

Cajun Fiddler Cedric Watson Is Helping to Preserve Tradition

Texas native leads a red-hot band steeped in Louisiana's Creole tradition

By [Matt Sircely](#) posted June 2011 ☆☆☆☆☆

Strings Magazine



Now residing a half-day's drive across the prairies of East Texas where he grew up, Cedric Watson composes tunes on fiddle and double-row accordion at his house close to the railroad tracks, just a few blocks north of downtown Lafayette, Louisiana. The region is rich with cultural revival; roots music intertwines with the language, food, and vibrant dance scene. A few blocks south lies the Blue Moon Saloon, a patchwork of outdoor porches, corrugated roofed patios, walls adorned with road signs and memorabilia, a rustic wooden bar, and a packed dance floor often stepping to some of the region's finest players, including Watson's band Bijou Creole.

Watson's Grammy-nominated lineup of Creole and zydeco heavyweights cut Bijou Creole's latest recording live before a Blue Moon audience. Last year's *Creole Moon: Live from the Blue Moon Saloon* features dance music with polyrhythmic percussion and Watson's salient fiddle, accordion, and vocals in Creole French. Some songs draw heavily on la-la, the old-time Creole music. Others reflect classic zydeco with its rhythm and blues infusion. A call and response juré hearkens back to Africa.

When the band momentarily steps aside, Watson picks up the fiddle. "What I like about the fiddle is: the fiddle is what puts the blues in French music. This is a tune I learned from Mr. Canray Fontenot," he says before launching solo into "Canray's Jig" with triplets flying and his foot firmly on the downbeat.

When Watson follows up with another Fontenot tune, "Jogue au plumbeau," the crowd finds itself elegantly waltzing to the crunch of Watson's bow, French vocals, and bluesy double-stops sliding up the neck. Long notes answer the vocal, laden with ornaments of the Creole tradition, both sweet and graceful, yet powerful enough to move 200 feet across the dance floor.

Watson tips his hat to all of his Creole fiddle predecessors, and peers, but especially Fontenot. "His style took you all over," he says. "It took you back to the Caribbean roots that we have, it took you

back to France a lot of times, blues, Native American influences—anything you can think of. Canray was the most diversified, in my opinion.”

La-la’s strong downbeat coupled with polyrhythmic textures shares a common thread with old-time Caribbean music forms, Watson adds. He describes how European dance melodies “mutated when everybody started mixing these rhythms together and it became popular.” He enjoys envisioning how the initial cultural crossovers happened. “Even in a time like slavery,” he says, “I think music was still bringing people together.”

From the dance clubs of south Louisiana to a BBC concert at London’s Barbican Center, Watson has emerged as a young, leading voice in Creole fiddle music. He won his first Grammy nomination as a member of the Pine Leaf Boys, a primarily Cajun ensemble, for 2007’s *Blues de Musicien* and followed up the next year with a nomination for his eponymous solo debut of originals rooted in Creole tradition.

Watson garnered another Grammy nomination for the 2009 debut recording from his group Bijou Creole, *L’Ésprit Créole*, and 2010’s Bijou Creole recording, *Creole Moon* received a nomination as well. “I would call my music an original style of Creole music,” he says as a train whistles and clatters behind him on the telephone.

“All Creole music is on the downbeat,” he continues, contrasting the style to the boom-chuck of Cajun music or the snare hits of zydeco. “I can be standing right there on the drummer with the snare, and I don’t even hear it because I’m all about the downbeat,” he says, referencing such early recordings of Creole icons as Amédé Ardoin. “If you can ever hear their feet tapping in some of the old recordings, they’re always on the down.”

Growing up in East Texas, Watson absorbed tunes from other Creole fiddlers and accordion players. His mentors, including Edward Poullard and J.B. Adams, with whom he still plays, introduced him to countless musicians and recordings. Upon his arrival in Louisiana, Watson recalls, people “didn’t know whether someone young was going to come up and start taking [Creole fiddle] on, or if it was going to die.

“So one of my goals has been to preserve the Creole fiddle.”

In many ways, Watson’s own lineage reflects the diverse influences underlying Creole music. His great-great-great-grandfather, a Spaniard from the Canary Islands, fought for Mexican General Santa Anna and received a thousand acres in return for his service in Watson’s hometown of San Felipe. All together, Watson counts Spanish, German, African, French, Malaysian, and Native American ancestry through the generations. “I grew up around my great-grandma, and she remembered these people,” he says.

In recent years, Watson has traversed North America, Europe, and the Caribbean with both Bijou Creole and small ensembles playing la-la. One great thing about touring the Caribbean, Watson says, is to spread awareness of the Gulf Coast Creole culture to other parts of the Creole world. “That’s how we’re going to make Creole culture survive. If we realize we all exist, we can come together somehow to help preserve each others’ cultures—to help make things happen like festivals, books—everything to keep the whole existence of the beautiful Creole culture.”

Watson is composing a forthcoming recording with Bijou Creole, which should be released this spring. “The egg is almost ready to hatch,” he says.