INTERVIEW: MICHAEL DOUCET

Cajun band leader Michael Doucet: "My real musical heroes are in Louisiana. There've been lots of imitators but those guys are the real stylists. It's amazing watching these bewitchy guys playing beautiful fiddle and gently interpreting stories."

Cultured in Cajun

Fiddler, singer-songwriter and musicologist Michael Doucet is one of the leaders of the Cajun music renaissance. Cajun music has emerged from the bayous in recent years to become a bona fide folk movement with enthusiastic fans from Lake Wobegon to Texas. Doucet is the leader of BeauSoleil (the name, which literally means "beautiful sun" in French, also refers to a member of the Acadian resistance in the 1700s and is a common Cajun saying expressing good luck), the most popular Cajun-trad music band in the country, and a member of the traditional acoustic Cajun music trio, the Savoy-Doucet Band.

Historically, Louisiana Cajun culture began in 1715 when French settlers in Acadia were forced to re-locate after England gained control of the region and renamed it Nova Scotia. The refugees moved to Louisiana in an attempt to recreate Acadia (which the word Cajun is derived from) culture. In subsequent years, a unique ethnic community of French, Creole, Afro-Caribbean and Anglo-Americans developed. But in 1936, English was proclaimed the official state language and French was banned from public schools. Outside of the French-speaking envadaces, Cajuns came to be viewed disdainfully as an ignorant and backward people. Younger generations sought to distance themselves from their culture by adopting mainstream American ways.

Doucet has written, "The original culture was blown apart in Acadia by the exile. It came together in Louisiana in a new way. Then it was infiltrated and diluted by a lot of other people and influences and practically destroyed by Americanization. You have to put the pieces back together by looking at what's left and uncovering all the links to understand the whole. What a musician does is translate cultural ideas into appropriate sounds. The Cajun music is not necessarily a sequined star. He is an interpreter, a spokesman for cultural values."

— Dan Ouellette

THE MONTHLY: How did you first come to see yourself as a spokesperson for cultural values?

MICHAEL DOUCET: In 1974 a band I was in playing Cajun music was invited to France to perform at a folk festival. That was a turning point for me. Up until that time, I was thinking that Cajun music didn't even get as far as New Orleans. But when we played in France, we discovered that people knew all about us. We were extremely popular there. On my return I decided to learn more about my roots and educate others about Cajun culture.

TM: How did you do that? Did you find Cajun histories?

MD: I quickly discovered that there weren't any books written about Cajun music. I realized that I would have to learn from the older Cajun musicians. Through the songs we play, we're telling the story about our way of life.

TM: People call Cajun music good times music. What about it that evokes that kind of response?

MD: The music itself is so exotic. It's basically French folk music with American Cajun folk music elements as well as Caribbean 'islands' rhythms. It's music that allows you to unwind. It's not wimpy folk music. There's a rawness to it. It's very similar to the blues in that way. The cadence of the songs makes you want to dance. It also conveys a lot of emotion. When we perform, we play exactly how we're feeling, which is communicated to the audience. Not every-thing we play is happy music. But it's honest.

TM: Why did you decide to master the fiddle?

MD: I actually didn't start to play fiddle until I was in high school and didn't even own one until I was in my early twenties. I played drums and harmonica when I was very young. Then I learned how to play the trumpet and later the guitar. I became interested in the fiddle because my uncle had one. He used to let me come over to his house and practice on it, but I could never take it home. I learned three songs on it. In college I had a friend who was a classical violinist. One day I picked up his violin and started playing. He was amazed. He asked me if I had ever studied and I told him no. Playing the fiddle came easy to me.

When I finally bought my first fiddle, I practiced on it for three weeks and then played a gig with it. After that, I went to England where I met Barney Dranfield, a Scottish fiddle player. He taught me how to use a fiddle to get a wider range of notes. I learned from them how the Cajun songs should be played. They weren't really taught in the academic sense. These guys just said, "Here, I'll show you how to play this song." I'd try to emulate their style.

I see my role now as passing those styles on to future generations. I also convey in music that warm feeling I received from the elder musicians who taught me. The good times nature of the music and the Cajun values of hospitality and generosity are inseparable. Since Cajun music has gotten more popular these days, some bands pick up accordions and fiddles, brand themselves Cajun, learn some songs and go on the road to play gigs. We see ourselves differently. We're not just like Lindy, who doesn't conform to the stereotype of the good-bred man. Schepini says this so deftly that one only wishes that he had moved beyond the simple linearity of the 'Cajun' man. Mullard does it so much better, more speculative questions about what the whole sideshow revealed about media culture and the Australian character. A Cry in the Dark is nothing special, but it does pull away the cheerful, unperturbable, "sensible" mask Australia presents to the world and to itself. And Meryl Streep could hardly be better in one of her finest and most self-effacing performances. (John Powers)

DANGEROUS LIASIONS

THE MONTHLY: What is your favorite movie of the year?

MD: First of all, there are commercial reasons. The best example is the movie The Big Easy, which was filmed in Louisiana and had a lot of Cajun music in it. A couple of years earlier the movie Bolero the Cajun also exposed a lot of people to Cajun music. The director, Glenn Plung, asked me to write one traditional Cajun music tune for a dance hall scene which was set in the 1850s. The producer liked the music so much he entered an entire series of songs which he asked me if I could do. I only had two weeks to compose all the songs, but they're some of the best pieces I've written because they are the sternest.

Another reason why Cajun music is so popular is the Cajun food. People flock to see the food comes from. If they look into it, they find out how well the food goes with the music. In Louisiana, we have big gumbo and crawfish picnics that make the action a bit obvious. Where the novel leaves you in doubt about the sincerity of the protagonists and the reality of their lives, the film helps to show what the plot. The cast is a bit too Anglo-looking—meny and pale—and all the cornpone and cultural-realistic sensibilities aren't exactly suited for theorate drawing room and precious locations. The story and characters are so strong, however, that they survive the tiresome bits and remain marvelously. (Helen Knole)