Festivals Acadiens et Créoles to celebrate Francophone traditions in October

George Clarke
g.eorge.clarke@thevermilion.com

The musical line-up for Festivals Acadiens et Créoles 2018 was released on Friday and plays it safe with fan-favorites and some newcomers who fit neatly into the established soundscapes.

Wayne Toups, Feufollet and (obligatory mention of Grammy-winning) The Lost Bayou Ramblers are just a handful of the Francophone-rooted acts to grace Girard Park come October for the annual free music event.

The first time I went to the festival, I was a freshman. I was freshly moved from the Pacific Northwest to Louisiana. I remember more flashes of color than sights, more smells than sounds, but more than that I remember beginning to understand what that “Louisiana culture” was that I had heard so much about since I moved.

It was October 2015—about that complicated time of year where one can wear a jacket in the morning and by the afternoon have moodyly sworn a generational war against the subtropical climate system.

Festivals Acadiens et Créoles has been a Lafayette tradition since the late 1970s, forming from three separate music festivals (hence the awkward plurals in the name) out of a statewide initiative to renew and maintain interest in French heritage and Cajun and Creole music.

The French language had gained a stigma in South Louisiana just after World War I when the state constitution mandated that all education is in English. It became a sign of the uneducated, and French-speaking children were then punished by mentors and bullied by peers.

When those children had children of their own, they were hesitant if not loathe, to teach them the language of their heritage, remembering the humiliations they had endured as a result of their tongue. At the time of the second World War, the grasp on the Francophone legacy was weakened to the point of death, but following the war saw a revival at the hands of soldiers returning from France who had seen their distant roots.

As I stood in Girard Park, most likely holding some sort of crawfish-bread-bowl concoction, I remember thinking that it was absolutely wild that there was an event like this. Where I’m from, one actively and strenuously avoids engaging with strangers, let alone dancing with them. It’s still strange to me—I’m still vaguely suspicious of this “laissez bon temps rouler” thing. It seems too nice.

That’s not to say these festivals are somehow self-contained utopias—far from it. I’ve seen numerous fights in the three years I’ve been going. I’ve seen parents hit children, and children hit parents. In 2017, there was a shooting at Festival Internationale that killed one person and injured two others. I’ve seen girls and women and boys harassed for how they dressed, for how they acted, because they had the audacity to act truly in an environment that espouses inclusion and Whitmanesque celebration of self.

Holding people who promote hateful ideologies morally accountable and demonstrating intentional, compassionate inclusion in this community is more important than ever now, in the light of the regressive and disappointing homophobic reactions of many locals over certain events at the Lafayette Public Library and the absurd outrage-pondering of mayor-president Joel Robideaux (who is also, man of many talents that he is, busy selling out LUS in a move that, like all privatization, would work directly against the interests of the poor and working class).

Now, I’ll be honest and offer an opinion: no one is asking for: I don’t particularly like Cajun music or Zydeco. For me, it’s like blues music or Adam Sandler: you know what you’re getting every time. I enjoy it in doses on occasion, but I don’t go looking for it (which doesn’t really mean anything because in this part of the country, Zydeco finds YOU).

It may be because I am so far removed from its cultural context, or simply because it doesn’t slap, but that doesn’t really matter. What matters is that it exists, that people are happy around it and that it creates a kind of abstract, accordion-patterned bridge with the past.

Festivals Acadiens et Créoles, like Festival Internationale and the sugar cane festival in New Iberia and the strawberry festival in Ponchatoula and the rice festival in Crowley, are as much about yesterday as they are today—as much about preservation as they are perpetuation.

This weekend in October was, of course, a mere appetizer compared to Festival Internationale in the spring. People told me to “Just wait for Festival Internationale.” People told me to “Hold on.” I waited and held on, as one does. There were innumerable comparisons to Coachella. People would send me that truly awful “moonbeam” meme. I was all jazzed up for this mystery festival, not particularly bothered that it came at a time in the semester when I should have been deep into studying for finals. And then it came around and it was hot and sweaty and big and strange and a kaleidoscope of languages, foods, fashions, ages and ethnicities.

Festival Internationale, like most large music festivals in North America, is as much fashion showcase as it is a celebration of the border-crossing qualities of music and art—an exercise in the proper accessorizing of ripped denim, fringe and large hats.

As Virginia is for lovers, Lafayette is for families, and here the most fascinating part about these festivals (Internationale and, to a lesser degree, Acadiens et Créoles), isn’t the Californian-for-a-day aesthetics or the eclectic gathering of musicians and artists from across the globe; it’s the kind of quiet, tacit, agreement between the diverse groups attending the festival—specifically between parents with young children and the drugged-out wanna-be Burning Men—that amounts to a curiously surreal and hilarious understanding of “live and let live.”

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On Friday, Sept. 7, the official artwork for Festivals Acadiens et Créoles will be unveiled at the Paul and Lulu Hilliard University Art Museum, in conjunction with “Louisiana French: Myths and Movements,” an exhibition that seeks to dispel misconceptions about Louisiana French.

The festival will take place Oct. 12-14 in Girard Park.