

# Larry's Corner

## Cajun Music

In Louisiana the Acadians shortly began to encounter and intermarry with other ethnic groups, fostering their evolution into a new ethnic group - *the Cajuns*. Late in the 1800's local merchants imported affordable, durable accordions, which spurred the instrument's rise in popularity among Cajun musicians. In 1928 phonograph companies began to record Cajun music in an effort to sell more players. During the 1920s & '30s, Cajuns experienced a period of increased Americanization, prompted largely by the discovery of oil in south Louisiana and the building of new highways. Indeed, the accordion practically disappeared from Cajun music between 1935-1950. At this time, Cajuns added the steel guitar, bass, drums, and even banjos and mandolins to their lineup.

By the late 1940s, however, the accordion again dominated Cajun music. Although the guitar and fiddle receded to backing roles, Cajun groups kept the steel guitar, upright bass, and drums, all remnants of the string-band era. The accordion's return, however, corresponded with the arrival of two increasingly popular national genres — rhythm & blues and



rock 'n roll -represented in South Louisiana by the "swamp pop" sound. Cajun music appeared to many on the verge of extinction.

Then, in 1964, Cajun musicians triggered the "Cajun revival." At the same time, young Cajun musicians were pushing the limits of Cajun music, combining it with other sounds in a way similar to swamp pop musicians in the 1950s. During the early to mid-1980s, Cajun music (as well as zydeco) experienced a worldwide boom in popularity that continues to the present.

## Cajun Dancing

*"Two-step"* songs (4-beats)

There are several options for dancing to Cajun two-step music:

8-ct two-step – quick/quick slow,

quick/quick slow - travels around the line-of-dance.

6-ct two-step - quick/quick slow, slow - travels around the line-of-dance – this is known as "Mamou Two-Step," and is the same thing as Texas or C&W Two-Step.

Mamou Jitterbug – This is basically an adaptation of single-rhythm swing dancing, done in the center of the dance floor, leaving the perimeter open for the traveling dancers to use. It has the same count as the Mamou Two-Step - quick/quick slow, slow – and the quick/quick is equivalent to the "rock-step" in Swing dancing.

Cajun Jitterbug - Traditional Cajun Jitterbug features a "hobble step" alternating feet like you are stepping on and off a curb, and lots of underarm turns popular with C&W dance.

Waltz (3-beats) Cajun or zydeco waltz is generally a simple progressive waltz that travels around the "line of dance" of the dance floor. A Mamou-waltz variation actually features the Mamou two-step footwork pattern, and you can count it "step, step, step / hold, step, hold".

## Zydeco Music

In the days of old, in rural Creole communities, neighbors would gather at harvest time and work together to complete their tasks. When a family would have a bouchert (butchering of a hog).

Zydeco is a popular accordion-based

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musical genre - the blues and dance music of Louisiana Creoles. Contrary to popular belief, it is not Cajun in origin. Rather, zydeco is the music of south Louisiana's "Creoles," who borrowed many of zydeco's defining elements from Cajun music. (In turn, Cajun music borrowed many of its traits from Creole music.)

The word *zydeco* derives from the French expression *les haricots*, meaning "beans." *Zydeco obtained this name from the common Creole expression Les haricots sont pas salés* ("The snap beans aren't salty"). *Les haricots sont pas salés* can be considered a lyrical metaphor for difficult times: in the past, Creoles seasoned their food, such as beans (*les haricots*), with salted meat — when times were bad, salted meat became too expensive, which explained why "the beans aren't salty."

Zydeco is actually the most modern form of Creole music from Acadiana, and it first appeared after World War II, when Creoles became influenced by the rhythm, blues and jazz that was heard on radio and juke boxes. The mixture gave birth to a genre that the world enjoys today as Zydeco. In 1954, BooZoo Chavis had the first recording of modern zydeco with *Paper in My Shoe* on Folk-Star Records. Zydeco has evolved considerably over the decades, and now draws on pop music sources like soul, rap, and even reggae. Zydeco frequently appears in movies, TV, and commercials— even more so than Cajun music, which, unlike zydeco, has retained much of its traditional flavor. It has attracted a loyal worldwide outside Louisiana, as demonstrated by the large numbers of zydeco dancers on the east and west coasts. Zydeco remains a relevant cultural expression for the Creoles of Acadiana.



## Zydeco Dancing

Traditional zydeco dancing is done in closed position, with an 8-count footwork generally counted slow/quick/quick, slow/quick/quick with footwork: step pause/step/step, step pause/step/step — each of the steps is a weight shift from side to side. The dance does not travel around the dance floor. "Club style" zydeco features the same footwork done in open position, with a variety of lead & follow improvised variations. Waltzes are also occasionally played by zydeco bands, and you can do a Cajun waltz for these. In Louisiana, zydeco dancer attire is often jeans and cowboy boots.

## Dance Community

Shortly after starting to dance, you will have come across most of the "regulars" who make up the backbone of the local dance community. Dance communities are fairly small. The dance community is like a family, and its members are like family members. Friendships come and go over time, but family is there forever. That is why maintenance of relationships within a family is critical: few of us ever choose new parents or siblings. Once a relationship within a family has soured, its effects are long-lasting and painful. In the same vein, it pays to maintain good relationships in the dance community, because as long as you go dancing in the same geographical area, you will run into the same people over and over again, and awkward situations will remain, well, awkward.

Avoiding unpleasant situations is easy, especially because most dancers are easygoing, nice people. Just don't go out of your way to aggravate anyone. Easily done, because there is so much dancing going on, there is hardly time for anything else. All one has to do is to observe elementary social graces. Despite this, there are a few situations where dancers are prone to get in trouble.

One of these sticky situations involves dance etiquette. Everyone seems to agree to dance etiquette in abstract, but there is a wide variation in what individuals

believe applies to them in practice. When you see someone who is, in your opinion, in violation of dance etiquette, it may be awfully tempting to go and give the offender a piece of your mind. Or at least, to try and politely point out the mistake. Don't give in to that temptation!

It is very difficult, in fact next to impossible, to change people. Few of us have that magical combination of tact, insight, and charisma to be able to change someone's behavior in a meaningful way. You are likely to generate resentment without accomplishing anything. Furthermore, you will look a silly busybody to onlookers. The exception is the case of a close friend, whom you feel obligated to help out. In that case, any related conversation had better take place tactfully and in private. But in general: Etiquette, yes. Etiquette police, no!

Does this mean that etiquette offenders go scot free? Not really. Etiquette has a wonderful self-enforcing mechanism. Consistent violators will find themselves more and more isolated, and thus problems usually take care of themselves.

In some cases more direct action may be needed, especially when the violator puts others in serious immediate discomfort or danger. Action should then come not from the average dancer, but from someone official, for example the emcee or DJ. In that case it is very important that the rules are stated unambiguously and enforced uniformly. Your job, however, is finished once you bring a violation to the attention of emcee or DJ.

It is also a good idea to avoid old, tired, and unresolvable arguments, dance related or otherwise. For example, there is nothing original left to be said (if there ever was any) about the superiority or



inferiority of International vs. American style, Swing vs. Jive, Country Western vs. Swing vs. Ballroom, and so on. More often than not, these are questions of taste, people have made up their minds, and will not be swayed by anything that you have to say. Enjoy the dance and the company of your dancing friends; don't put them down.

A phenomenon one sometimes sees in social dancing is dance cliques, groups of individuals that only dance among themselves, and implicitly or explicitly discourage others from dancing with them. There is very little you can do if you come across them. But if you are part of them: do yourself a favor, lighten up!

**SOME BIG (AND NOT SO BIG) TIPS FOR ASKING WOMEN TO DANCE:**

Here are some clues for asking that special someone to dance. These aren't rules, just tips you might want to think about.

1) Hygiene! Hello . . . Wear deodorant, aftershave, cologne (in REASONABLE

AMOUNTS). Don't stink when you dance. :) There's no reason to. If you are getting turned down a lot, check your breath and your body odor. One more tip, mailed in by one of our users, don't overdo the cologne!

2) Make eye contact (if possible): If it appears as if she is avoiding looking at you, you're facing a possibility of being turned down. However, that shouldn't faze you necessarily. Only if it's obvious that she is avoiding looking at you, should you consider just staying away.

3) Never take being turned down to dance personally. There are SO many dancers in this world, and not everyone wants to dance with everyone else. Just move on to the next person, you can even add a "Thanks anyway".

4) If it appears they are on the way to the bar, or the restroom, wait for a more opportune time.

5) If the woman is coming off the dance floor, and looks like she's about to pass out from dehydration, you might want to wait for a more opportune moment, or go buy her a water, and then ask her to dance.

6) If they are obviously with someone else, you may want to read the body language clearly before asking her to dance. Ask women to dance that are "with" other people, however if you don't already know them, acknowledge the guy, with a nod, to let him know it's cool. Opinions vary on this, but there are plenty of women who go to clubs with guy's (boyfriends) and dance with other people. Likewise, there are plenty of people who will not take kindly to you asking THEIR

date to dance. Pay attention to the body language, and read the situation before asking women to dance that are obviously with significant others.

7) Don't interrupt a conversation that a woman is having! Now, I do this all the time. When a good song comes on, I will butt in, admittedly rudely, and ask one to dance (even though I can plainly see that two people are conversing). Well, I can't recommend this, even though I am guilty of it. It's rude and extremely bad manners. However, it's ok to park yourself close enough to the two that are talking so that she can see that you are anxious to dance. At that point, it's up to her, if she wants to talk, or wants to dance.

8) Look at the edges of the dance floor! That's generally where people stand that are waiting to be asked to dance. Look for the woman madly tapping her foot, or swaying back and forth to the music. These are pretty telltale signs she's ready to dance, quite probably with the first guy that asks her, so **GET MOVING!**

What should my first dance with a new lady be like?

The **WRONG** way: Grab her and immediately start throwing her into every conceivable move you've ever learned in class. Forget about the closed position, just spin her absolutely as fast as you can, without stopping, in order to impress her with your amazing leading abilities. Forget about the rhythm, and through sheer force of will, get right into the most complicated and intricate patters that you know. Do all this as fast as humanly possible . . . If she can't keep up, she'll just be impressed with how good you are.



;) If you're not very fast, grab the woman in as close an embrace as possible, pressing her body up against yours so she can tell exactly how many sit-ups and crunches you do every day. Enjoy the dance, because it will probably be the last one you have with this follower . . .

The **RIGHT** way. Once on the floor, take the lady in closed position. Try to actually keep your right hand up high, under her shoulder blade, and put some strength there (so she has a nice place to rest her arm). It's a pretty clear clue to ladies, when a guy takes her in closed position and puts his right hand on her ass, that he's not that great a dancer (or interested in something completely different). Likewise, give her some space. Now, I like to dance very close sometimes, but with new dancers, I always let **THEM** determine the distance of the dance. I'm not going to plaster them against my body right off the bat (I wait at least until the middle of the song . . . that's a joke). ;)

For those who have taken my classes, this should be familiar. Start with "The Rock" (TM). "The rock" is exactly what is

sounds like! You rock back and forth, with the lady, to the rhythm of the music. This can last from 5 seconds, to a minute, but I don't recommend starting to dance until you both are rocking (back and forth) in unison. This assures that you both are on the same beat (and listening to the same music). When you both are feeling the rhythm, start off with the basic step! Keep her in closed position for a while, play with it, try a few simple inside/outside turns. Get to feel each other for a while. At this point, you can actually stop staring at the floor (your feet) and take a gander at who you're dancing with! Smile . . . relax . . . the rest is up to you.

**Important Note #1:** Try and determine the level of experience the lady has with dancing. A good leader will always match his skills with that of his follower (making it easier for her (and you both) to have an enjoyable dance). Obviously, if she is a beginner you don't want to be dragging her forcefully around the floor with complicated arm movements, and vice versa, if she is advanced, you don't want to keep doing the basic forever (although this can be ok in some situations).

Do you have any likes or dislikes, stories, or helpful hints for dancing? If so, write it down and give to Larry Ablin or Barb Johnson. We will add it to one of the future News letters. If you would like to tell us how you became interested in dancing, write it down and give to Larry or Barb, we will add your picture with it and put it in one of the future Newsletters. If you have anything you would like to write for us, just write it up and give to Barb or Larry. I enjoy writing something for you. **LARRY**

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