



Terrance Simien and the Mallet Playboys

by John Radanovich

Although the now immensely popular zydeco and Cajun musics grew from the same, wet Acadiana ground, outside influences molded them differently. Cajun grafted country western onto French ballads and Acadian folk tunes. Zydeco evolved parallel to Cajun music but was strongly influenced by a love of southern Louisiana Creoles for blues music.

When Clifton Chenier took his new mixture of blues and French waltzes out to Los Angeles in the 1950s, homesick blacks from Louisiana and East Texas (who had migrated to California for work) packed little clubs to hear his completely original accordion blues music. Others, mainly LA session musicians (such as Steve Miller and Ry Cooder) took notice, too.

Nowadays, it seems as if you can't go anywhere without hearing zydeco. The Madison Avenue advertising firms never seem to tire of using zydeco's fun, uptempo sound for selling cars and other objects that appear to need "excitement." The good time irresistibility of the music has gained a large worldwide following; acts like Terrance Simien, Buckwheat Zydeco, and CJ Chenier tour incessantly. All three play more regularly in clubs in Chicago, New York, and LA than they do in their homes in and near Lafayette.

Until his death this year, the eldest zydeco pioneer and star was the eccentric and very funny Boozoo Chavis, considered the king of the hill since Clifton Chenier passed away. That is, until Beau Jocque burst onto the scene in 1992. His souped-up, James Brown'ed version of zydeco breathed new life into the music, and made its complexion flushed and funky. Beau Jocque and Boozoo (who sold underwear at his concerts, with his image printed on them and the words "Take Em Off and Throw Em in the Corner," and "Let Me Play With Your Poodle!") once engaged in largely friendly cutting contests. But Beau Jocque was in many ways a traditionalist, who very successfully added new elements. For a short few years, Boozoo again regained his title after the enormously tall Beau Jocque died suddenly of a heart attack at age 45 in 1999.

Although Beau Jocque's sound influenced every single newer act down in Acadiana, veteran Terrance Simien's sound and approach were already long established. In his case, New Orleans R&B is as strong an influence as Clifton Chenier. Simien's voice has been described as the best in zydeco, and certainly is. His voice and much of his approach has been strongly influenced by Aaron Neville's countryish warble and smooth attack.

Thirty-five year old accordionist Simien may not be a zydeco traditionalist, but he is the best practitioner of a "nouveau zydeco." The Mallet, Louisiana native brings to his music a strong New Orleans sound not otherwise seen in music from the southwestern Louisiana parishes. With his charm and Creole handsome good looks, he cuts quite a figure onstage, where he prefers to play barefoot and with his wild hair flying.



A single bar of any of his songs shows a resemblance to the Neville Brothers sound, what with Simien's Aaron Neville-influenced voice, and a mixing of other elements into his zydeco--primarily rock and R&B, but also reggae. Simien and band, the Mallet Playboys, came into their own organic sound without any direct Neville influence. "It's funny, you know, but I never saw the Nevilles until 1985, which is when I saw Aaron for the first time, too. It was the most incredible thing I've ever heard. Since then I've just gotten all over their music. The way they sing, all that Meters funk thing. I didn't even know that it existed in my music until I began to travel outside Louisiana. People would tell us that we sounded something like the Neville Brothers. When I finally went to hear them, it changed the whole way I look at music. There I am still trying to yodel."

Bringing rock and other styles into zydeco isn't so unusual nowadays (Buckwheat Zydeco also does it with great success), but a powerful singing voice is unusual in this music. Because zydeco is exclusively a dance music, the vocals normally aren't very interesting (aside from being sung, exotically enough, in French). Growing up, Simien sharpened his voice in the black church of Saint Ann's in rural Mallet, just down the road from the famous Richard's zydeco dance club. His records include songs that can't really be categorized as zydeco, and even lack accordion playing.

Ever since his 1990 debut record *Zydeco on the Bayou* (Restless Records), Simien has become a national household name and makes appearances at countless festivals year round. He is most famous for his appearance in the film *The Big Easy*, for which he co-wrote "Closer to You" with star Dennis Quaid. When Quaid's character takes Ellen Barken to Tipitina's, Terrance Simien and the Mallet Playboys are playing onstage.

Since beginning his professional career at 17, Simien has become zydeco's crown prince. He has made a White House appearance for an inaugural ball--backing Stevie Wonder playing harmonica--for President Clinton. He recorded with Paul Simon and toured with Robert Palmer and Los Lobos. Several of his songs have been used in major motion pictures and national advertising campaigns.

Simien's second record in 1993, *There's Room for Us All* (Black Top Records) was one of the few zydeco records reviewed by *Rolling Stone* magazine. It is also one of the best zydeco records around, and intersperses R&B and a Bob Dylan cover of "I Shall Be Released" with hot zydeco. Like the old jazz player's trick of quoting from popular songs during a solo, Simien tosses in Jackson Five phrases in "Zydeco Boogaloo." Add a Dickie Betts-style guitar solo and punchy drumming throughout and the result is one of the genre's classics. Showing his love of New Orleans funk, Simien includes two songs backed by the Meters, one of which is a sexy version of the King Floyd soul classic, "Groove Me." The rest of this very nice record uses several of New Orleans' best session musicians on other covers of classic zydeco songs and Simien originals.

Although fluent in French, Simien doesn't often sing in the language. "I don't do it as much as I used to because not that many people understand it anymore. We usually do about 3 songs each set in French. But if someone requests something in French, we are happy to do it."



The most interesting recent project Simien is a self-produced zydeco recording for children. Narrated by a wise old cypress tree, it is the story of a rural Louisiana Creole man, zydeco, Creole cooking, and local history.

“That was real fun to research all the old people in the neighborhood, to hear different stories and songs about the Creole culture. One song came from an old lady from the neighborhood. It's in French and came from her grandmother who was a child at the time of the Civil War. I had never heard it before, but kids sang it when the war was coming to an end and they knew they'd be free. I sing the French part and then sing the English. I just sing it a cappella probably because this was before the accordion really came to zydeco music.”

An English portion of the song translated by Simien proves to be an intriguing and musically complex slave chant.

“A lot of stuff got lost and never got recorded,” Simien laments. “With me, people would start off singing a song like that and then be embarrassed and stop. I'd be like, ‘sing, sing! We can share this stuff with the world!’”

Simien undertook another project because he figured that there are lots of Mardi Gras songs, so why not a New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival song? Consequently, the title song from his *Jam the Jazzfest*, is often heard at the New Orleans Jazz Fest, which is growing in popularity exponentially every year. A line from the song promises that coming to Fest will be “the most fun you'll ever have without getting undressed.” The EP on Tone Cool Records (1998) includes a New Orleans medley Simien has done live for years: “lko-lko/Brother John/Jambalaya,” that comes with steel drums to add a floating Caribbean feel. The 5-song EP adds a rollicking zydeco “Macque Choux” (named after a popular Cajun sidedish of spiced corn) and “May Your Music Live On,” a tribute to the late John Delafosse, who was a major influence on Simien's playing. “May Your Music” features an echoing accordion as a backdrop to Simien's love for his mentor and a wish to see him in heaven.

Simien tours without much of a break all year, and especially hard in summer. When home, he only manages to play Grant Street Dancehall in Lafayette once or twice a year.

“When I'm home, we're in the studio a lot. That and my wife has me doing all those things I don't do when I'm gone.” Simien's wife Cynthia holds down the fort while her husband is gone, and is plenty busy since she also manages the band and raises their young daughter, Marcella. The fourth-grader is musically talented and has perfect pitch.

Most of the Mallet Playboys have been with Simien for some time. They include Danny Williams on keyboards and background vocals, Darwell Davis on drums and background vocals, Ralph Fontenot playing frottoir and spoons, Harold Scott on bass, and Wayne Dalcourt on lead guitar. They will soon release *Tribute Sessions* with Australian AIM Records.

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