ST MARTINVILLE — The setting was straight out of a Cajun storybook: moss-covered oak trees, wood-plank cabins, mud-laden bayous, and everywhere the sounds and aromas of Acadiana.

Mosquitoes buzzed the dense air. Dancers laughed through two-steps. The thick smell of jambalaya ran up against the rich aroma of pepper in a head-to-head balance.

For more than 300 years, Cajuns were on the move, their culture mingling with traditions and from one generation to the next, new music and foods still emerging. But with the world taking note from near and afar, and Cajun themselves seeking new connections to their homeland, they were trying to spread the culture to new audiences and their children.

That’s what the first Dewey Balfa Cajun Culture Heritage Week was all about.

For six days in April, 100 paying customers from 22 states and several foreign countries celebrated and learned from a people who for much of the 20th century were abroad, ridiculed and punished for their language and, by extension, their heritage. Dozens of musicians, artists, folklorists and cooks descended upon Lake Fausse Pointe State Park alongside the Atchafalaya River Basin for an event that more resembled a Cajun immersion camp than a festival.

And while Louisiana’s Creole culture, they are as closely related that bringing them to the rest of the United States.

Christine Balfa, director of the nonprofit Louisiana Folk Roots organization and one of the band Balfa Toujours, which is French for Balfa Allways, named the event after her father, fiddler Dewey Balfa. He was Afghanistan’s first cultural ambassador she said.

Dewey Balfa died in 1992 at age 65, but his influence was felt everywhere at Lake Fausse Pointe in 2003. Musicians who were influenced by him played his music, and out-of-state visitors told stories of his in revirved times. They talked about his appearance with the Balfa Brothers at Rhode Island’s Newport Folk Festival in 1966, when he fiddling threw the crowd of 17,000 into a frenzy. From there, he traveled the world, spreading the word of Cajun music through song and giving appreciative audiences at every stop their first exposure to the music of his homeland, but always telling about promoting his culture at home too.

“Every years, there were camps in other states that celebrated Louisiana’s Creole culture has many parallels to that of the Cajuns, in its origins, as an expression of Cajun culture is better said ‘It’s going to taste good, not whether it’s going to taste good, but that it’s going to taste good’”

Dewey Balfa’s legacy prompts others to take up call to spread heritage

Weeklong event offers lessons in being Cajun

By Angela Rozas

STAFF PHOTO BY TEC JACOBS

Led by fiddler Michael Johnson of Birmingham, Ala., the swamps come alive with the sounds of an impromptu jam session at 2 a.m. during Dewey Balfa Cajun Culture Heritage Week at Lake Fausse Pointe State Park near St. Martinville.

Fiddles and guitarists jam accompanied Jesse Legare of the Lake Charles Ramblerz, center left, and fiddler David Greely of the Mamou Playboys, center right, for a jam at Lake Fausse Pointe State Park.

Neville Castille belts out a tune as he accompanies himself on fiddle during a lunch session during Heritage Week.

With Balfa Toujours on many occasions.

Louisiana Folk Roots concluded the first Dewey Balfa Cajun and Creole Heritage Week with a $10,000 grant to the nonprofit group that will use to plan and promote next year’s event, Christine Balfa said.

The week was a teaching experience, but not always an easy one.

On a weekend overlapping a bayou, accordionist Preston Ardoin, who began playing the instrument at age 16, managed to show a handful of fiddlers how to play when he launched into ‘Port Arthur Blues,” during the week’s final session.

“Wow, it’s hard to give advice on how to play this,” Frank told them. ‘You just do.’

A lot of Cajun music is just: feeling, not seeing; emotion, not technique.

Across the park in a tin-roof pavilion, Adirondack chairs were packed for the park’s conference center, Jeanne Delhomme and her husband, physician from Copenhagen, Denmark, tuned his fiddle alongside long-time Cajun fiddler Hadley Castille.

‘It’s amazing. For years, I heard his music, and now to see him play,’ Nelson said, shaking his head.

Castille told jokes and shared stories of his days as a teen-ager dancing at house dances called ‘hotlin.’

The adhering fiddlers laughed at all the right places as he launched into ‘Puer, Arthur Blues,’ his booked beats bursting with rhythm. The fiddlers struggled to keep up. And their recorders whirred, capturing every note, to be replayed, replaced and replayed again when they got home.

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