Fiddling Spearhead of the Cajun Revival

BY LEE HILDEBRAND

AS A TEENAGER in Scott, La., in the heart of Cajun country, Michael Doucet took the music of his people pretty much for granted.

Michael Doucet and Beausoleil perform Saturday and next Sunday at the annual San Francisco Cajun and Zydeco Music Festival at Pier 3, Fort Mason, and October 13 at O.T. Prince’s in Saquen, October 14 at the Cochi Cabaret in Cochi, October 15 at the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco, and October 16 at the Palms Theater in Davis.

But in his native Lafayette Parish, there was little interest in the traditional music.

Most Cajun musicians had turned to performing country music and, by 1979, there was only one bar in the area that featured Cajun music and Doucet led the band.

The fiddler now divides his time between touring, with the eclectic Beausoleil's band that includes tenor saxophone, drums and rubboard and the more traditional Savoy-Doucet Cajun Band.

He gives credit for the current Cajun music revival to the sudden popularity and commercialization of Cajun cuisine.

Around Lafayette, he said, there are now dozens of Cajun bands performing at seafood restaurants that have recently tackled "Cajun" in front of their names in order to attract the tourist trade.

"Beausoleil" is a Cajun term of endearment that translates "beautiful sun.

This guy called me to go to France in ’79," Doucet said, "and he wanted a name for the group. It was a nice day outside, so I said ‘beausoleil.'"

Doucet, who hails from the heart of Louisiana country, credits the current Cajun music revival across America to the sudden popularity and commercialization by restaurants of Cajun cuisine.

When the English folk music teacher asserted that Cajun music was "just translated from English ballads," Doucet set out to prove the professor wrong.

In his research, he turned to reissues of vintage Cajun recordings that were then being released in Berkeley by German-born record producer Chris Strachwitz.

Not only did Doucet win the argument, he took up the fiddle and began performing the music of his French-speaking ancestors.

Today, the 39-year-old musician is at the forefront of the Cajun music revival.

With his band, Beausoleil, he records for Strachwitz's Arhoolie label, which has just issued its fourth album, "Hot Chilli Mama," by the group.

Beausoleil scored the music for the feature film "Hollis: The Cajun" and also performed a number called "Bayou Gris-gris" that can be heard by the opening titles of the current film "The Big Easy."

After graduating from LSU in 1973, Doucet was getting ready to begin a master's thesis on musical English poet William Blake when he and guitarist-accordionist Zachary Richard were invited to perform at a folk music festival in France.

"For us," Doucet recalled over a plate of hot cakes in Strachwitz's kitchen, "it was like going back in time because we were within a culture that completely spoke French and had the same manners and almost the same lingo as our grandparents and older people who we remembered. It completely changed my life."

Returning home, Doucet received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to do a comparative study on Cajun fiddle styles.

"There are 22 French-speaking parishes in Louisiana, all of which have their own forms of this music and own completely berserk personalities who play different ways," he explained.
HE WAS the hot "discovery" at this year's San Francisco Blues Festival. According to the folks at El Cerrito's Bayside Record Distributing Co., there's been a run on his self-produced record albums since the festival. His version of the Cajun standard "Colinda" is featured on the sound track of the recent film thriller "The Big Easy." And some call this accordionist and singer the Cajun Mick Jagger.

Yes, his gumbo's on the fire, but 37-year-old Zachary Richard - headlining with his band, the Zydeco Rockers, at the Sweetwater in Mill Valley on Friday and Saturday - is not a new face. A native of Lafayette, La., near the heart of bayou country, Richard is a 15-year music-business veteran who's had a following in Canada and France for more than a decade. In the early '70s, he was even signed to a contract with Elektra Records, as a country-rock singer-songwriter, but that album was never released because of Elektra's reorganization into Elektra-Asylum Records in 1973.

"Around that time, a friend convinced me to perform in Canada, where I made more money in two days than my entire career to date," he said, fresh from the stage after his Blues Festival triumph. "A Frenchman convinced me to try France, where I played in front of 20,000. It was instant success. To the French and the French-Americans, I was their Louisiana Cajun brother."

Since then, Richard has returned to his roots to develop a synthesis of traditional Southern Louisiana dance music - Cajun melodies, zydeco syncopation, a dash of New Orleans second-line r & b - and rock and roll. "I think we finally have it," he said. "I don't play pure zydeco, but it's an important influence."

The time seems right for Richard, with Paul Simon and John Fogerty collaborating with zydeco musicians Rockin' Sidney (of "My Toot-Toot" fame) and Rockin' Dopsie, and Clifton Chenier (acknowledged king of the zydeco accordion), Jo-El Sonnier, Buckwheat Zydeco, Queen Ida and Terence Simian bringing the good-time sounds of Southern Louisiana to new markets.

Richard originals like "Who Stole My Monkey?" or "Zydeco Party" have a traditional sound, except the drummer plays a rock beat. "This is a vein of American pop music that's never been explored anywhere except Louisiana," Richard said. "On a number like 'Monkey,' I'm hitting the keys like Little Richard's right hand, only I'm doing it on an accordion instead of a piano. The idea is to integrate the zydeco beat and accordion sound into the core of a rock-and-roll band."

He moved between Louisiana, Canada and France in the '70s and early '80s, returning to Louisiana to stay in 1985. "I've only had this particular band together for the past year," he said. "Right now, we're the biggest draw between New Orleans and Houston."

A graduate of New Orleans' Tulane University with a degree in history and the son of the mayor of Scott, La., Richard grew up on rock and roll. He learned guitar and harmonica playing Rolling Stones songs. He mastered the blues and country music, dabbled in Caribbean grooves and jazz, and brought all that together with his knowledge of French, which he learned from his Cajun grandparents. But he became more and more intrigued with his musical roots.

"I heard Clifton Chenier's Blacksnake Blues zydeco LP in 1965," he recalled. "It opened up my head."

He learned the accordion - the most important instrumental component in Cajun and Zydeco music - by playing along with a recording of classic '50s Cajun dance hall music by Aldus Roger. He practiced his technique, and he's now a charismatic performer with a fine, mellow blues voice.

"It hasn't been no big breakthrough," Richard said of his current fortunes. "We're just slamin' it out. We've got an album's worth of material, but I don't feel compelled to bust down record company doors. When those record company guys call us up, we'll be ready. We're not gonna change popular music in America, but nobody around here's ever done what we're doing."