

Introduction

“The Good Times Are Killing Me”



Do you ever wonder what is music? Who invented it and what for and all that? And why hearing a certain song can make a whole entire time of your life suddenly rise up and stick in your brain?—Lynda Barry, *The Good Times Are Killing Me*

This study began on the dance floor, with experiences of joy and pain. The sources of joy shall become evident in the following pages—the music, the movement, the musicians, the many friends and dance partners with whom I have shared time and space on and off the dance floor. The pain is from the loss of many of these same experiences and friends, mostly due to different sorts of distance and, early on, through death. Whereas the joyful experiences exist as fond memories and still as activities as near as the closest dance hall, I have come to understand that the painful experiences—of loss of place, loss of friends and loved ones, even loss of self—also must remain thriving at the very heart of Cajun and Creole music. Indeed, the names of legendary musicians who have passed on—tragically, like Amédé Ardoin, Iry LeJeune, Will Balfa, and Rodney Balfa, and prematurely, like Dewey Balfa, Tommy Comeaux, and Beau Jocque—hover above this musical expression as a reminder of just how fleeting the joy of its experience can be. Zachary Richard sums up the paradox of *les bons temps*, the good times that just keep on rolling, in this way: “The basic contradiction of Cajun music . . . is that you have songs which are about nothing but heartache, loneliness, loss—loss of

love, loss of property, loss of stature in the society, all of these things—on this music that is absolutely joyful. So it's this incredible contradiction that is part of the Cajun soul, I think. You know, that even in pain you celebrate" (qtd. in Mouton 1999, 40).

This paradox lies at the heart of understanding what I call the Cajun dance arena (which is necessarily a music arena as well), and this volume examines the different means by which identity and authenticity are constructed within and in relation to this arena.¹ These constructions encompass recent Cajun cultural history, but through the music and dance forms they also stretch back to the origins of Cajun and Creole culture in southern Louisiana. Moreover, these constructions not only raise fundamental issues about Cajun and Creole identities and what constitutes authenticity in relation to them but also about questions of popular memory, of cultural representation, and of social exclusion. In this study, I conjoin my understanding of Cajun dance and music culture to these different questions and issues.

Furthermore, I situate my study of constructions of identity and authenticity in the Cajun dance and music arena in relation to the ongoing disciplinary dialogue between, on one hand, French and francophone cultural studies and, on the other, various Anglo-American modes of pursuing cultural studies and research. As Fredric Jameson has noted, one difficulty in defining "the desire called Cultural Studies" as a program of research and study lies precisely in its "relationship to the established disciplines" (1993, 18). Although I return to the question of definition in chapter 1, I conceptualize the goals of this study as located at a juncture in between disciplines, with a hybrid approach derived from a number of critical sources, most notably from the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. I hope in this way to enliven and enrich the understanding of a genuine, if not entirely indigenous, American form of cultural expression with the scholarly tools available in the interdisciplinary fields of contemporary cultural studies.

To meet this cross-disciplinary challenge, I undertake my reflection on Louisiana Cajun music and dance and their cultural representations as a means of "disenchanted *les bons temps*." This French phrase derives from the familiar Louisiana declaration *laissez les bons temps rouler*, let the good times roll, employed by Louisiana residents and nonresidents alike to characterize the spirit of the stereotypically carefree approach to life in the Pelican State.² Yet, although it is seemingly an unambiguous evoca-

tion of *joie de vivre*, this expression also places an exuberant face on the hard times and pain at the heart of Cajun and Creole cultural life.

As for the term “disenchanted,” it is located in a number of discourses.³ For my purposes, I borrow it from Sylvia Wynter (1987) in order to demystify different facets of the cultural representations that sustain the spirit and myth of *les bons temps* while also celebrating this very spirit and myth. One might well wonder why such demystification need be undertaken at all. I explain more fully in chapter 1 the steps that helped me to conceptualize this project, but here I will only point out that the constructions of identity and authenticity in the Cajun dance and music arena manifest ways in which contemporary societies and social groups deploy cultural representations for a broad range of strategic and ideological ends.

The dual facets of joy and pain in *les bons temps* have an almost logical counterpart in the contradictory thrust: on one hand, these facets help cultural agents to promote Cajun culture to as wide a market as possible (through tourism, music, dance, and food, and often conflating Cajun and Creole in the process). On the other hand, some of the same cultural agents (and many others) often demand respect for the “authenticity” of this (singular) “tradition.” In making such a demand, these agents sometimes fail to recognize that the natural development of forms of cultural expression results in their escaping such tightly controlled traditional boundaries. This line of cultural flight is all the more likely to be uncontrollable when it also results from national and international strategies of promotion.⁴ In this sense, my study seeks to join a number of remarkable recent works as an exploration of the conjuncture of practices by local cultural agents and the effects of these practices on wider, global representations.⁵

Alongside this project of demystification of *les bons temps*, however, I insist on the crucial impetus within this study of stating the complementary enchantment of *les bons temps*. Indeed, I had considered repeatedly setting off the prefix “dis” with parentheses—that is, as “(dis)enchanted”—in order to communicate scripturally this dual emphasis. In any case, rather than “declining” *les bons temps*—that is, “an ambiguous gesture of refusal and participation at the same time” (Rosello 1998, 13)—I conceptualize this project as at once celebrating the paradox of joy and pain inherent to practices of the Cajun dance and music arena and pursuing the critique of frequent distortions in representations of these very

practices. For, even when the cultural agents active in this arena contribute to such representations, one can understand their activity as a form of “minority discourse,” a form of fabulation that Deleuze describes as “catch[ing] someone in the act of legending”—that is, “to catch the movement of constitution of a people” (1995, 125–26).

This dual strategy of disenchanting informs the overall organization of the chapters that follow. I begin by explaining how this project evolved, starting from the passion I developed as a fan of Cajun music and a dance practitioner, the scholarly interest that grew slowly from this personal affinity, and the challenges that arose during the project’s realization. Thus, in chapter 1, “Becoming-Cajun,” I trace my own becomings—personal and professional—by focusing on a poorly understood and relatively little discussed form of American music and dance expressions with a unique heritage in French and francophone cultures. I then examine how these expressions may be linked and how they contribute to various modes of Cajun self-representation, constitution of identity (although the plural, “identities,” is a more precise term), and concerns for authenticity. The opening development provides the bases for actively disenchanting *les bons temps* through the twofold thrust of celebration and critique. By celebrating the thematics of the Cajun music repertoire (chapter 2) and the dance arena in terms of its spaces of affects (chapter 4), I am better able to examine and critique various modes of visual representations (chapter 3) as well as different borders of inclusion and exclusion in related sociocultural practices (chapter 5).

However, this project has also developed in terms of the aforementioned disciplinary intersections between French studies and overlapping strains of cultural studies—as understood and as ever evolving in North American, British, and Australian language, literature, and communication programs. Thus, in the opening chapter I also contrast different perspectives developed by critics and commentators of the current critical conjuncture. My purpose in doing this is twofold: First, I seek to clarify how disciplinary tensions arising from questions of definition relate to the framework outlined here. I also wish to emphasize the debt I owe to diverse practices of Anglo-American cultural studies and to the rich conceptual field articulated by French and francophone theorists. This dual impetus helps me to develop my critical analyses as ways of opening particular cultural forms and practices to scrutiny and understanding in the context of their sociocultural elaboration. Second, I con-

sider these forms and practices as different manifestations of the notion of the “minor” in artistic expression. That is, by their very existence and continued development, these modes of expression consistently challenge and disturb the “major” or dominant cultural modes on a number of levels while, nonetheless, succumbing to the sociocultural “capture” of these same dominant modes.⁶

Finally, to highlight the complex views of Cajun cultural heritage, identities, and their manifestation through musical and dance expressions, I conclude chapter 1 with a brief glimpse at how these issues intersect with conflicts of globality and locality. By introducing and comparing the practices of three Cajun musicians—Zachary Richard, Marc Savoy, and Michael Doucet—who will reappear in subsequent chapters, I provide details about how the very efforts to accommodate demands for authenticity participate in the shifting construction of “identity” by extending and influencing the processes of cultural (self-)representation.⁷

I approach this broad topic in four chapters that focus on distinct facets of musical and dance expressions. In chapter 2, “(Geo)ographies of (*Dé*)payement: Dislocation and Unsettling in the Cajun Music Repertoire,” I examine the affirmation of Cajun identity prevalent in many lyrics that glorify rather stereotypically an ebullient Cajun way of life, the myth of *les bons temps*. In so doing, I locate within the musical repertoire the shifting yet recurrent thematics of place and displacements, both geographical and affective, in order to reflect on the plaintive sadness that constitutes the necessary underside of the enthusiasm in the myth of *les bons temps*. In the chapter’s final section, I locate these toponymic, thematic, and performative relations within the poetic and musical expression of one exemplary Cajun musician, Zachary Richard, especially in his two collections of verse—*Voyage de nuit: Cahier de poésie, 1975–1979* (2001) and *Faire récolte* (1997)—and his 1996 album *Cap Enragé*. Based on lyrical evidence from recent Cajun recordings, the predominantly textual orientation of this chapter derives from my firm belief that we can only proceed to discuss the subsequent forms of cultural representation by first having accounted for some key thematic elements at the heart of the myth of *les bons temps*.⁸

In chapter 3, “J’ai Été au Bal’: Cajun Sights and Sounds,” I develop a critique of various filmic representations of Cajun identities in different examples of cinema, documentaries, and Cajun dance instructional videos. I consider these examples (in the production of which many Cajuns

have willingly participated) as ways in which the filmmakers and producers implicitly develop varying definitions of Cajun identity in relation to the dominant American culture surrounding and engulfing Cajun culture. As a visual counterpart to the lyrical complexity explored in the previous chapter, chapter 3 addresses at once the shifting border between the authentic and the stereotypical, and the linguistic, discursive, and sociopolitical facets that constitute the “minor(ity)” status of Cajun culture and identity. I focus, first, on precise scenes from two films that purportedly portray Cajun culture: the final *fais do-do* sequence in the little-known film *Southern Comfort* (1981) and the central *bal de maison* (house dance) sequence in the well-known film *The Big Easy* (1987). I then turn to several versions and visions of Cajun culture and music representations in documentary films by Les Blank featuring Marc and Ann Savoy in prominent roles, including *French Dance Tonight* (1989), *J'ai Été au Bal* (1989), and *Marc and Ann* (1991). Finally, I address the confluence of cultural affirmation and commercial initiatives in Cajun dance instructional videos that entrepreneurs have produced since 1987—for example *I Love to Cajun Dance* (Cecil 1988), *Cajun Dance Instruction* (Michaul's ca. 1992), *Allons Danser* (Speyrer 1987), and *Introduction to Cajun Dancing* and *Advanced Cajun Dancing* (Speyrer and Speyrer 1993a and 1993b). The analyses in these three sections demonstrate how the representation of presumably authentic Cajun identities and cultural practices contributes to the construction of these identities and thereby inherently extends the disenchantment of *les bons temps* in the very act of their celebration.

I shift my focus into the field of the music and dance venues themselves in chapter 4, “Feeling the Event: Spaces of Affects and the Cajun Dance Arena.” I explore the “thisness” of these events, the very special intensities of speed and movement that combine in order both to transform each event and yet also to retain its specificity in relation to the Cajun dance and music arena. Although creating the most theoretically demanding chapter, this approach helps to animate the active relationship of dance and music within the event of movement, sensation, and affects. By examining a range of experiences in Cajun dance and music venues in terms of the spaces of affects in which they unfold, I propose to conceptualize more fully how bodies constituted within the sensory and territorial field of the dance arena can engage with and expand the field through the simultaneous experiences of sound, sight, touch, and scent. These conjoined elements of the dance and music event constitute the

vital assemblage of dancers, spectators, and musicians within dynamic spatiotemporal becomings. Thus, drawing on my dance experience at different Cajun dance and music venues, I emphasize the variations in and effects of performances by, notably, Michael Doucet and BeauSoleil and Wayne Toups and ZydeCajun.

In chapter 5, “Disenchanting *Les Bons Temps*,” I consider the socio-political tensions that underlie *les bons temps*. That is, having established the links between self-representation of Cajun identities, the performance as “event,” and the territorial aspects of the Cajun dance and music arena, I consider how the different appeals to Cajun identity and authenticity are troubled both by linguistic isolation and by racial and social practices that inherently attempt to protect the dance and music forms from intrusion by variously defined “others,” both inside and outside Louisiana. This disenchantment of prevalent mythologies of identity and authenticity corresponds to the order of analyses in the preceding chapters: first, of the musical repertoire (studied in chapter 2) in terms of modes of instrumentation and selected lyrics in Cajun music and zydeco; second, of documentaries (considered in chapter 3) in terms of statements and images about race relations in the origins of Cajun music; and, third, of the dance arena (described in chapter 4) in terms of particular exclusionary practices that have occurred in different clubs and festivals.

Having thus reflected on the disenchantment of *les bons temps*, I return in chapter 6 to their inherent force of enchantment and hope by considering a number of current initiatives in Cajun music that speak to the joyful prospects for *les bons temps* in this century.⁹ These initiatives include, but are not limited to, the emergence of women’s voices in the male-dominated Cajun music scene, the plethora of teenage and even preteen musicians performing Cajun music, and collaborations between Cajun and zydeco musicians on a growing number of projects. It is true that however much one might wish the contrary, the tensions and exclusions identified in chapter 5 are likely never to disappear entirely. Yet, with grassroots initiatives like Action Cadienne, led by Zachary Richard to introduce Cajun French language to children and, more generally, into daily life, or Christine Balfa’s efforts to stimulate greater knowledge of Cajun cultural practices through the Louisiana Folk Roots organization, different forms of alliances can emerge and serve as examples of affirmative practices that are at once cultural and pedagogical.¹⁰

In the end, this study is inspired by the paradoxical message—of joy

and pain, of love and loss, of rootedness and displacement—that one discovers in the music and that Cajun dancers practice in seeking out the next music and dance venue, knowing that it will be over in all too short a time. This study is also inspired by the same spirit that animates Lynda Barry's *The Good Times Are Killing Me* (1988), from which I have borrowed the title of this introduction and have used for the introduction and chapter 6 epigraphs.¹¹ In Barry's novel, the character Edna Arkins tries to recall the good times, yet she can only do so by confronting the many painful experiences of her past. Her experiences raise difficult questions about identity and authenticity around the vexed issues of race and gender, and yet are also mediated by the joyful sounds and feelings of music and dance in her childhood. That Barry's own creativity is inspired by a broad range of musical practices, including Cajun and zydeco, is evident in the portraits and commentaries that constitute the novel's wonderful "Music Notebook" in its appendix. Besides these lovely portraits, Barry also provides an original cover portrait appearing on the videocassette carton of Blank and Strachwitz's *J'ai Été au Bal* (1989b) as well as for the 1990 audiocassette and CD of the documentary's musical selections. This individual devotion translates the complex mix of emotions and practices and of movement and feeling in the Cajun dance and music arena. We can thus better understand the intensity of investment that lies in the constructions of identities and claims to authenticity subsumed by the myth of *les bons temps*.