One night during "French Week," the July 4th week of the Smithsonian Institution's Bicentennial Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C., a group of folk musicians from Louisiana, Quebec and provincial France were sitting around a little cafe in Georgetown.

A fiddle named Pascal Guerrin from Poitou, France, took the stage, and began to play a folk song from his native town. A few moments later, Rodney Ball from Basile, La., began humming along, then playing, and singing the lyrics, not missing a word.

"And that was it," says Barry Jean Ancelet. "Three hundred and thousands of people went absolutely crazy.'

But after festival hours, when French musicians from Louisiana, France, French Canada and New England would stay up all night comparing notes is when the "really heavy cultural exchanges took place," says Ancelet, who accompanied the Louisiana group to Washington as program-presenter, and still recollects the experience in reverential tones.

The rationale behind this "Old Ways in the New World" section of the Bicentennial festival was to promote cultural exchange between folk groups from different parts of this country and their counterparts overseas. And to Ancelet, that night in Georgetown was even more dramatic proof of the experiment's success than a whole week's worth of "howling and screaming ovals" and a stageful of performers and entire audience in tears at the end of the Cajun concert that closed the festival.

"All during the festival, and particularly that night, everybody recognized for the first time that they weren't alone in the world," says Ancelet. "They saw that their culture was as legitimate an expression of the French language as any other. You had regular, everyday people from Louisiana, France, Canada and all over, and what they saw was that there just wasn't that much difference.

"The Cajuns of Louisiana have been told for a long time that their language is nothing but a dialect, or a patois, not a legitimate one from the French language. Nobody would understand it anywhere else, and it was just a bunch of malarkey. And they saw that they had no trouble communicating with people from all over the French-speaking world. First-hand, they talked to them, and the people understood.

Making everybody—particularly the people themselves—understand, only the music, but the entire Acadian culture that art form reflects, is the unique mission of Barry Ancelet, who at age 26 has an undergraduate degree in French, master's in folklore and is presently pursuing studies for a doctorate in folklore while teaching Louisiana French folklore at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette.

Now director of the fledgling Center for Acadian and Creole Folklife at USL, Ancelet is instrumental in founding that research and education agency in 1974, with CODOFIL (Council of the Development of French in Louisiana) Director James Domengeaux, Louisiana historian Otho Hebert, USL President Ray Authement, University of Texas folklorist Roger Abrahams and Smithsonian Institution Folklife Director Ralph Rinzler.

In theory, the operation that was headed by Hebert until his death last year was set up "to address the school to the traditional culture of this area, which was thought to be a very rich and important one, and one that had not received the attention it deserved." Operating under an appropriation from the university, the center was founded as a research center for Louisiana French language folklore, "but nobody was really sure exactly what that meant, and it is well under way toward becoming a full-blown research-education project with grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to back it up.

In essence, the center's philosophy is "to try to get some sort of legitimacy into dealing with the Acadians," says Ancelet. "Creole" was tack on to include all the French-speaking possibilities.

"For a long time, people said the Acadians had no culture, but culture is nothing more than the artistic expressions of any group that considers itself a people. And it's a great part of the design of this center to give an outlet for Louisiana French society to express itself and to have that expression recognized as a legitimate art form or culture.

From an historical perspective, the center is concerned with establishing just how significant and largely unsung a role the Acadians played in settling this continent.

"All you ever get from the history books is the English side of things," says Ancelet. "It's really underplayed that the Spanish had a viable society going on in the Southwest and that the French who settled by 1604 in what was called Acadia and is now parts of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia had a working, and the first democratic society going on this continent and that eventually Louisiana, where they decided to migrate, rather than take an oath of allegiance to the English crown. Acadia was settled in 1604. Just to give an interesting perspective, Jamestown was 1607." And of course it's not the English fault that all you hear is Plymouth Rock; they're just telling their story. It just so happens that we haven't told our story yet, and that's what we need to do. You talk about the Acadian history, and the first thing anybody mentions is Longfellow. Well, my God, Longfellow was from Boston; why should we let him be the interpreter of Acadian history?"

While he considers much of the work produced by "outsiders" on Southwest Louisiana "excellent," Ancelet has been disenchanted with other studies, which he considers "unnecessarily concerned with the 'exotic' aspects of it. You get all these people searching for Paradise Lost, and what they write is much more based on fascination than understanding. The point is to start publishing information here, on ourselves, rather than always having someone else come in to interpret us."

Though Ancelet feels "some legitimate, accurate studies in Acadian and Franco-American history in general" is one way to give the Acadian people a perspective on their own history, another and possibly the most practical, is working with the vast amount of oral history still in circulation. "The Acadians got a rich education, but not what we call an academic one, until the Public Education Act went into effect in 1920. They don't have novelists and historians, but they have storytellers. And that's why I'm doing this folklore business—looking at..."
Louisiana French society, at a third of the state that is still French-speaking, as we know it now, using the language, which is still the means of communication.

In the same way that Ancelet considers the Cajun storytellers "carriers of their culture," so too are its musicians. "We don't have symphonies and opera, but we have Cajun music, a unique mixture of sounds that's been called by one Quebec writer 'the richest and most powerful music produced in the French language in the 20th century.' In the same way that our music is entirely our own—it has roots in Quebec and France, America and Africa, but it was that coming together that produced this form as we know it—the people here are relatively new creations, from older roots, but the combination that is new is Cajun. And we need to study this Louisiana phenomenon."

A native of rural Cankton, La., for whom French was a first language, Ancelet's resolve to disseminate that phenomenon took root in 1974 during a CODOFIL-funded research project that brought him into the countryside collecting folk tales from local raconteurs. That effort led to "getting my feet wet in folklore," and the eventual publishing of his master's thesis at Indiana University on "Oral Literature from French Louisiana." A collection of 101 folk tales ("the number was purely accidental," assures Ancelet) compiled with the blessing of Richard Dorson, head of the Folklore Institute at Indiana, the thesis includes "the best" of his extensive recorded oral repertoire of South Louisiana.

Ancelet's first "really public effort in folklore" came in March of 1974, when he conceived and sponsored through COFODIL the first "Tribute to Cajun Music" (now an annual event, last year attended by 25,000 people) at Blackham Coliseum in Lafayette. "Going out and finding who was who," Ancelet, with the help of fellow coordinator Keith Cravey, recruited the best bands and ballad singers in the area to perform for the first time in a large concert setting.

A tremendously successful event, "all of a sudden 12,000 people are sitting in this huge auditorium looking down on something like an Allman Brothers concert. They're seeing the kind of music groups of 250-300 people have taken for granted in dance halls every Saturday night of their lives, and they're going crazy."

Heavily attended by USL students who enjoyed the novelty of a music form some never had heard before, the first "Tribute" was deemed most successful by Ancelet because of the "40, 50- and 60-year-olds really being turned around from seeing their music in a different way. What we were trying to do and I think we were successful with, was to force a whole society to recognize the value of an art form they had taken for granted for so long.

Long recognized outside Louisiana, since its "discovery" in the '30s by noted ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax and most dramatically during the 1967 National Folk Festival when a group of Cajun musicians presented a galloping re-enactment of the Mardi Gras, "Going out and finding who was who," Ancelet, with the help of fellow coordinator Keith Cravey, recruited the best bands and ballad singers in the area to perform for the first time in a large concert setting.