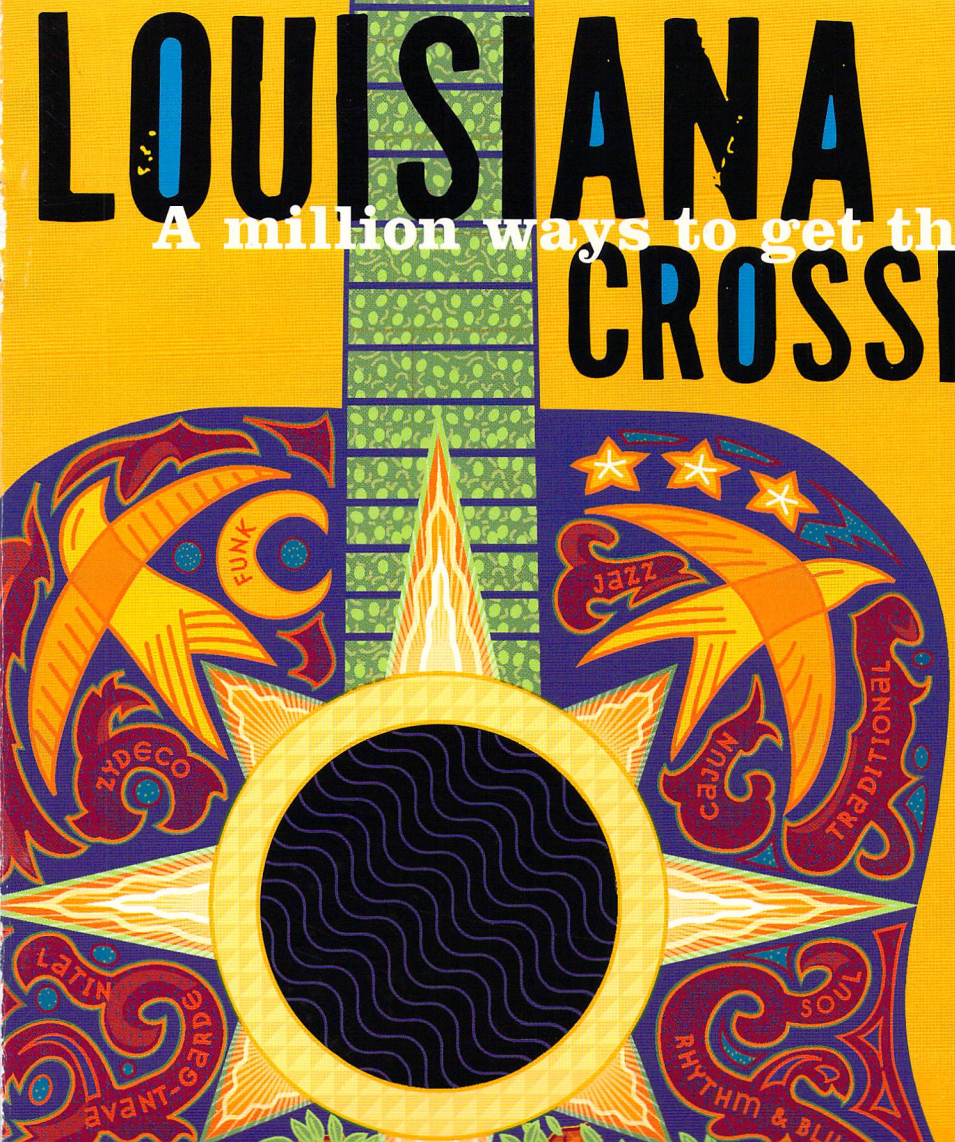
LOUISIANA CROSSROADS

A million ways to get there

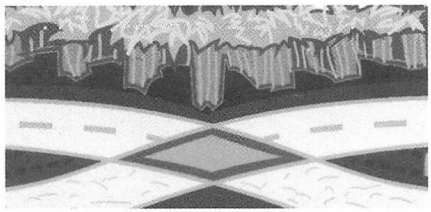


MUSICAL JOURNEYS

CROSSING ROADS,

By John Laudun

The scene is unforgettable for all who witnessed it: a thin, somewhat nervous, young white man makes his way through the darkness to the stage. The black woman on the stage laughs somewhat nervously herself, unsure of what is happening, about to happen. The young man finds his way onto the stage and proceeds to read an African praise poem. He overcomes his fears and delivers the poem with some force and even a touch of humor. When he is done, the crowd roars its approval as he makes his way back to his seat.



CROSSING LIVES

The people in the audience applaud the boy for being so brave as to read a poem in public, to dare to be artistic and expressive, to be open to the world. They applaud the woman not only for encouraging the boy to write but also for giving him a moment to shine. They are also applauding the moment in which all this occurs, a moment which has brought them together, to share the intimacy of a teacher and her pupil, as they both stand together in the circle of light on the stage.

The boy is a local high school student, here in Lafayette where I live and write this. The woman is Glenis Redmond, a performance poet. Sharing the stage with her that night was Scott Ainslie, a white blues musician. To call her simply a poet and to call him simply a blues musician is to undo all that they do on stage. They are performers and educators and writers and players. The stage they shared was Louisiana Crossroads.

Share is the operative word during any of the Louisiana Crossroads performances. Though the hall got larger when the series moved from its original spot in The Art House to the grand, wooden space of Vermilionville, the performances have remained intimate moments in the lives of the performers and in the lives of the audience, which is how performances should be, individuals gathered together for the momentary pleasure of community in and of itself. What has continued to delight observers like myself is the range of those gathered into these momentary communities: young, old, black, white, men, women, long-time arts supporters, first-time listeners, the erudite, and the just plain curious.

When the Acadiana Arts Council started Louisiana Crossroads, their goal was small: to establish a concert series that would give performers and audience members a chance to

interact in a setting conducive to such meetings. Along the way they discovered that not only was there a market for such an endeavor but that, when allowed, such interaction becomes a serious business.

What they discovered is the very heart of human creativity, which is community, and the very heart of what makes Louisiana the incredibly creative place it is, the willingness people have here to take a little bit of something from their neighbors' lives and include it within their own.

A fancier word for this is creolization, and I introduce the idea here to think a little about the lens that Louisiana Crossroads presents us. Peering through that lens, we can gaze into the past and see the long line of neighbors, doing what people have always done — worked, played, gotten married, raised families. Now just because I begin with the idea of neighbors doesn't mean we should assume that everyone was equal. Louisiana's rich history is also a troubled one, with slavery and racism's long legacy entering early and staying late. The fences that divided neighbors often reflected relationships of unequal, and sometimes brutal, power.

Fences aren't, however, very good at keeping out ideas. The ancestors of those who

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currently call themselves Cajuns, Creoles, and African Americans often occupied roughly similar places in the social and economic hierarchy. Often the frictions that occurred within communities, some of which had deadly outcomes, came about because the members of these groups were fighting for the same, scarce resources. Despite such possibilities for antagonism, young blacks found themselves listening outside the windows of Cajun dance halls while young whites were listening outside the doors of blues clubs, just as their parents had listened to the strains of music that escaped *bals de maisons* and blues house parties.

It is no historical accident, then, that the two men most often cited as the fathers, or at least significant shapers, of Cajun and zydeco music in the twentieth century are Amédé Ardoin and Dennis McGee, proof that people do indeed cross roads in order to cross their lives. The danger that lies in crossing is perhaps best seen in the tragic tale of Ardoin (please see *Suggestions for Further Study*). At the same time, his story is an example of how music brings people together and how far we have yet to go to live up to music's possibilities.

These two men, and many others, deserve our admiration and respect, but they are not alone. Indeed, they represent a much larger social and cultural scene. We would be doing ourselves as well as the spirit of Louisiana Crossroads a disservice if we did not

acknowledge this fact. This larger scene goes by a variety of names, each of which tries as best it can to grasp some fundamental aspect of the underlying historical and cultural dynamics at work. The scene to which I am referring is the larger stage of south Louisiana, which has also been called the French triangle, south of the South, and the northernmost tip of the Caribbean.

The territory marked off by such poetic appellations arcs up from New Orleans, through Baton Rouge, to Avoyelles Parish and then glides back down again to the Lake Charles area. Along its base are the many cheniers, bays, canals, bayous, cuts, lakes, islands and marshes that form the Louisiana coast. Just as the boundary between the Gulf of Mexico and Louisiana is not clear, so too are the landlocked boundaries: they are rough, weaving in and out of the smooth lines I have drawn here so quickly; and they are diffuse, allowing people to come and go, taking and bringing with them ideas they got within and without the territory. Southeastern Texas and the Mississippi Delta have their own sounds, but if you listen closely, you will find echoes of ideas and traces of people crossing the imaginary lines we draw on maps. The result is an amazing mix of cultural forms and their functions.

Historically, the mixing begins early, even from the outset. Of course, most histories

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"begin" with the arrival of European explorers at the end of the seventeenth century. Even in a brief introduction to the idea of Louisiana as a crossroads, it would be difficult to ignore the archeological record which shows rocks like flint from the north in the possession of the natives that lined Louisiana's shores, just as it would be hard to ignore the shark's teeth and salt they traded for such rocks.

France beat Spain in claiming Louisiana, both seeing it as an opportunity to expand their own empires as well as an opportunity to limit England's. From the beginning, though, the French settlement at Natchitoches was in constant communication with its Spanish neighbors, just as New Orleans would, within a year of its founding, delve into the African slave trade. Alongside enslaved Africans flowed in Germans, Isleños, Acadians, Italians, Irish, and many, many others. In the case of at least one of these groups, the Acadians, they brought with them a European culture already seriously acclimatized to the New World.

They also came in waves and faced stops along the way. The Acadians who were forced out of what is now Nova Scotia were either dumped in some of England's nearby colonies, the original 13 colonies, returned to Europe, or spent time in the West Indies. Also spending time in the islands of the Caribbean were African slaves, many of whom would eventually be bound for Louisiana. We have reason to believe some of the dishes we now call Cajun and/or Creole first began to cook in Haiti and Cuba. Red beans and rice is but one example.

The mixing, then, that is the very foundation of Louisiana's folk cultures precedes their arrival in Louisiana, just as that mixing proceeds even today, with practitioners of various traditions like cooking or making music always looking to improve, in their own minds and to their own tastes, what they are capable of producing.

Past performances of the Louisiana Crossroads series have highlighted this amazing engine of cultural continuity and change, which foregrounded what folklorists as well as practitioners have always known: there is no innovation without tradition. Without the sounds of Cajun fiddles, blues guitars, zydeco *frottoirs* — let alone the sounds of so many distinct, yet familiar, voices — there could have been no swamp pop, no zydeco funk, no Cajun rock. And such a list ignores what Louisiana's musical natives have contributed to the larger, national and international musical traditions.

We know jazz passed through Louisiana crossroads, as did the blues, but if we keep

our sights only on physical geographies, then we lose the intellectual and emotional geographies that the series has mapped so well, and continues to map with this year's lineup of amazing musicians who love to play and play to love. If you picked up this introduction at the same time you bought the first series CD, then you already have in your hands one of the most common crossroads we have in our time. As you sit down to listen to the live recordings, or, better, as you sit down tonight and enjoy an actual live performance, then you have in your heart the crossroads we all carry within us all the time.

Enjoy the ride, my friends, enjoy the night. The Louisiana Crossroads series counts our stars for us, naming us in turn.

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Suggestions for Further Study

A great deal of additional information on the ideas and events mentioned in "Crossing Roads, Crossing Lives" is readily available. Two great Web sites can steer you according to your passions and the amount of time you have to devote to such pursuits. The first is maintained by the Louisiana Folklife Program and is dedicated to documenting and promoting many of the traditions mentioned above. Another Web site, more focused on history, is hosted by the Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism (CCET) at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Both sites host an amazing number of articles and encyclopedic entries as well as photos and audio files, and both aim to be as complete and current as possible. Their URLs are:

Louisiana Folklife Program: www.crt.state.la.us/folklife

University of Louisiana at Lafayette Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism: www.louisiana.edu/Academic/LiberalArts/CCET

Both Web sites offer bibliographies and discographies for the interested reader and/or listener. They also reveal a dependable network of folklorists, anthropologists, historians, and community scholars who you can contact and who are usually quite happy to give you a better idea of where you might continue your research, depending on what you are interested in and what you already know.