Students learn to fiddle at a recent Fait à la Main workshop.

Made in Breaux Bridge

The Fait à la Main Series lights up downtown Breaux Bridge.

ON TUESDAY NIGHTS, IN A SMALL OFFICE SPACE IN DOWNTOWN Breaux Bridge, the lights are on. The stores are all closed and the sidewalks are empty except for power walkers, patrolling the streets in uniforms of two-piece sweat suits. The office space is occupied by Louisiana Folk Roots, a nonprofit organization captained by musician/cultural activist Christine Balfa. The lights are on at Louisiana Folk Roots in more ways than one.

In May of 2001, Louisiana Folk Roots organized the first ever Dewey Balfa Cajun and Creole Heritage Week, a weeklong camp with intensive lessons in various aspects of Louisiana's folk culture, from Cajun accordion to language and native crafts. Dedicated to Christine's father, Dewey Balfa, the camp was at once an homage to his memory and a continuation of his efforts to nurture the cultural IQ of Acadiana residents. Although the Dewey Balfa Week was a resounding success on all counts and will continue annually, there remains one problem:

it's only a week. After regrouping from the inaugural heritage week, Balfa and the staff of Louisiana Folk Roots began making plans for the Fait à la Main series, month-long weekly classes that would offer some of the same precious instruction.

"It sort of came out of thinking about the Heritage Week," says Balfa. "For local folk, who can't get off the whole week, it's something they can incorporate into their lives, when they can come once a week for a lesson. We started out having Pyok (Cajun fiddler Al Berard) do that first one and that was really successful and we thought it would be great to do it full-time."

Although tuition in the traditional instruments of Cajun music has been featured at the Fait à la Main Series, Balfa sees the series as more wide-ranging, touching upon less-explicit facets of the culture.

"The music and the food and the dancing are all popular and well-known," says Balfa. "But we wanted to make sure we tried to do native...

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Dirk Powell is just one of the local artists and artisans who conduct Fait à la Main sessions.

crafts, and we’re doing a class in Mardi Gras traditional costumes. And ballads and language. There’s so many different things. Bill Fontenot did his native plants, and that was really successful. We had 24 people for that one. And it’s just something that will keep going throughout the year, until the heritage week comes around.”

Some of the esteemed instructors who’ve already taught Fait à la Main classes include accordionist Steve Riley, fiddler Mitch Reed, singer Marce Lacouture and naturalist Fontenot. Some future instructors include Sam Broussard, Geno Delafose and others. In essence, Louisiana Folk Roots acts as a liaison between local people who have absorbed traditional lore (whether it be musical or linguistic or otherwise) and the people who are thirsty for that learning. The Fait à la Main helps ensure that the need to teach as well as to learn is being met inside Acadiana.

“I guess it’s a chance to put things in a setting that people are used to learning in,” says Dirk Powell, husband of Christine Balfa and himself a walking repository of traditional American musical styles. “Today people are used to learning in a little more of a classroom environment. It’s a chance to pick up a lot of local knowledge that was traditionally passed down, you know, within families in traditional ways. A lot of the time people used to have to do those things is not really there anymore. Families are more separate. The way our lives are going, people tend to be not quite as ready to do that sort of thing and the circumstances prevent it. But you’ve also got a lot of people with a lot of knowledge and sometimes they don’t have an outlet."

Berard, who taught the first Fait à la Main classes, taught himself to play fiddle and now plays professionally with T-Mamou & The Basin Brothers. And although he did a good job of it, he largely had to teach himself, in a time when learning Cajun fiddle wasn’t exactly the hippest thing to be devoting your energies to.

“There was nothing like this when I started to play,” says Berard. “I wish I could have had lessons. It would have saved my mom and dad lots of headaches.” Besides saving parents and spouses from headaches, the Fait à la Main series highlights an ongoing phenomenon in Acadiana today: a culture becoming blissfully aware of itself.

“It’s kind of a shift for the culture to enter a place where these kind of classes would be offered,” says Powell. “But it’s also a shift that’s not made in certain areas and sometimes a lot of these things get lost. You know how the old music, it’s real strong, considering where it was, but those kind of things, they still need a lot of push, they still need some drive.”

The Fait à la Main Series takes place on Tuesday nights from 6:30 to 8 p.m. at the Louisiana Folk Roots office at 108 Bridge St., Suite 2A, in downtown Breaux Bridge. Classes are $40 for the general public and $30 for Friends of Louisiana Folk Roots. For more information about upcoming classes, call (337) 332-6254 or visit www.lafolkroots.org.

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