

Desegregating the Understanding of Music

By Gayle Murchison

In this comprehensive study of music rooted in the Southern part of Louisiana, Sara Le Menestrel questions the stereotypes pertaining to Cajun and Creole music. Her historical perspective reveals how the complex issues of race, identity and authenticity have created a dynamic that contradicts previous studies which focused on a more segregated approach.

Reviewed : Sara Le Menestrel, *Negotiating Difference in French Louisiana Music: Categories, Stereotypes, and Identifications*, Jackson, MS, University of Mississippi Press, 2015.

The last weekend of April and the first one of May, New Orleans hosts JazzFest. Though national and international musicians increasingly dominate its various stages, JazzFest continues to showcase Louisiana musicians, especially Cajun and Zydeco bands. To the outsider, JazzFest provides an opportunity to sample the local color in the context of a commercial event dedicated to packaging and promoting the region's musical gumbo, a metaphor music critics oft invoke. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 generated interest in New Orleans and Southern Louisiana, renewing focus on this area's musical traditions. Ten years after the disaster, the University of Mississippi Press published French anthropology professor Sara Le Menestrel's *Negotiating Difference in French Louisiana Music: Categories, Stereotypes, and Identifications*. An extensive, scholarly study of music in and around primarily Lafayette, a region she refers to as "French Louisiana," this book represents her decade-long ethnography of and twenty-year engagement with music in the Southern part of Louisiana, both before and after the hurricanes.

Le Menestrel conducted fieldwork over the course of ten years, using participant observation and archival research, as her primary methodology. In addition to attending dances,

festivals, concerts, and other musical, cultural, and social events (in which she sometimes limitedly participated as fiddler and dancer), from 2001 to 2008 Le Menestrel conducted interviews with more than forty musicians and others involved in the music scene. Self-reflexive, she is aware and acknowledges that the privilege of her own French nationality permitted her to ask certain sensitive questions about more than the music—especially when interviewing black musicians.

Questioning stereotypes

At the center is the question of identity. Applying critical and cultural theory, as Le Menestrel delves deeply into this culture, probing something at the core of American society: race. As she writes in the introduction, “I propose to study how social hierarchies and stereotypes based on the notions of race, class, and region shape, and in turn are shaped by, tastes, representations, and musical practices within French Louisiana music” (14). Rather than attempting an exhaustive historical or cultural study of the music, Le Menestrel is interested in what Cajun and Creole musicians themselves think of their own music, as well as how institutions, the music industry, and academia have shaped the musicians’ perceptions and understanding of their own musical traditions and practices. She boldly and profoundly states: “I argue for the importance of desegregating the understanding of French Louisiana music by situating it beyond ethnic or racial identifications, bringing to light the other identifications and factors at stake in the perception and practice of French Louisiana music and the complexity of the musical landscape.” Or, more succinctly, “This book explores the role of music in constructing, asserting, erasing, managing, and negotiating difference” (15). With these two statements, Le Menestrel gets to the heart of the matter: this is a study of difference, as it is constructed along regional, racial, linguistic, ethnic, and class lines—and the ways in which these intersect—and how, as she further notes, “representations of French Louisiana music tend to conceal the interstices between binary oppositions such as black-white, urban-rural, differentiation-creolization and local-global.” In short, this is a study of music and difference that seeks to explore how black and white musicians—Creole and Cajun—share more in common than not, despite various socio-cultural musical markers.

The theoretical basis is complex, for it involves Le Menestrel carefully unpacking received notions of race and ethnicity. She examines two racialized terms typically used to refer to individuals and cultures from southern Louisiana, “Cajun” and “Creole,” the former conventionally referring to the whites and the latter to blacks. The origins and applications of these terms are in and of themselves problematic, as she shows. She coins the phrase “French Louisiana music,” which allows her to cut across racial lines and focus on regional identification and explore in equally (if not more) meaningful ways how much black and white French music and musicians share as much as how their musical practices and repertoires differ. She uses other categories of analysis to avoid having to rely on the problematic “Cajun” and “zydeco,” which as genre terms were invented and manipulated in part by the tourism industry, state and

local governments, academics, and the music industry, as she documents. *Le Menestrel* addresses how class as well is an identity within the Cajun community. “The ‘Cajun’ and ‘Acadian’ labels are thus situated within a narrative of social stratification that has shaped the current registers of identification” (12). Noting how the state of Louisiana banned speaking French in the classroom in 1916, later enshrined in the state constitution in 1921, she addresses how the term “Cajun” came to be used as an epithet until the francophone and Cajun renaissance in the 1970s.

Hybridity and creolization

Throughout, *Le Menestrel* challenges received notions of authenticity, tradition, genre, and other means by which French Louisiana music is classified, promoted, and marketed by those whose tradition it is, as well as by outsiders. The book has five chapters, each dense in content. The overall organization is chronological, beginning with the years corresponding to the birth of the music industry and the spread of New Orleans jazz beyond the city. In the first chapter, “The Early Twentieth Century: A Diverse Landscape,” *Le Menestrel* relies primarily on archival research as she chronicles how diverse musics circulated in the region. She traces the flow of a various traveling popular entertainments ranging from minstrel and medicine shows to carnivals and circuses to Hawaiian music, which could be heard in dancehalls and other venues. In addition to bands from out of state and from New Orleans and music heard on the radio, records and sheet music also circulated in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, a range of American popular music could be found. The region even sported its own jazz bands that could improvise collectively. This repertoire shaped that played by French music ensembles. And French music already had its own repertoire, style, and identity. Here, *Le Menestrel* shows the hybridity and creolization of French music, and the interaction of black and white musicians.

What comes as a surprise is her documentation of black jazz bands in the region. *Le Menestrel* writes extensively about several black and Creole musicians who lived and performed in South Louisiana. It came as a surprise to read about Willie Geary “Bunk” Johnson, a musician who had played with Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, and Buddy Bolden before moving from New Orleans to New Iberia in 1920. Johnson later had a comeback during the late 1940s jazz revival. These bands—jazz and French music—not only featured the same instrumentation, but also played the same genres, both American popular dances and those associated with francophone Louisiana, both urban and rural: schottisches, quadrilles, and the like. *Le Menestrel* provides a sample of more than four dozen jazz bands active during this time that performed in nearly three dozen venues.

The issue of authenticity

She begins the second chapter with an account of her early fieldwork in Lafayette, which began in 1992. Having befriended Christine Balfa, the daughter of Dewey Balfa (a major figure in the 1970s revival), Le Menestrel went on to study fiddle with one of the latter's students. Positioning herself as a student fiddler allows her to explore the notion of what constitutes a tradition, and to then go on to address matters of canonization and experimentation. Again, she turns to historical and archival research in questioning notions of authenticity, addressing in this chapter the role folklorists such as John and Alan Lomax played in shaping notions of what was and was not "authentic," *i.e.* in their view, what they understood as the surviving music of the original Acadian settlers. The Lomaxes, with the assistance of Irène Thérèse Whitfield, documented a range of ethnic folk music traditions (e.g., English ballads, klezmer, cowboy songs) that reflected the influence of Anglo-American culture, the suppression of French language, and the impact of mass media. Yet the Lomaxes focused primarily on music they understood to be French. Similarly, Louisiana State University cultural geography professor Lauren Chester Post promoted his version of French music, this time when choosing performers and repertoire for the 1936 National Folk Festival in Dallas, Texas. This kind of academicism continued into the 1950s, with the appearance of *Folksongs of the Acadians*, recorded in the second half of the 1950s. Focused on perpetuating narratives of authenticity and tradition, it continues to the present day.

Academics have not been the only ones who have shaped notions of what was and was not "authentic" French music and Cajun identity. Various industries have also played a role in shaping, both an ethnic, class, and musical identity. Le Menestrel locates the beginning of this in the 1920s Louisiana oil industry. She further documents how the folk revival of the 1950s inspired a specifically Cajun, or French Renaissance, during the 1970s. In addition to musicians such as Dewey Balfa, concert and festival organizer and promoters figure prominently. Le Menestrel focuses particularly on Ralph Rinzler, who invited Balfa to perform at the 1964 Newport [Rhode Island] Folk Festival. Rinzler went on to found Washington, D.C.'s Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 1967. Academic researchers and music festivals constitute cultural institutions, which have profound influence in shaping public perception, both within and outside music cultures. Urban folk revival musicians the New Lost City Ramblers, Le Menestrel documents, helped disseminate Cajun music to northern and urban audiences with their 1966 recording "Parlez nous à boire." Thus, the issues revolved not only around authenticity, but also around the conflux of commercialism, rural regional music traditions, and urban popular music. Additionally, Le Menestrel documents the role music producers such as Arhoolie Records' Chris Strachwitz (who discovered Clifton Chenier and also issued *Louisiana Cajun Music*).

Le Menestrel grapples with two thorny issues: creolization (and relatedly hybridity) and Americanization. She includes the work of younger scholars who see Americanization as a process and thus "the object of legitimate analysis instead of being viewed as an assimilationist movement with inevitably damaging consequences" (87). This allows her to turn her attention

to other newer genres such as swamp pop, and the influence of rhythm and blues, country, and rock on later styles of French music.

The color of music

The third chapter focuses on race. Titled "The Color of Music," she begins by returning to 1996 and accordionist Horace Trahan. Trahan, white, began playing with an integrated band and, as Le Menestrel bluntly states, crossed the color line, incorporating zydeco into his music. Similarly, black musicians such as accordionist Geno Delafosse cross the color line by playing Cajun music. She uses these examples to set up how in this chapter she will "demonstrate how music categories, tastes, and representations are ingrained in the racial imagination" (148). She addresses how Cajun music has been tied to country and western and zydeco to R&B. Again, Le Menestrel deconstructs this by returning to the history of the record industry, which created the category of "race" music in the 1920s as a catchall for any and all varieties of African American music. Similarly, rural musics were marketed as "hillybilly music," a term later replaced by "country and western" in the 1930s, as "race music" would be replaced by "rhythm and blues" in 1949. Again, Le Menestrel documents the role key label owners and music collectors played in categorizing and marketing various genres of French Louisiana music, here along racial lines. Once again, she offers important insights into American race relations, drawing connections between the 1960s civil rights movement and the rise of white ethnicity. "The rise of white ethnicity and black nationalism favored claims for cultural legitimacy based on 'racial' criteria" (153). During this time, she argues, the category of "French music" became divided along racial lines into categories of "Cajun," "Creole," and "zydeco" in ways that it was not in the first half of the 20th century. She chronicles the CREOLE INC. movement of black Creoles in southwestern Louisiana.

Ironically, Le Menestrel argues, "French Louisiana music scholarship and publications have contributed significantly to the segregation of music styles, while also celebrating the notion of creolization and the impact of black Creoles on Cajun music." In this chapter, she sets about re-inscribing black Creoles into the history of French music in southwestern Louisiana, offering as an example Creole Amédé Ardoin, who played with Dennis McGee. As she points out, Le Menestrel is not alone in identifying racial stereotypes prevalent in French music historiography. Yet, she does try to suss out differences in black and white performances practices and repertoire without resorting to racial essentialism. Here, she relies on her informants and their understandings of what constitutes Cajun vs. Creole musical style. Her interview with Cedric Wilson is especially informative as to the versatility of French Music musicians and how much Cajun and Creole musicians share with respect to repertoire and performance practice.

As much as language and race and ethnicity define the music and the identities of its practitioners, the marker that seems to function as a master signifier, as it were, is French

Music's *rural* heritage and character. Le Menestrel devotes her fourth chapter, "Homegrown and Lowdown," to a discussion of the music's ruralness. Here, Cajun and Creole's own perceptions of their music intersects with those of outsiders, *e.g.* folklorists, academics, festival organizers and promoters, northern urban folk music revivalists, and the like. Reinforcing the rural nature of zydeco music, Le Menestrel offers information provided by journalist Sheila Dewan on zydeco trail rides. Le Menestrel offers zydeco as a site for further ethnographic research. Nonetheless, though she is careful to avoid making premature generalizations, Le Menestrel carefully documents aspects of rural black Louisiana and Texas life, in sharp contrast to the American popular culture's general perception of black culture and music as overwhelmingly urban, as represented by genres such as hip hop, rap, urban contemporary, and the like.

The final chapter, "Choosing French Louisiana Music," focuses on those who come to southwest Louisiana to participate in cultural tourism or transplants to the region, drawn because of their love of their music. Some are returnees, coming home. Again we encounter Le Menestrel as a fiddler, this time sixteen years later with a newborn in tow. Her positionality as a native French speaker, European, and one who was not initially drawn to French Louisiana music informs her analysis of the role outsiders have played in the history and development of this music. Ambitiously, she treats musicians, fans, and collectors, with particular focus on northern California. These transplants to southwest Louisiana "vividly illustrate the essential role played by non-natives in the validation, circulation, and remapping of French Louisiana music." They have established themselves in the local music scene. She begins with the northern California Cajun and zydeco scene, a region to which Creoles and southern blacks migrated during the 1940s through 1970s. A number of musicians, Queen Ida for example, pursued careers in northern California, and it was here that Chris Strachwitz founded his label Arhoolie Records. French folk musicians in turn were discovering south Louisiana music in the 1970s, creating a group of "Francadiens," a group she defines as "French Louisiana music fans in France, Europe, and Louisiana." These Francadiens organize concerts, workshops, and festivals. Joining them are English, Danish, and other European fans, journalists, record producers, and such. Additionally, the 1990s Roots Music movement spurred further outside interest in south Louisiana music interest. As in her earlier chapters focusing on French Louisiana music practitioners and fans, Le Menestrel also interviewed many of these transplants. Here, Le Menestrel provides a fresh perspective on music, culture, and identity in this region--one set in contradistinction to New Orleans. The city draws both migrants and tourists annually, drawn primarily by the city's fabled jazz history and vibrant live music scene (in which I myself was a participant as keyboardist in R&B/blues bands 1998-2005). I must say, it was illuminating to read the portion of Le Menestrel's account of the French music jam scene in southwest Louisiana.

If one is looking for a simplistic, segregated history of Cajun or zydeco music that eschews complex issues such as race, class, or the problematic ways in which both musics have been shaped not only by its practitioners, but also by academics, folklorists, state, cultural, and tourist agencies, and outsiders and other markers of identity, then one should perhaps spend a weekend at the fairgrounds of New Orleans's JazzFest and purchase a trade publication. If one,

however, wants to learn about French music in southwestern Louisiana as practiced historically and more recently by both blacks and whites, locals, and transplants, then you should read Le Menestrel's *Negotiating Difference in French Louisiana Music: Categories, Stereotypes, and Identifications* while listening to the recordings Le Menestrel discusses in her text (many of which are available on various streaming audio and video services and platforms). This book is a nuanced, multi-layered and at times provocative study. As ethnographer, participant-observer, and previously a resident of the community she studies, Le Menestrel's work is informative, authoritative, and unparalleled.

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