TRADITIONALLY A MOST GRACEFUL and refined movement, "Acadian" dancing, as it was once termed, may be centuries old. But these days it's called Cajun dancing and, man, is the custom ever alive and twirling!

True, a fervor for dancing has always been associated with the Acadian's joie de vivre, but up until the past five years or so, dancing to chunky chank was, for the most part, a big turnoff for the younger Cajun breed. However, with the advent of new and faster dance steps and younger, upbeat Cajun bands, Cajun dancing is now about as hot locally as South Louisiana boudin.

Who knows exactly why Cajun dancing has suddenly become so popular. Maybe since it is now nationally cool to be able to parier un peu de Cajun or whip up a serious gambe, the younger generation of Cajuns has finally realized that it's okay to be Cajun. "If you don't like French music, you're not much of anything—that's how popular it's gotten," says 28-year-old Becky Menard, daughter of Cajun musician D.L. Menard. She remembers as a teenager not wanting to touch the traditional stuff her father would play. But the more upswelling sounds of younger bands like Fili (a local favorite), Jambalaya, Terrance Simien and Beausoleil have converted her, she says.

Another reason Cajun dancing may be particularly big among the 25- to 45-age group now is its appeal to whiskey drinkers of caloric burning; it's an excellent aerobic exercise. Vicky Capell, who produces Acadiana Open Channel's grand Cajun Dance Contest that rolls around every year or so, has noticed that since the first dance contest in 1981, a lot more athletic types have gotten into the "sport." "What a lot of people will do," Capell says, "is workout at Red Lerille's, then head to the dancehalls. It's an extension of their athletic prowess."

A prime portrait of the go, guy get sum' um, get sum' athletic Cajun dancer is Richard Baron, 49, a senior vice president in a Lafayette stock brokerage firm. Baron dances in tennis attire and keeps a change of three shirts in his car for a long, hard night on Mulate's dance floor. The stock broker says he and his wife took up Cajun dancing for something to do together after the kids left home, but it is also obvious that this art form is a challenge to be conquered. He even has a sporting way of explaining the steps—"Just think of it as giddy-up, giddy-up."

Besides being a great physical outlet, learning to dance Cajun-style can also be an alternative to less pleasant social situations. And if you're single, the consensus is that it's easier to meet a mate Cajun dancing than by pumping iron at a health club or strolling your grocery cart down some grocery aisle late at night. Miriam Fontenot, local Cajun dance instructor, agrees.

"Cajun dancing is a good way for guys to meet ladies," she says. "To say 'Would you like to dance?' and dazzle her with ability is more appealing to a lady than asking 'Do you want a drink?'"

"It's almost a chivalrous thing to ask. And it's hard to refuse a man when he's only asking you to dance.'"

Fontenot, a professional dance teacher, is the only exclusively Cajun dance instructor in Lafayette. This month marks her third year of teaching. When she first started offering 3-week sessions, she would average 3 to 4 students. Now regular sessions average about 30 students. Fontenot's classes generally include more single men than women; that's because women, who generally follow, can somehow fake it if they're not good dancers—but how can you fake leading?

For ladies, it's an equally unpressured atmosphere to meet men in Cajun dancehalls. Young women often make a habit of arriving at the dancehalls unescorted and have absolutely no qualms about it. That's because they generally encounter their "buddies," habitual Cajun dancers. For a newcomer, all it takes is a little interest on her part and someone is bound to ask her to dance before the night's over. And since many dancers continuously switch partners, it makes it even easier for women socially.

Is there a John Travolta movie in the offering here: Urban Cajun or Samed It Fairer?

OUTLET, the athleticism, or the upbeat bands. It seems everyone has a different explanation. Could it have something to do with all the charm of being a bit old-fashioned? Or was the film "Bellezaire the Cajun" an inspiration?

Well, for whatever reasons, and probably for many reasons, Acadiana is experiencing an exciting renaissance of the old art of Cajun dancing—that's evident. Just 10 years ago, for instance, taking Cajun dance lessons from anyone other than your mother or your uncle was just about unheard of. But today, if you can even manage to squeeze onto the dance floor on popular nights you'll find more than a handful who have taken Miriam Fontenot's class. When Vicky Capell started her Cajun dance contest five years ago in New Orleans, she did so because she had difficulty finding anyone who knew how to Cajun dance. That's no longer the case and numbers are proof. Of the four contests she's held in the last five years, the first drew 20 couples, and the last, 90.

In the final analysis, Cajun dance classes have probably swelled and dance floors expanded simply because more and more people have discovered that Cajun dancing is just plain fun. Trying to interview dancers at Cajun dancehalls was like trying to hold back a kid from jumping in the pool the first day it opens.

Four minutes into one interview and it's, "Can I go walk? I'll be right back."

Another interview, with a woman. This time a guy approaches and stands...
towering overhead.

“Oh, do you want to dance with her?” asks this interviewer.

“Yeah, do you mind?”

So the interviewer sits—left alone again to doodle in a reporter’s notepad and nurse a beer.

Cajun dancing seems to just get into your blood, to turn into a passion that can’t easily be resisted once the fiddles and accordions start to play.

But ironically, for many dancers, the music is purely a medium which stimulates the desire to dance; it has little value on its own. “I don’t like to listen to Cajun music when I’m sitting down. If I’m not dancing, I can’t stand it!”—and that comes from Janine Kilchrist, 31, this year’s Cajun Dance Contest’s best female dancer.

Instead, it’s some kind of magic once the fiddles start and you’re on the dance floor. That’s when the simple, but fun Cajun dance steps blend with the simple, but fun Cajun dance music to create an impassioned appeal.

This appeal is expressed individually and personally by Cajun dancers. “It’s my spirit, my offering to God when I dance. It’s my heritage, that’s the only way I can explain it,” says Betty Cecil, who along with Earl Arnould (known for teaching “thousands” and twirling two ladies at a time on the dance floor) are considered the “spirit of Cajun dance.”

Judy Nunn, a former winner of the AOC Cajun Dance Contest, describes the thrill of Cajun dancing as no comparison to any other form of dancing.

“It’s something about it that just gives you life—it’s a driving force. You hear the music for one minute and you’re on the floor,” says Nunn.

Others have simpler answers. “It makes me happy,” says 22-year-old Margaret Labry.

IT CERTAINLY WOULD BE OBVIOUS to an observer that the “younger generation” is making its mark in Cajun dancing simply because of the number of young faces you see in the dance halls. (Younger generation is relative since Cajun dancers in their 90s can certainly be found.) But if you never saw the faces but only saw the feet, you’d notice that they aren’t doing it the same way as maw-maw and paw-paw.

This newer generation of Cajun dance buffs is turning away from the more traditional two-step and has developed a dance influenced by the 1950s rock ‘n’ roll and jitterbug that is to the count of two-step. Along with new and faster steps are showy swirls and twirls. According to Jim Dugas, 36, brother and contest dancing partner of best female dancer Janine Kilchrist, younger people (those 40 years old or younger) generally do various jitterbug-type moves while older folks walk and two-step.

In a jitterbug, a “Cajun jitterbug” it’s called, you’ll see more spinning and breaking, whereas in a traditional two-step the couple dances together, only rarely breaking.

In all its flair and splendor, the Cajun jitterbug is naturally a more athletic dance step. But sometimes dancers push the physical skill a bit far. Over-emphasis on high energy and competitive moves can turn the jitterbug or even the fast two-step into a rough looking sport where the gracefulness of the dance is lost, along with the poise of the partner.

The jitterbug turns should be done with style and grace and not resemble a wrestling match,” according to Fontenot who tells her students it’s not how many jitterbug turns you do but how well you actually dance that counts.

Developed over the last 15 years, the Cajun jitterbug is considered the “newest” emerging style of a dance that’s centuries old history. But while variations on the Cajun jitterbug and other steps exist, Acadians possess little terminology to describe them. Fontenot says the reason the dances have not been institutionalized is that the steps are too simple to label. After all, we’re not talking ballet here with all the vues sous’ and les pas de deux.

Usually nonetheless, the latest variations of Cajun steps are generally attributed to a group of hard core Cajun dancers from New Orleans who, from time to time, turn up at Mulato’s and teach new turns “and stuff!” to hard core local Cajun dancers. Out of necessity, however, both Fontenot and Cappel say they have had to create terms like “Cajun jitterbug turn” or “simple crossover” for class instruction or for contest purposes.

Dress styles haven’t seemed to change much between the older and younger crowds. The exceptions are contests where costumes are becoming more and more authentic. In general, men who frequent favorite dancehall hotspots like Mulato’s, Bijeaux’s, Grant Street Dancehall, and more recently, Randol’s, dress in casual jeans or shorts. But the women make it a point to put on their fullest skirts. Wearing a dress, or full skirt, gives a much better effect to Cajun dancing, women agree.

But women tend not to agree on what’s worn underneath the skirts when they rise with the turns. Undergarments can be subjects of controversy and as well, reveal the dancer’s personality. At one end you have those conservative dancers who consider it improper to be without a petticoat that’s not at least knee length. At the other end are the dancers, usually more daring and skillful, who leave all that old fashioned business for old ladies and opt instead for a little flair and flamboyance. After Janine Kilchrist won this year’s award for best female dancer, Cappel said she’s certain next year there will be more than just one imitator of Kilchrist’s style—she danced before judges with high, French-cut, red leopard panties underneath her skirt.

LOCAL CAJUN DANCERS MAY all live in the same vicinity and dance at the same dance halls, but according to Cappel, there are three distinct kinds of Cajun dancers these days: the traditional Cajun, the born again Cajun.
The traditional Cajun is say, 30ish or thereabouts, and learned how to Cajun dance as a child at family reunions and dancehalls and has never stopped. The born again Cajun is the 50-ish old who's been in Acadia his all life but only discovered the experience two years ago. These are the Cajun kids who refused to open their ears to Cajun expressions and customs and never learned to Cajun dance from family members, but who, as adults, have rediscovered their heritage and now take structured Cajun dance lessons. The new wave Cajun is the 30ish East or West Coaster—the Cajun dance academicians who will hold forth on the exact nature of a "pretzel." (Not the munchy you eat with beer.)

With all the fad, flair and categories, something this hot, it would seem, has got to soon enough sizzle out. For now, a typical Sunday night as Mulate's Restaurant finds File playing to a crowd stuffed like a can of sardines on the dance floor. Dancers overflow into the aisles, darlings waitresses and making for tableside entertainment for diners. But will the craze for Cajun dancing continue or fade? Is all this just a part of the current Cajun interest that will subside all too soon?

*Pas de tout,* say most local Cajun dancers.

"The fad is not Cajunism because we Cajuns have been here 300 years," says Beausoleil member Michael Doucet. "The fad," he says, "is the socialism of Cajun, and that's what comes and goes. But dance is beyond culture. The view of why to do Cajun dance is a fad, but as long as there's Cajun music, there'll be Cajun dancing."

"Cajun dancing won't go away," agrees Miriam Fontenot, "because when a Cajun band plays anywhere in the world, people get up and want to dance."

Proof of that observation is when Beausoleil played Carnegie Hall. "The ushers kept going up and down the aisles trying to keep people from getting out of their seats to dance," recalls Michael Doucet. "Or take last year, when Earl Arnauld and Betty Cecil were asked to perform Cajun dance to the music of File at the Smithsonian Institute's National Folklore Festival honoring Louisiana and India. "The people in Washington were grabbing our arms, literally pulling them out of the sockets pleading 'Teach us, teach us!'" recalls Arnauld.

"People went crazy. They started applauding and clapping, and we just stopped, the response overwhelmed us. "There were ladies from India listening and watching. It's the custom in India not to touch when you dance. But this Indian woman came up to me and said 'Hold me, hold me like you hold Ms. Betty.' And I reminded the woman that her custom doesn't allow holding. But her answer was, 'But this is America, hold me, hold me!'"

And according to Arnauld, if people from other parts of the world who've never heard Cajun music go wild and say, "Teach me, teach me!" then it'd be a sin if Cajuns didn't love their music and dance.

"Cajun dance and Cajun music will change, sure," he says, "but dance it, play it, and hold onto it."