Cajun songwriter releases two new albums in Europe

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NEW ORLEANS — It's later, the alligator has waited, and it's been a while for the crocodile.

Songwriter Bobby Charles, who was 14 when he wrote "See You Later Alligator," is attempting a comeback with two new albums. He also has written "On the Champs Elysees," his first song in French, which was once his native language. "I always wanted to write a French song, but I never knew I could do it until I wrote this one," said the 48-year-old Charles, whose real name is Guidry.

"A French lady from France heard it, and she comes to me almost crying. She says she can see the tablecloths and smell the wine."

Charles is the descendant of 18th-century refugees from Nova Scotia who were kicked out of Canada because they would not renounce their Gallic cultural allegiance. They, and others from what was then called Acadia, settled in Louisiana where they became known as Cajuns.

Bobby Charles Guidry was Cajun when Cajun wasn't cool.

So he sliced off his last name in the mid-1950s when he signed as the first white singer for Chess records, which produced black entertainers.

In fact, Chess apparently thought Charles was black because Cajun was so foreign from the American mainstream. Accounts have it that Chess officials were shocked at the white face grinning back at them from publicity photos mailed from the bayou country.

His hit song, which inspired a new hip, lingo for a generation in the '50s, came about one night when the teen-age musician was leaving a popular club in Abbeville. He turned to say good night to his friends, quipping "See you later, alligator."

An inebriated and forever anonymous woman yelled back, "After a while, crocodile." At that moment, poetry was born.

"I said, 'Thank you very much,' and I went home and wrote the song," Charles recalled.

He similarly cranked out "Walkin' to New Orleans" for Fats Domino when Domino suggested he walk from Abbeville because he was broke. And he spent nearly all of one afternoon to create "I Don't Know Why I Love You But I Do" for a Frogman Henry release.

For Kris Kristofferson he did "Tennessee Blues," but it was the alligator song done by Bill Haley and the Comets that first sent his words soaring to the top of the charts.

One of Charles' newest tunes is an environmental plea called "Clean Water." The song begs for a cleaner world. Charles lives on the banks of the Vermilion River, which was once one of the 10 most polluted rivers in the United States.

Charles listened to a tape of the song, backed by a chorus of untrained children who were pulled in off the street in front of the Nashville recording studio where the record was made. "Only a Cajun knows the value of clean water," Charles said.

He has arranged for European distribution for his two LPs — "The Little Cajun" and "Clean Water." However, he is still negotiating for an American release. Charles said he is more appreciated in Europe than in the United States and is especially popular in Germany.

Still, he's always been respected by fellow artists in the American music industry. With just one telephone call, Willie Nelson canceled all dates for his Perdernales Studios so Charles could record there.

Such fellow musicians as Nelson, Neil Young and Rufus Thibodeaux can be heard backing Charles on his albums.