gradually blending with other musical styles, while maintaining its characteristic sound. Today you can hear Caribbean, R&B, blues, jazz, African, Latin, and even hip-hop influences in zydeco’s syncopated rhythms.







Rosie Ledet & the Zydeco Playboys at the Acadiana Center for the Arts in Lafayette, Louisiana.



Sha Me Nu with Donna Angelle jamming in St. Martinville, Louisiana.



Lil' Pookie & the Zydeco Sensations perform at Café Des Amis in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana.

Photos: Cherie Yurco

The best place to go to hear live zydeco music is Southeast Louisiana, where there are numerous festivals and venues that celebrate the genre year-round. Here are a few possibilities:

**Festival International de Louisiane, Lafayette:**

This five-day festival is held during the last week of April, in historic downtown Lafayette. Music performances from local and international acts are held on six stages. It is designed to celebrate cultural expression in a variety of forms, and to encourage understanding and appreciation for different cultures.

**Crawfish Festival, Breaux Bridge:**

A three-day festival in early May, the Crawfish Festival features numerous local zydeco acts.

**Southwest Louisiana Zydeco Music Festival, Opelousas:**

Held the Saturday of Labor Day weekend, live zydeco music plays from 11:00 a.m. until 1:00 a.m. Several pre-festival events take place in the week prior.

**Festivals Acadiens et Créoles, Lafayette:**

This festival started in 1972 as an effort to keep Cajun and Creole culture alive. Since then, it has grown into a three-day event held in October that attracts people from all over the world.

**Café Des Amis, Breaux Bridge:**

This popular restaurant holds a zydeco breakfast every Saturday at 8:30 a.m. Doors open at 7:30 a.m. and it's best to get there early.