

2 Sheets

GEOG 220
"Place, Space and Identity"
Alan Nash

CAJUN MUSIC

Some notes to accompany your viewing of the video

- **General Objective:** we will see from this video that it is the unique blending of diffusion and innovation of cultural traits together in one particular area that create and then sustain a cultural region.
- **Specific Objective:** Using Cajun music as an example, to consider how the pattern and spread of musical traditions contribute to the creation of cultural regions.

Of the many things that go towards defining unique cultural regions, folk music is an important element, but one relatively neglected by cultural geographers until quite recently. Anthropologists and folklorists have spent much more time studying this topic, developing the field of *ethnomusicology* to study patterns of world folk music.

In this video, we travel with Alan Lomax to examine one particularly interesting example of a regional folk music, the *Cajun music* of Louisiana – we will hear and see how this music contributes to the creation and maintenance of a distinctive Cajun culture region, and we will consider the music's patterns of diffusion into Louisiana.

The state of Louisiana was once part of France's colonial empire in the Americas, and it was therefore to Louisiana that many of the French Acadians fled when they were deported from Nova Scotia by the British between 1755-1763. The Acadians settled mainly in the south west of Louisiana, and over time became known as "Cajuns".

In the video, Alan Lomax tells us that Cajun music developed from three quite separate folk music traditions that met and mingled in Louisiana. These are:

- **French Acadian music** from Nova Scotia. Many of the words (lyrics), many of the tunes, and at least one type of instrument (the fiddle) used in Cajun music have Acadian origins – and from there, of course, can be traced back to parts of France, such as the Poitou region.
- **African music.** Slaves brought with them from Africa their musical traditions, and contributed the distinctive rhythms and percussion (drums) to Cajun music. [Note: Lomax also argues that the Cajun accordion has African roots, but modern cultural geographers attribute its origins to German immigrants who settled Louisiana in the 1880s.]

- First nations' music. Lomax suggests it is just possible that some of the rhythms of Cajun music may have their origins in the songs of the aboriginal population of the region.

These three elements subtly mix to form the basis of Cajun music. However, we should not forget that this mixture also includes elements of local invention – the use of the washboard (often considered a feature of a more energetic form of Cajun known as *zydeco*) is certainly a Cajun innovation.

In general terms, we see from all this that it is a unique blend of diffusion and innovation that creates and then sustains cultural regions.

It is interesting to note that Cajun music has also spread to influence other musical traditions in its turn. The video gives us two examples of this:

- Alan Lomax suggests that Cajun songs influenced Texas cowboy songs (he says the “yippee-yi-yay” of the latter may have a French origin). If so, their influence spread up routes, such as the Chisholm Trail, along which cattle were driven to the railheads.
- The revival of Cajun music is discussed towards the end of the video. What is not mentioned, however, is its subsequent path to “world music” status. Note, for example, its use by Paul Simon in his 1986 *Graceland* album, where Cajun music is combined with the singing of South Africa’s Ladysmith Black Mambazo. [World music, of course, illustrates the postmodernist view that all musical traditions are equally worthy of respect.]

Alan Lomax, the host and narrator of this program from the PBS *American Patchwork* series (originally broadcast in the early 1990s), was among the foremost scholars of American folk music. Continuing his father’s pioneering work in the American South, Alan Lomax began recording folk music in the 1940s on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution. He “discovered” Lead Belly, and played a part in the revival of Cajun music. Sadly, he died in the summer of 2002. Interest in traditional American folk music continues, recently encouraged by the film *Oh Brother Where Are Thou?*, and by the fine selection of recordings available on CD through Rounder Records. Another recent film worth seeing is *The Songcatcher* (a drama set in the nineteenth-century Appalachians of the USA involving a heroine who figures out the local folk songs are based on old British songs).

Some References:

Malcolm L. Comeaux, “The Cajun Accordion”, in *Baseball, Barns & Bluegrass: A Geography of American Folklife* ed. George O. Carney (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998) pages 131-138.

George O. Carney (ed.) *The Sounds of People and Places: A Geography of American Folk and Popular Music* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994).