Allons à Tanzania?

Africa got its first taste of Cajun music last month, and the natives are still restless.

Armed with the fiddle, guitar and harmonica so well-known to frequenters of dancehalls in the Lafayette area, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown played encores to his encores for standing-room-only crowds in Botswana, Lesotho, Zambia, Tanzania, Madagascar, Kenya, Sudan and Egypt. Playing as many styles of music as he does instruments, Brown introduced the East Africans to swing, jazz, blues, calypso, bluegrass, country western and Cajun. "They seemed to like everything I played," said Brown, noting that bluegrass, country western and Cajun were their favorites.

Born in Orange, Texas, Gatemouth has been playing Cajun music all his life. "Half of Texas is Louisiana," he explains. Brown learned to play Cajun music from his father, who also played Cajun and country music. Having learned to play the guitar at age 5, and the fiddle by the time he was 10, Gatemouth soon mastered the viola, mandolin, harmonica, piano and bass. It was only natural that he would make his professional debut playing drums.

Brown has played "all over Europe," where he has produced eight albums. "I got tired of the record industry and the market I had in the United States," he said. Although he was once received better in Europe than in America, Brown considers the response he now receives in his own country equal to that he gets abroad. "I'm getting ready to record in America," he commented.

At a folk festival during the summer, Brown was chosen by the State Department to succeed the late Louis Armstrong as America's "goodwill ambassador." Brown played thirty concerts during his six week tour, in the largest facilities available. Nevertheless, thousands had to be turned away. "They were breaking the doors down to get in," Brown recalls. According to Gatemouth, the Africans have been exposed only to the worst elements of American music. "You ought to hear the crap they're trying to play," he comments. "All of it is rock and roll oriented. Rock and roll is bad enough here."

Brown has been requested to play in Iran, Pakistan and India. "A lot of other countries want me now," he says. The U.S. government willing, Brown will accept the invitations. "It's doing a lot of good for this country," he explains.

Gatemouth considers himself a teacher as well as a musician. Though his music naturally encourages dancing, Brown prefers a sit-down audience. "Dancers don't learn what they're listening to," he complains. "I'd rather play to the people who are going to sit and pay attention."

Brown respects few musicians, "beside myself." Count Basie has influenced him more than any other musician, he says. "I like Johnny Guitar Watson and a couple of others," Brown notes. "Coteau is one of my favorites." Brown is backed up by a six-piece Baton Rouge band, which he is considering replacing.