LOUISIANA CROSSROADS

A million ways to get there

MUSICAL JOURNEYS

From kombo to where past

We will never know for certain how Africans, long incarcerated first in the cells of coastal forts and later in the holds of slave ships, managed to secret okra seeds to the Americas or how they managed to defy their own hunger for food, but secret and defy they did. Not only did they introduce an entirely new vegetable but they also brought with them their word for it, *gombo*. ◦ As soon as the doors of the new colony swung open, the slave trade began. It is a fact of our history that Louisiana, like the rest of the Europeans' "New World," was a giant get-rich-quick scheme. The same imagination that

combo: meets future

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pushes industry overseas in the present brought industry here in the past. One way to lower costs was slavery.

The peoples already on the continent did not make very good slaves and continually slipped their bonds and retreated deeper into a still mysterious frontier. But just as the people who were becoming African Americans continually found ways to engage the colony's actions on their own terms, by working to acquire their freedom or escaping themselves, the people of the First Nations of the continent engaged as best they could.

One way they did so was by selling foods and herbs they cultivated or gathered in town markets. One herb that was particularly intriguing and found its way into what was becoming south Louisiana cuisine was ground sassafras leaves, commonly called by their French name, *filé*, but known to the Choctaws and others as *kombo*.

Like so much else in American culture in general and Louisiana culture in particular, our pots of gumbo, found cooking simultaneously in thousands of kitchens, were first set up in crossroads. The larger American ideal is the melting pot, where everyone becomes one thing. The Louisiana reality is that everyone brings something to the pot, but that doesn't mean everyone comes out with the same dish. Driving from Ville Platte to Delcambre, from Henderson to Crowley about this time of year, when the gumbo pots start to come out, pretty much makes that point.

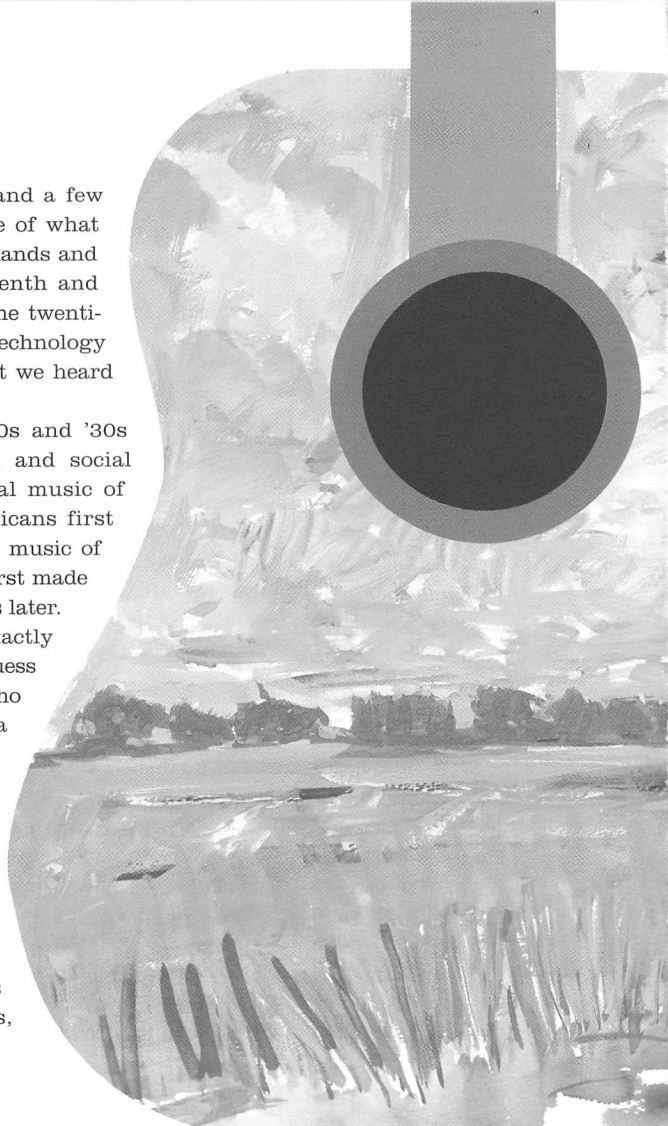
The same goes for Louisiana music, too.

Thanks to some written descriptions and a few decently parsed lyrics, we have some sense of what music was like along the bayous, in the wetlands and on the prairies of Louisiana in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But it was not until the twentieth century, with the advent of recording technology and the birth of the recording industry, that we heard for ourselves what was happening.

Those audio snapshots from the 1920s and '30s come after almost 200 years of cultural and social exchange. By searching out the traditional music of West Africa, we try to guess what the Africans first sang here. By searching out the traditional music of France, we hope to imagine how Acadians first made music when they began to arrive five decades later.

Truth be told, we will never know exactly what people sang or played. We can only guess how exactly those first interchanges went. Who heard what? Who first tapped their feet to a rhythm they had never heard before? Who first hummed a tune they heard in passing?

And then, what happened as fresh waves of immigrants and slaves arrived? Imagine south Louisiana on the verge of its population growing half again as the refugees of the Haitian Revolution, black and white, came in three distinct waves. And later, of course, significant populations of Irish and German immigrants, Czechs,



We are, all of us, in some small but significant way, African American and European American and even a little Native American. That's just a fact. We eat crawfish. We follow blues progressions. We raise levees.

Italians and Jews arrived. We cannot imagine the Louisiana landscape without them. Imagine our world without rice on every table, without chicken spaghetti, without the mazurka, without the accordion.

An old saying maintains wherever you go, there you are. Well, here we are in south Louisiana, all of us, tumbled together. We have two choices: we can worry about sorting ourselves out or we can just throw ourselves back into the pile and let things sort themselves out in due course.

Happily, it seems to have been the choice of most of the folk cultures of Louisiana to pursue the latter course. That's largely why we have our music, our food, and so much else today. We are, all of us, in some small but significant way, African American and European American and even a little Native American. That's just a fact. We eat crawfish. We follow blues progressions. We raise levees.

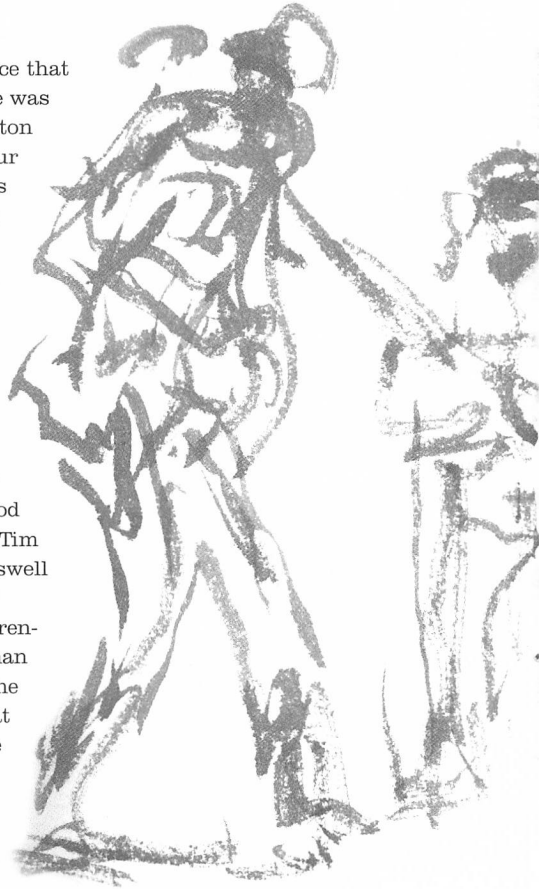
Which raises another important issue: Did all those folks who have given us all these gifts think only of the past as they made their world? If we turn to just two folks from our own time, Clifton Chenier and Dewey Balfa, then we know the answer: No.

Both Dewey and Clifton drew from the past but their focus was on the present,

with an eye to the future. In their present was an audience that wanted to dance, to move and to be moved. In their future was the next generation of musicians, who would take Clifton and Dewey into the current century. Their present is our past; their future our present. The rhythms and melodies that Dewey and Clifton assembled are now firmly a part of each and every one of us: we move to them in the same way we take in air and breathe it out again.

There are many other greats, and some are still in our midst. Each reveals just how wide and how deep Louisiana music is. If you need proof that the bayous and prairies and marshes and piney woods and even the city streets of Louisiana gave birth to more than what we now call Cajun and Creole music, think only of Bunk Johnson or Leadbelly or Jerry Lee Lewis or Mickey Gilley or Buddy Guy or Slim Harpo or Louis Armstrong or Rod Bernard or Dale Houston and Grace Broussard or Tim McGraw or Fats Domino or Mahalia Jackson or the Boswell Sisters or even Randy Newman.

During a momentary break between transcendental renditions of songs like "Slow Horses and Fast Women," Nathan Williams was asked if there had been no zydeco, would he still have played music and what kind of music might that have been? Admitting to a Louisiana Crossroads audience that he used to sing B.B. King's guitar solos, Nathan said he might have gone down the path of rhythm and blues.



Mark, Dennis Paul and Nathan Williams at Louisiana Crossroads, Jan. 15, 2003

Nathan Williams reminded his Crossroads audience, "I make my living on the road, but I love to play in Louisiana." So go across town. Go somewhere you have never been before. Talk to people you wouldn't normally talk to. Keep the spirit of Louisiana's folk culture alive.

It's a fact that Nathan is now a major figure in zydeco music, but who knows what the future might have been like if a 12 year old from St. Martinville had decided he would rather play guitar?

You – and those seated near you – are part of the future of Louisiana music. The sounds and stories you hear tonight and each night of the series may figure in your journey. Imagine a future in which music from the First Nations resonates and is intertwined with the classical music of India. Roll in some boogie woogie.

Sprinkle with a bit more bluegrass. Don't forget to serve it over some jazz, and you got quite a dish.

Which is all to say that the present matters. Thank you for coming to the Crossroads performances. Thank you for supporting these musicians as they create our musical present for us and hint at what the future might be. Being here matters. Their being here matters. Let them know how much you appreciate them: buy their CDs, go to their shows, insist your friends go with you — as Nathan Williams reminded his Crossroads audience, "I make my living on the road, but I love to play in Louisiana." Go across town. Go somewhere you have never been before. Talk to people you wouldn't normally talk to. Keep the spirit of Louisiana's folk culture alive.

That's what the Louisiana Crossroads series tries to do. It honors the past, but it knows we are headed into the future. This year's lineup of musicians continues that tradition. I hope you are as excited as I am about having Ulali begin a series that finishes with Zachary Richard. In between, we get to welcome Daybreak, Frankie & Sean Gavin, Sandip Burman & Friends, John Mooney, and the Maurice Brown Quintet.

Who knows what will come of all this? These crossroads of ours are always about both the past and the future. They are here to allow our imaginations to run up and down them, to imagine the past the way it might have been and the future the way it might be. The present is right here, where the two meet, but who can ever tell which foot is where, past or future?

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Suggestions for Further Study

A great deal of additional information on the ideas and events mentioned in *From kombo to combo* is readily available. The Web sites below are a good place for interested individuals to start:

Louisiana Folklife Program: **www.crt.state.la.us/folklife**
University of Louisiana at Lafayette Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism: **ccet.louisiana.edu**