Blues, swamp pop, Cajun, Zydeco, jazz and country

By The News-Features staff

For a metro area its size, Baton Rouge has a surprising amount of musical activity. It helps, of course, that the city's located in south Louisiana, a region that's among the most musical in the nation.

Situated between the extremely musical realms of New Orleans and Lafayette, Baton Rouge can claim its own music heritage.

While New Orleans may be the birthplace of jazz and a haven for rhythm and blues, funk and all manner of musical hybrids, and Lafayette and Acadiana are swimming in Cajun music, zydeco and swamp pop, Baton Rouge can claim a rich blues heritage.

Swamp pop, too, has a stronghold in areas just south of Baton Rouge, including Prairieville, home of swamp pop prince Van Broussard.

Though many of Baton Rouge's swamp blues stars — including Slim Harpo, Lightnin' Slim and Lonesome Sundown — have passed on, the blues still has a home here, played by such Louisiana legends as Henry Gray and Tabby Thomas and younger players with national and international reputations, especially Larry Garner and Kenny Neal.

Blues is the main menu at Tabby's Blues Box and Heritage Hall, which recently moved from its world-famous North Boulevard location to a new, larger, even air-conditioned spot downtown. Thomas performs at the club regularly and books other acts as well, including his well-known son, Chris Thomas King, and New Orleans' Rocky Charles.

The club also hosts Tuesday night jam sessions. The Blues Box recently began presenting zydeco bands each Monday.

In north Baton Rouge, blues runs in the family at Neal's Restaurant and Lounge. Like Thomas, Rafal Neal is a local blues patriarch, the father of several professional blues musicians, including the world-famous Kenny Neal.

Blues bands are a regular feature at Phil Brady's on Government Street. The Mid City bar's blues jam, too, is a Thursday night tradition. Brady's also books the occasional rock acts.

Blues also has a home at Abe's Barbecue, where it can be heard every weekend. Local legends Henry Gray and Rafal Neal have appeared on Abe's patio as well as younger performers like T-Bone Singleton.

Though Baton Rouge is just east of Cajun country, the area's not only visited by Cajun and zydeco bands from southwest Louisiana, it has local bands that specialize in those distinctly Louisiana music genres.

Rudy Richard and His Blues and Zydeco Band features Richard's blues guitar and zydeco accordion. Local Cajun acts include Toot Les Soir, Mitch Landry and Boudin.

Cajun music is heard several nights a week at Mulaté's Cajun Restaurant and a few nights a week at Brunet's Cajun Restaurant.

Casino Rouge stages a Cajun night each Wednesday and the Cajun French Music Association presents Cajun groups each Friday at 10777 Greenwell Springs Rd.

Jazz music has grown in Baton Rouge in recent years thanks to the regular bookings at M's Fine and Mellow Café downtown and Sullivan's Steakhouse off College Drive. M's has retained to create a listening room in which conversation doesn't overpower the music. The restaurant-music venue has booked nationally known jazz acts Marcus Roberts and Mark Whitfield, high-profile New Orleans' names Ellis and Jason Marsalis, Los Hombres Calientes and world-traveling Baton Rouge resident Wessell Anderson. Sullivan's offers jazz several nights a week.

Rock acts tend to perform in the LSU area, especially at Varsity Theatre, the Bayou and the Spanish Moon. Varsity shows headlined by national touring groups often feature local bands as opening acts. The Bayou, established in 1977, is a classic campus rock club, pool tables included. It mostly books up-and-coming acts.

Rock and alternative country acts also perform at the nearby Cheeze's.

The Spanish Moon, a Highland Road venue between LSU and downtown, has become increasingly busy. It figured prominently in the recent South By So What? festival, which featured several acts on their way to or from the South By Southwest Music Fest.


Kenny Neal

Media Conference in Austin, Texas. The Thirsty Tiger, one of the city's few downtown music venues, also books rock and alternative country acts.

Of course, for listeners interested in the latest hits and oldies, many bars and clubs offer talent-covered bands and karaoke nights.

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