CAJUN HUMOR:
Is the Joke On Us?

Or, Sommes-Nous Si Drôles Que Ça?

Justin Wilson
Cajun Humor:
Is it Funny Only in French?

By F.R. Duplantier

Who do you think of when you think of Cajun humor? Justin Wilson? Howard Jacobs? Bud Fletcher? That's who most people think of, but there are some Cajuns who will tell you that the dialect humor of Wilson, Jacobs and Fletcher is neither Cajun nor funny.

Though a safety engineer, Justin Wilson became an internationally known humorist "accidentally," after discovering that his audiences were much more attentive when his safety lectures were laced with a joke or two. Born in Roseland and now living in Denham Springs, Wilson has been exporting his brand of humor to the rest of the continental United States, and in Canada, for 42 years.

When he isn't lecturing on human relations to a police academy, making a roux on his public television show, "The Cooking Cajun," organizing his thoughts for his daily radio commentary, recording yet another of his Cajun humor albums (eighteen, so far), or dictating a book of his Cajun humor, Wilson sometimes reflects on the drawbacks of being an internationally known humorist. "Every time you say something, you're supposed to be excruciatingly funny."

Scribe for Justin Wilson's Cajun Humor was Howard Jacobs, whose daily column Remoulade has been a fixture of the New Orleans Times-Picayune for over twenty years. A native of Lake Charles and long-time resident of New Orleans, Jacobs' attempts to transcribe Cajun patois and humor include Cajun Night Before Christmas and his most recent effort, Once Upon a Bayou.

In Justin Wilson's Cajun Humor, Jacobs records Wilson's story of the mother crawfish who gives her baby crawfish their first tour of the world. "Dey not gone but about 'irty feet an' de two li'l baby crawfish 'row up bot' dey claw an' SHOOM, high gear reverse. An' de mama crawfish she say: 'What de matter, chirren?' Dey say: 'What dat big ani-mule up dere, ma-ma?'"
The Aggie Joke...  

'Pas Vraiment une Blague'

Mamou businessman John Vidrine says Cajun humor often can't be translated into English. "We just play around with words all the time," says Vidrine, noting that puns in particular defy translation.

Vidrine also dislikes Fletcher, whose jokes, "which can't be told in mixed company," says the Cajun, as well as his language, "is something you can't learn in a dictionary."

Most Cajun humor, Vidrine observes, consists not of jokes but of situations. As if to demonstrate, in walks trucker Elwade Manuel looking for some hardware to mount an antenna on his rig. "I'd hate to have to hold that antenna up myself," the Cajun jokes. "It might get cold." At no less, Vidrine retorts, "You could buy a glove."

Vidrine recalls the customer who came in looking for new batteries for his flashlight. His old ones had gotten so weak that every time he turned it on the beam fell out. "I don't think you should tell off-color jokes, either," Vidrine says.

According to John Vidrine, owner of a hardware store in Main Street in Mamou, "What they say about the Aggies isn't true."

Vidrine recalls a recent skirmish between the Cajuns and the Aggies, who have never really been on the best of terms. The Aggies got so riled up they began throwing sticks of dynamite. Vidrine hit them and threw them back.

Thinking he'd get the best of a Cajun, an Aggie strolled into Vidrine's store a few weeks back and asked for change for a $22 bill. Vidrine gave him two elevens.

A frequent customer at the hardware store, trucker Elwade Manuel won't have to hit the road again for several weeks. He just got back from delivering a truckload of Cheerios to some Aggie farmers. "I made a killing on those doughnut seeds," says Manuel.

However much Cajuns may like to tell Aggie jokes, it seems the Aggies like to tell them even more. "Aggie jokes are perpetuated by Aggies more than anyone else," maintains Edward Joubert, professor of sociology at LSU. A native of Opelousas, Joubert got his doctorate in sociology at Texas A & M, thus earning the dubious title of "the Cajun Aggie."

According to Joubert, the Aggie joke has given the Aggies a sense of identity and brotherhood. "Prejudice against any group creates solidarity," he explains. By establishing an identity for its student body, the Aggie joke has also promoted an increase in alumni contributions at A & M. On sale at the university's bookstore, the numerous Aggie jokebooks go like hotcakes.

Of course, Aggies like to tell Cajun jokes too. "Most Aggies grew up in a very puritanical environment," Joubert explains. To the Cajun, the Aggie represents the totally uninhibited person that they'd like to be. The jokes told by Aggies about Cajuns are derogatory. "But at the same time, they represent a type of envy."

Not every Aggie likes the Aggie joke. "You get the same mixed reaction as you get on Cajun jokes," says Joubert. "The more sophisticated Aggies take offense."

When someone else remembers the time he offered to tell the latest Aggie joke to one of these more sophisticated Aggies. "Hey, you know that joke to A & M," the latter objected. "That's okay," said Joubert. "I'll tell it now."

French in Louisiana (CODIFIL), "the so-called humor that makes the Cajun look stupid, simplistic and ignorant isn't Cajun at all. When a Cajun is funny, it isn't because he doesn't know better. It's because he wants to be."

Dialect humorists are capable of understanding the Cajun. They're not interested in translating the Cajun. As if to demonstrate, in walks trucker Elwade Manuel looking for some hardware to mount an antenna on his rig. "I'd hate to have to hold that antenna out myself," the Cajun jokes. "It might get cold."

At no less, Vidrine retorts, "You could buy a glove."

Vidrine recalls the customer who came in looking for new batteries for his flashlight. His old ones had gotten so weak that every time he turned it on the beam fell out. Manuel can top that one, having once driven his rig through a storm so violent that the beams of his headlights were blown into the ditch.

According to James Domengeaux, chairman of the Council for the Development of Cajun French, "the idea of the Cajun, humor isn't a joke, it's a promotion of Cajun culture."

"Who's making fun of the Cajuns?"

"The Cajun, as well as his language," says Vidrine.

"Not me," says Justin Wilson. "We tell them."

"We hate to have to hold our jokes back," says Vidrine. "It's because we want to be."
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Louisiana French, used to speak French "real well" himself, "but I've forgotten it." Though proud of his French blood, Wilson has no particular affinity with French. "My forebears were on my mother's side left France, because of France," he explains.

Though internationally known humorist thinks people take themselves too seriously. "You're in a terrible fix if you can't laugh at yourself," he says. Wilson always asks his audiences if they laugh at themselves. "You ought to," he tells them. "You're funny as hell."

MOI NON PLUS

Howard Jacobs says he isn't making fun of the Cajuns either. "If I felt in my mind that this type of humor was ridiculing the Cajun people, I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. Any time you deal with dialect, though," Jacobs observes, "you run into trouble. Some people are going to resent it.

The notion that Cajuns tell jokes only in French is ridiculous to Jacobs. "Most people of Cajun origin don't even speak French," he says. Though "their humor comes from the distorted English," in laughing at a distorted word or expression, Jacobs points out, "you're not laughing at the man who said it. You're laughing at the idea conjured up in your head."

Jacobs is the first to admit that the patois with which he dresses his anecdotes is not characteristic of all Cajuns. "There's fewer Cajuns speaking this dialect all the time," Jacobs observes. "You run into trouble. Some people are going to resent it.

Having received letters of objection from only a few individuals, Paul Tate and James Domengeaux among them, Jacobs refuses to believe that his patois humor is offensive to "the rank-and-file. You would think that if there were more resentment I'd have received a hell of a lot more letters," he says, noting that his Cajun Night Before Christmas sold best "in the Cajun country itself."

What has given patois humor a bad name, according to Jacobs, is the misuse of it by certain humorists. "Your good Cajun story is one that illustrates something about Cajun life, attitudes, or philosophy," Jacobs contends. "But some people will take any story and convert it to Cajun dialect."

Jacobs objects to the "dirty" humor of Bud Fletcher as much as John Vidrine does. "It gives people the impression that the Cajuns are all dirty old men." Entertainers like Fletcher, says Jacobs, are "the guys who give Cajun humor a bad name."

QUIT MOI!

Dirty old man? Who's a dirty old man, asks Bud Fletcher. "I've entertained church groups of every denomination. I have stories for every occasion. You'll never hear any filth on my albums. It's all suggestive." Also suggestive is Fletcher's response to Cajuns who object to his dialect humor. "Come outside and I'll tell you what I think about them," he says. "I think Domengeaux's being ridiculous, and so is Tate. I think they're really ashamed of their heritage."

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If he's not behind the bar, Fred Tate is probably in the back cooking. Fred tells his jokes in French or English. "It doesn't matter," he says.

TRENTES DOLLARS PEUT-ÊTRE

Across the street from Paul Tate's law office in Mamou is Fred Tate's Lounge. Every Saturday morning teacher-writer-humorist Revon Reed broadcasts Cajun humor from Fred's. A book and a couple of albums of Cajun French humor to his credit, Reed refuses to entertain in English. "I don't know how much I'd get—thirty dollars maybe," he jokes, but it is his distaste for translation, and not the nominal remuneration, which discourages him.

"It's a penchant for salty tales, "the kind they like in France. You don't dare tell them" he comments, "except in French. You translate them into English and they become vulgar immediately."

According to Reed, the delivery of a Cajun humorist is often more amusing than his story, which may run anywhere from five minutes to a half hour. "He laughs at the punchline before he gets that illustrates gets to it," says Reed. "He laughs at his own talent. Everybody laughs. Then the guy forgets the punchline and everybody gets mad." Of course, the Cajun talespinner's stories are always true. If he detects skepticism, he will inevitably refer his listener, for verification, to someone who has unfortunately passed away.

"The favorite topic is generally animals," says Reed, relating a shaggy dog story. Sosthene was jealous of Pierre, whose dog was better than his own. When he bit oil, Sosthene spent his money touring the country to find a dog better than Pierre's, eventually discovering one that could walk on water. Was Pierre impressed? Not by a dog that couldn't swim.

"Cajuns love to put each other down," says Reed, just for the hell of it. Of course, they'll put down any other ethnic group too. "When telling jokes, Cajuns often seem to be degrading themselves. However, Reed observes, "in seeming to put themselves down, they put the other fellow down."

Fred tells of the Cajun who confessed to a Texan that it takes thirteen Cajuns to whip a Texan. While the latter strained himself, the Cajun explained, "Twelve to shake him out of the tree, and one to kick his butt once he's down."

Though he himself refuses to entertain in English, Reed doesn't seem to object too much to dialect humorists like Justin Wilson and Bud Fletcher. "Among elite groups of people, they're not very popular," he observes, "but ordinary Cajuns like them."

CARE PAIT RIENT

Behind the bar Fred Tate explains why he doesn't intend to get a swine flu shot. He knows a guy who's 67 and never took a flu shot in his life. Besides that, he knew a guy who took one and died.

Fred tells his jokes in French or English. "It doesn't matter," he says. He remembers one about a woman whose husband came home late one night, staggering. "Honey," she said, "if I was in your condition, I'd shoot myself."

"My dear," the husband replied, "if you were in my condition, I swear, you'd miss yourself."

"He must have been loaded, huh?" asks Fred.

At the bar having a beer is Patrick Higginbotham, a thirteen-year veteran of the oilfields. Does he like Bud Fletcher? "Mah good fan!" Higginbotham mimics, and starts to laugh. "You heard that one about the gum machine? That's something. Bud Fletcher's one of the best. He's got real good jokes."

"If they're so funny, why do Fletcher and Wilson upset some people so much? "Some people are kind of jealous," says Higginbotham. "Fletcher and Wilson aren't trying to hurt anybody. They're just trying to make people happy. It's the same with what they say in those jokes that hurts the French."

Higginbotham and Marion Marcotte too. "If you could understand French, you'd eat your heart out," he says. "I like any kind of joke. It doesn't matter who tells it, just so it's funny, that's all. You've got to be proud of your heritage, and I'm proud of mine, but a joke's just a joke."