



Duo puts the roots in Roots festival

By Johnette Rodriguez/Special to the Independent

True to the name of the Charlestown Labor Day Festival, Rhythm & Roots, fiddlers David Greely and Joel Savoy are taking Cajun music back to its roots when they appear Sunday, Sept. 4, at the festival, and, in a preview performance on Tuesday, Aug. 30, at the Towers in Narragansett, as the GreelySavoy Duo.

Both musicians have played music for most of their lives. Savoy grew up in the quintessential musical household, with his father, Marc, making and playing Cajun accordions and forming musical groups with friends and family members; his mother, Ann, on guitar and vocals in those groups; brother Wilson on keyboards (and other instruments); and himself on fiddle (ditto). The four of them still tour as the Savoy Family Cajun Band; Joel and his mom were in The Divine Secrets of the YaYa Sisterhood; Joel was a founding member of the Red Stick Ramblers, and he now has his own record company, Valcour Records.

Greely, along with accordionist Steve Riley, founded Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys, and Greely toured with this group for 23 years. Not only was he the fiddler, often the lead vocalist and sometimes even the saxophonist in the band, but he was one of the primary songwriters and song-researchers. This past Mardi Gras, he played his farewell performances with the Playboys, and he has settled into some long-planned-for projects, such as playing double fiddle with Savoy.

When the French-speaking Acadian settlers were deported from the Canadian Maritimes in the mid-18th century, they migrated to French-speaking Louisiana, bringing their music with them. In those earliest years, the violin was the most common instrument, and just two fiddlers could create such variation in harmony and rhythms their music would fill up any Cajun home or backyard.

"We have the basic, the most primeval Cajun line-up," Greely observed in a recent phone conversation. "One fiddler plays the rhythm and one plays the melody - we trade off. The second fiddler has a lot wider range of opportunity; he can play the traditional octave double or play counter melodies or change the pallet of the harmony. If you do it well together, it's more like one and one equals five."

Greely wrote in a liner note on his self-titled album that, even though they are almost a generation apart, Savoy is "like my musical first cousin."

"We noticed that we had an affinity for each other's styles," Greely explained further. "When we played together, there was not a lot of adjustment, not a lot of compromise necessary. We find it really easy to take things to higher levels than if our tastes were that much different."

"Whenever we play, I love the range of feelings," he continued. "We'll play an old unaccompanied ballad, really sweet and really slow and really emotional. And then the next one can be really powerful - we just let it rip and we can get ferocious!"

The special vocal quality of the violin has often been noted, Greely said, and it stems partially from the subtle way the musician's fingers slide up and down the fretless neck of the instrument, bending and shaping the notes in endless permutations. With Cajun music - which Greely avows has some of the prettiest melodies of any roots-based music - many of the oldest tunes were based on a cappella ballads, with the fiddler consciously trying to reproduce the human voice. That quality also makes double-fiddling so engaging.

"With singers and fiddlers - anything where you can nuance the note," Greely reflects, "it just thrills the human soul. All the harmonics just mesh together in a weave, and there's an extra excitement in the sound of working so close together."

"There's a real visceral satisfaction with getting two fiddles in tune with each other," he added. "It's more human and

more organic. A lot of instruments like piano and guitar are tuned to an average, called "equal temperament - they sound OK in any key."

From the beginning of his collaboration with Riley, Greely has always been interested in finding "archival material that isn't being played anymore and having a good time playing traditional sounds." That focus hasn't changed for Greely. I've seen him play in a small, acoustic venue several times, and he can captivate an audience with stories of the old-time fiddlers he heard and adapted tunes from or with his research into 18th-century slave songs. He's also passionate about the Cajun music that exists away from the dance halls.

"Dance hall music is very social," Greely said. "It's designed for people to visit or to catch up with each other or even to court and that's all great. But there was also a lot of music played by Mom or Dad at home that was a lot more personal. I love watching people play in those settings - they're just transported somewhere else. It's a completely different environment, to a different purpose.

"I'm really interested in making that available to people," he said. "That's one of the reasons I'm doing the duos, because this is the kind of music that's basically gone on forever - to sit around at home for a small gathering and pay close attention to it. A lot wider range of emotions and feelings can be reached with that."

So join Greely and Savoy in the "home setting" at the Towers (Aug. 30) or at the Rhythm & Roots Festival (in the workshop tent on Sept. 3 and 4 and the main stage on Sept. 4 at noon).

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