

Lawrence "Black" Ardoin is a living legend of Creole music and a major connection between the sounds of the plantations and sharecropping era to the continuing evolution of Zydeco music pioneered by his two sons, Sean and Chris.

Talking with Mr. Ardoin is like going through a rolodex of Louisiana music history. As a boy, he played fiddle with his father, the late "Boi Sec" Ardoin. He's played with and influenced a veritable Louisiana Music Hall of Fame: Canray Fontenot, Rockin' Sidney, Beau Jocque, to name a few. He's performed with bands such as the Ardoin Brothers Band, Lawrence "Black" Ardoin & His French Zydeco Band, and Lagniappe, which he did with his son Chris before retiring in the '90s. Afterwards, he managed Chris's band, Double Clutchin' for a time.

In addition to a successful music career, Ardoin served two years in the Army after being drafted to Vietnam, worked at Entergy for 38 years, and served as a local Zydeco radio host. In 1982, he started the Lake Charles Chicken Run, a yearly event during Mardi Gras.

These days, Ardoin lives in Goosport with his wife Jojo, enjoying retirement. The couple recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. In addition to Sean and Chris, they also have a daughter, Erica, and three grandsons. *Thrive* magazine recently visited with Ardoin, where he talked about growing up in the music business, the subtle differences between Zydeco and Cajun genres, and passing the legacy on to the next generations.

first person

by Matt Dye

with

Lawrence "Black" Ardoin

Linking his Family's Musical Legacy

How did you get started with music?

The music comes from the cotton field. My father couldn't read and write, so he spoke through his accordion. I started playing the fiddle at age 11. Didn't want to. Didn't like it. But the good part was that on Saturdays I didn't have to work in the field. We lived eight miles west of Mamou. Friday nights, Daddy would play in Lake Charles and I'd play the fiddle in the band. Canray Fontenot was the original fiddle player. When he took a leave, I took his place, and played nearly every Friday night. And we'd come back at three, four o'clock in the morning, and I got to sleep in . . . my sisters, they'd hate that. Then I started playing the drums later in life by hopping on drum sets after the band's drummer got up to go to the bathroom, and it came naturally.

When did you start playing the accordion?

I was playing drums in the Ardoin Brothers band. Morris was on guitar, Russell was on the bass, Canray was on fiddle, and my brother "Bud" was on accordion. Then, on September 29, 1974, off 104 and 190 getting into Lafayette, "Bud" was in accident and didn't survive. After a time, I told my cousin I felt I could pick up accordion and play. He said, "Well, maybe he left it with you." I picked up my daddy's accordion at an intermission and started playing a waltz, and Canray looked at me and was like whoa, and started to grab up his fiddle. I never played like my daddy at all, but, if you've got a good band to cover up . . .

You say you started in Creole music, not Zydeco. What's the difference?

Zydeco comes from Creole and Cajun music. The number one difference is Cajun is you (a Caucasian) playing it; Creole, I'm playing it. Skin color. My great uncle Amadee Ardoin, was first to record this music, and then the Cajun's took it over, and called it Cajun music. Creole is a waltz and a two-step, and Cajun did the same thing, but a Cajun waltz was a little more dragging music; ours was a little more upbeat. Zydeco just takes that and adds a little more blues and rock.



Describe the heyday of your music career and what were some of the highlights?

I was the hottest thing going back then. And that's economics. I could go down to the streets of New Orleans and just play to the older people, and they'd get up and start dancing, so then when I'd play a festival, they'd know what time I was playing, and like thirty minutes before I'm coming on, you can see them coming in dragging their chairs. I wasn't the best accordion player, but I was a good entertainer. Just like Richard LeBouef and Terrance Simien. They both aren't the best around, but they're great entertainers. In 1984, I played in New Orleans for the World's Fair with Sean and my daughter. Chris was too young. Then, when Chris was nine years old, my dad, me, and Chris played at Carnegie Hall. Three generations of accordion players.

How did your children get into the music tradition?

I wrote a song for my wife to try to learn, and she couldn't get it, so Sean (at age 11) said, "I can do that," and I'm like oh yeah, you can do everything. So I gave him the paper and the accordion. In ten minutes, he had it down pat. My daughter did the same thing. Now Chris was different. He learned on his own. And how he had all those songs in his little head, I don't know. We'd go out to festivals, and I'd dress him up. I painted him a Horner accordion red, gave him a white straw hat, some red ropers, blue jeans, and a red and white strip shirt, and we'd go play. He'd come back with more money than me! They'd throw 20-dollar bills at him, and I'm like damn!

Yet your sons seem to have gone in two entirely opposite directions.

Sean had a different style, always did. I'm happy to see that. Sean was doing zydeco and was doing pretty good, but then he gave it up and went to gospel, and that

didn't work. But anytime you're in a circle and you get out, it's hard to get back in. But Sean is going to make it because he's not the type of guy who's going to give in. He's a double Grammy nominee. When Chris was under my roof, he played my music, because it's what I wanted. When he turned 21, okay, I started giving him a little leeway. Then when he recorded, I had nothing to do with it, and he started changing. He started coming up the ladder. And if it works, go for it. I'm not totally for everything he gets up there, but it's good.

What have you been doing since you retired?

I've built a couple trailers in the back that I rent for parades, and another one that I need to start working on. And I used to do mechanic work. People found out I was pretty good at it, and then on Saturday mornings, I couldn't plan to sleep late.

Will the legend live on through the next generation?

I've got three grandsons. My daughter's son, he's three, and I made a deal with him, that papa was going to buy him a scrub board if he started using the potty. He told my daughter about the deal, and that he was using it, and so it was going to happen. And man, that boy got to using that thing. Chris has two boys, and so they all three were over at Chris's studio, and they have keyboard, accordions, the drums. My daughter says her son's got a good beat on the drums. And Chris's two boys already have it down on the drums, and they've got that room all set up. So yes, that generation is going to continue with the music.

What advice do you have for future generations?

Rockin' Sidney once told me, if you can't pay cash for what you're looking for, for what you want, then you can't afford it.