

# Hear in Louisiana

Camryn and Shane Rodrigue

Beth McGinnis: This is Hear in Alabama. I'm Beth McGinnis. Well, actually, this is *not* Hear in Alabama. Ever since I started working on Hear in Alabama, I've wondered when might be the right time to explore some vernacular music *outside* Alabama—not Hear in *Alabama*, but just "Hear." Well, the time has come. With this episode I want to introduce you to opera singer Camryn Rodrigue, who grew up in south Louisiana. Camryn recently interviewed her father Shane about Cajun music. I hope you'll enjoy their conversation, and I hope you'll stay tuned for more episodes of "Hear" along the way.

Camryn Rodrigue: Hi everyone, as you all know, my name is Camryn Rodrigue, and today I'm here with my dad, Shane Rodrigue.

Shane Rodrigue: Hello, my name is Shane, like Camryn said. I'm 55, born and raised on the bayous of south Louisiana, in Thibodaux. And I'm a mechanical specialist for a natural gas pipeline company, Boardwalk Pipeline, which is not far from my house. We're a mainline transmission company, so I make sure the compression station stays running and everything runs smooth.

Camryn: That's great! Our goal today is to shed some light on the history and performance practices of Cajun music. Dad, what would you say is your personal connection to Cajun music?

Shane: My great grandfather was born in late 1890- mid 1890s. He played the accordion, which, you know, is famously known around Opelousas and South Louisiana as the "squeeze box." Which is really high profile in Zydeco music, but it's also in Swamp Pop music. And he played that and the fiddle, which everybody else calls a violin, but in South Louisiana we call it a fiddle. And he played that all his life, and he died at almost 100 years old, so I got to know him over 20 years. So it ran in my family, and they played music, you know, a mixture or variety of Swamp Pop and Country music from, like, Hank Williams Sr., to all the old-timers. Bill Monroe and all that kind of stuff down to Merle Haggard and Waylon Jennings and stuff. So it's been in my family for generations, since the forties. So that's where I learned it from, and my family's association with it. My momma used to sing in my grandpa's band.

Camryn: Oh wow! Could you tell me a little more about that band?

Shane: It was called "The Bayou Ramblers", and they just played local places, everybody calls them "juke joints", you know, in the fifties and sixties. Til he passed away in '73, you know, his daddy lived till 90 something and he died at 43, my grandpa. So they played just different honky-tonks and stuff, you know, all around the area I guess within a fifty mile radius. They couldn't travel too far 'cause they all had families. And wherever they could make money- they didn't do this for a living, this was sideline. After they would finish they work all week, and they would do this on Friday or Saturday nights. So it was, it was- they stayed busy doin' that.

Camryn: Oh okay, where would you say that this music originated from?

Shane: This music originated from the exiles, the Acadian French people exiled out of Europe and got exiled to Nova Scotia because they wouldn't bow down to the king. And then they got exiled from Nova Scotia because France lost the war with Britain, so Britain took over- England took over Canada. So they got exiled out to South Louisiana. Which the strange thing is a lot of families got separated because, what they would do is, they would get a big barn and they would lock all the husbands up inside and they would ship away all the wives and children to different places. And the husbands would never know where to find 'em at, where they were going, and then they would let the husbands go. Sometimes they would just, you know, kill 'em.

Camryn: Wow.

Shane: You to get rid- to try and end the culture. But they came from- the music came from- and when they settled in Louisiana they started blending with the Creoles, as far as music and food. So, but it came from folk music from Europe and we call it "from Acadiana," we call it "Acadie," in French. But they blended with the Creoles between the music, you know, the Caribbean music, and early country music, and just folk music, learning about different places and learning about each other. And how to live together on the bayous of South Louisiana.

Camryn: So I know that there's a couple of different kinds of Cajun music, you could say that there, probably the main ones, the categories are Swamp Pop Zydeco, and some traditional Cajun Folk Songs.

Shane: Correct, Cajun French.

Camryn: What is, in your opinion, the best way to describe the three different kinds of sounds of those three different genres?

Shane: The Zydeco is, it really highlights the accordion in the music, and it's kind of like a faster-type music. Swamp Pop originated from like, the early "bubblegum" music from the fifties, the rock and roll at that time. And you know it kind of evolved from that to what it is today, which they kind of, not really mainstreaming with the same kind of music as pop music, and you know, today's pop country and stuff like that. But it's more upbeat in tempo and stuff, but you still have some slow songs. And the French music hasn't changed much in decades. It's still Cajun French, a lot of heavy accordion and fiddle and harmonicas and all of them have a lot of horns and saxophones and trumpets, you know and stuff like that. So they have those still in the band, but Cajun French music is probably still the same one, you know, basically that's been over decades and decades.

Camryn: Oh wow. Where do you think that people would kind of listen to the different styles? If there was a place to listen to different ones?

Shane: Uh, local ballrooms, you know they don't really have too many dance halls anymore because that died out in the seventies. But they used to have, like a big bunch of dance halls, and every little town and village and community had one. And, like, Friday and Saturday it would be packed, and all it would be was bands and all the little kids played outside, basically like a big tent. Some of them had nice buildings, but none of them had air-conditioning. We didn't have air conditioning 'til I was almost a teenager. You

know, we had attic fans and stuff and window fans. But everybody would gather together and bands would just come and show up and they would play, people would dance and jitterbug and, like we call it, belly-rubbing music”, which is just slow music when the man and woman were just dancing real close to each other, but that’s what they call it, “belly-rubbing music” down here.

Camryn: Okay.

Shane: So that’s- and now, it’s just mainstream just in bar rooms now and they still have a lot of firemen’s fairs because- I don’t know if y’all are familiar but the firemen in South Louisiana are all volunteers, none of them get paid a dime. So all the money they make to support the fire departments and buy equipment and buy and pay for training and stuff all comes- they have these fairs. And it’s called “Firemen’s Fairs,” every town has one. And they sign up bands and some play for free, some of ‘em have to pay, but they sell hamburgers and hotdogs and sauce picantes and jambalayas. It’s kind of like a big “fais do-do,” like a big dance festival where they have rides, and they bring in a fair company and they bring in all kinda rides, the ferris wheel and all that, and the merry-go-rounds and all that. So that’s how they make they money every year.

Camryn: And what does fais do-do mean?

Shane: Fais do-do is like a big party with dance. And you invite- everybody’s invited, nobody’s outcast, everybody’s invited, wherever you are just come. And it’s just a big throw-down. Sometimes they’ll cook a hog, what’s called a “boucherie,” and they’ll make hog-head cheese, they’ll boil the hog down and scrape the meat off the hog’s head, well they really don’t do too much of that anymore, but not really down here. They use- just- “Boston butts” to make it. And they’ll make pork skins, that’s called “gratins,” they make sausage, pork belly, they’ll fry that up, which is really good. None of it’s healthy at all, just to say, but it’s all really good.

Camryn: So food, would you say, is, like, really tied in with like, these music kind of celebrations.

Shane: Oh definitely, definitely, and that gave- the cooking part of it gave the people a reason to come bring music and just have a good time. You know they say “Come pass a good time.”

Camryn: Yeah.

Shane: Laissez le bon temps rouler, you know, let the good times roll!

Camryn: Alright! So who are some more popular musicians today?

Shane: Today in this generation we have Junior Lacrosse, Don Rich, who's basically the King of Swamp Pop right now. We have Ryan Foret & Foret Traditions, we have Wayne Foret, we have Kenny Fife, we have Kenny Caneglade, which those guys are getting kind of older. But the younger generation like Junior Lacrosse and Ryan Foret are in their 20’s and 30’s. And the culture’s really strong, you know, the Cajun French language, speaking it isn’t coming back as good as I wish it would.

Camryn: Yeah.

Shane: But they'll still sing a lot. They'll start off a song in regular English and they'll switch over into Cajun French during a song, and switch back to English at the end of the song. So there's a lot of people, it's still alive and well down here. Zydeco music, you had Buckwheat Zydeco, who just passed away. He was probably the most famous one in the world with it. But there's a lot of Zydeco players mainly around New Orleans and Gretna and Norco. Just mainly closer to New Orleans, and maybe some around Cameron Parish and Opelousas and Breaux Bridge. But it's mainly prevalent in New Orleans- streets of New Orleans, around Bourbon Street and the French Quarter, and stuff like that.

Camryn: So from a personal connection and standpoint, how does listening to, like, traditional Cajun music make you feel?

Shane: Uh, it gives me a connection to the past, to my family, and to Louisiana history. And it's just- the songs make sense, not like some of the music they have today that I don't really care for a lot of it. But um, it's just down to earth and, you know, you could just picture people paddling the pirogues through the swamps. Which, a pirogue is what everybody else calls a "canoe." But we call it a pirogue on the bayou. And it just makes you think of the past.

Camryn: Yeah.

Shane: And it just gives you a happy feeling, you know, the songs aren't that sad. You know, 99% of the songs are happy and talking about "having a good time" and "family" and "religion," you know, your beliefs and stuff. And it's just real good music. And every song has a meaning, it's not just nonsense.

Camryn: So to kind of wrap up our time today, what's something you'd want the listeners out there to know about Cajun people and our music?

Shane: The Cajun people are friendly, we are hardworking, and if you ever get a chance to come down to Louisiana and go to a fair or a Cochon de lait, which is a country fair that's not really affiliated with the fire department. Cause there used to be a lot of church fairs, until the bishop stopped it in the mid-eighties. But we used to have the Cochon de lait, the Sauce Piquante festival, the Raceland Firemen's fair, we had all kinds of fairs all through the south Louisiana tri-parish area- we had fairs. And all of that stopped, but they're trying to bring them back. But anyway, yeah, if you ever get a chance to come down and enjoy some Cajun culture, you definitely have to listen to the music, you definitely have to come eat the food. I wouldn't say too much Swamp Pop is in New Orleans, it's more Zydeco, and like jazz and blues and stuff. You have to get to the outskirts of New Orleans. Between New Orleans and Baton Rouge and the bayou areas, towards Lafourche and Terrebonne Parish. There you're gonna hear a lot of Cajun Music. And especially around Acadiana and Opelousas and Breaux Bridge and Lafayette, and some around Cameron Parish too, usually you'll hear a lot of that too. Like they'll just have sit-ins and people'll just come up stage with their instruments and start playing and other people'll just join on stage with em. But if you ever get a chance, come down and pass a good time, and uh, come eat the food, and listen to the music. You won't regret it, and everybody's friendly down here.

Camryn: Well thank you so much for sharing with us today.

Shane: It was a pleasure being here! I hope y'all understood what I was talking about most of the time, I got a little accent. Oh I just had one more thing to add: we love LSU down here, Go Tigers!

Beth McGinnis: I forgot to ask if Shane Rodrigue would spell "Go Tigers" "geaux." I'll have to check on that. Thanks to Camryn and Shane for teaching us about Cajun music. If you're interested, there's a transcript of their interview on my website, [www.hearinalabama.com](http://www.hearinalabama.com). That's h e a r in Alabama dot com. I'm Beth McGinnis. Thanks for listening to "Hear."