Zydeco King Chenier
Made Music to the End

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W hen accordionist Clifton Chenier died last weekend at 62, he left behind an irreplaceable part of American culture. Chenier, the anointed king of zydeco, took the fragrant, frothy music out of the Louisiana bayous and was the one everyone in the field imitated. The two-step rhythms and spicy sounds of zydeco now remain as one
guess I influenced Clifton to the detriment of his commercial success," Strachwitz said. "Since I liked that old stuff. On the first session, the guitar literally burned up and his band members are on the record shouting 'oy yi yi,' but that's it. It was just drums, rub board and that meaning accordion."

Strachwitz also said Chenier sold more records this year than ever before, including a new compact disc collection. Chenier won a Grammy this year for his 1978 album, them how to do a two-step. A trailer parked out front announced the appearance of "Clifton Chenier and His Red Hot Louisiana Band" and inside Chenier would perform nonstop for four hours, squeezing that 45-pound accordion like a he-man and donning a cardboard crown with a wide, toothy grin. These memorable events remain as some of the most extraordinary musical performances I've witnessed in the past 20 years, and nobody like Chenier can be expected ever to come along again.

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of the few unsullied corners of ethnic music in this country.

Although he based his career for the past 30 years in the Lake Charles area of the Louisiana bayous, Chenier recorded extensively with the Berkeley-based folk and blues label, Arhoolie Records, run by musicologist Chris Strachwitz. Ironically, Strachwitz, who produced an early '70s documentary film on Chenier called "Hot Pepper," was putting the finishing touches on a new 50-minute concert film, "Clifton Chenier — King of Zydeco," when Chenier died.

"He was a tremendous musician," said Strachwitz, "an emotional performer, a great improviser and he had charisma... None of the other guys have that combination."

Strachwitz — who has recorded such blues greats as Lightnin' Hopkins, Sonny Boy Williamson, Mississippi Fred McDowell throughout his three decades of making down-home music — cut 10 albums with Chenier from 1964 to 1982. "I

"In New Orleans," on the GNP/Crescendo label. "That was one of the things he was most proud of," Strachwitz said.

Chenier suffered from debilitating diabetes throughout his last years. He lost part of a foot and leg to the disease and needed treatment on a kidney dialysis machine three times a week. As his health declined, his performances suffered, but Chenier never stopped working. He played in New York only two weeks ago. "I heard it was pathetic," said Strachwitz. "He told me, 'If I ever give up playing, I'm gone.' But there are many of us who saw him in recent years who were sorry we'd seen what we saw."

In his prime, Chenier could make the earth rattle to his funky beat. During regular visits to the Bay Area in the early '70s, he never hit town without playing a so-called "French" dance at a Catholic church gymnasium in Richmond. These affairs were attended almost exclusively by Louisiana transplants and nobody had to show