THE YOUNGISH, bearded fellow in the audience whooped and made hoarse alligator sounds. Up on the Hilton stage, Cajun fiddler Doug Kershaw loved it. The two traded Louisiana-type jibes, and Kershaw teased him about being a fellow "coon-a-..." The audience laughed uneasily.

"That's OK," said Kershaw with a hearty chortle. "That's what people in Louisiana call us Cajuns." A huge smile lit up his eyes as he knitted his bow stick out over the stage edge. "You should hear what we call you."

The crowd roared its approval, and Kershaw danced across the stage with the grace of a 'gator sliding into bayou waters. His bow smoked with wisps of the baby powder that he'd caked on to keep the strings dry.

Kershaw, born in Tiel Ridge, Cameron Parrish, Louisiana, the heart of Cajun country, wasn't always confident about his heritage. As a child, he says, he was embarrassed to be different. "I used to see these signs on the restrooms, 'white' and 'colored,' and I wondered why they didn't have one for 'Cajun.'"

That was 45 or so years ago, says Kershaw, 51. Back then, he says in his soft, Cajun accent, his people were a race isolated by their culture and the language barrier. He spoke only Cajun French.

"When I started school, they just threw me in a room with English teachers, and I couldn't speak a word of it," he said. "That made me feel inferior, and the kids who could speak English made me feel even more so."

It's hard on children, says Kershaw, who remembers a time when Cajuns didn't dare go too far from their homes in the Louisiana bayou. That's changed now, Kershaw says with pride, because of people like chef Paul Prudhomme, artist George Rodrigue — and himself.

Despite his pride in his heritage, Kershaw, the father of two sons in their 20s from a first marriage, and three — 11, 9 and 13 months — with his current wife, doesn't speak Cajun at home. It's too difficult, he said, because he's gone too much. "I don't read or write French, so I can't pass that on, and it's real difficult to pass on a language unless they hear it spoken."

HOME FOR Kershaw, his wife, Pam, and the three youngest children, is a newly purchased ranch in Colorado, near his wife's family in Denver. It's a good life now, he says, filled with all the responsibilities of fatherhood.

"My dad died when I was 7, so I never really knew what having a father was like," he said. "And my first wife and I divorced when our kids were really young, so I never got a chance to be a father to them."

He's taking his second chance at family life seriously, getting up at 6 in the morning when he's home to help get the children get ready for school. "I'm tremendously happy now," he said. "And sober." He
laughed and looked pleased. Kershaw, who didn’t earn the title “Ragin’ Cajun” just for his fiddle, looks good after four years of abstinence from drugs and alcohol. His once-gaunt frame is now filled out, his amber-veined eyes clear, gentle gray.

The author of thousands of songs, he recently started writing again. Songwriting, he says, is harder when you’re sober. “I’m having to do it in a different frame of mind. I used to live those damn sad songs. It takes more imagination now.”

Kershaw began taking stimulants to work longer hours, writing and performing — creating his career — always thinking he could quit. He was one of the rare ones. “When it wasn’t productive anymore, when I said ‘Hey, there’s more to me than that,’ then I quit. If I get a fiddle that won’t work, I get rid of it. It’s the same thing.”

Kershaw says he’s strong-willed. Once he decides to do something, he just does it. But strong will has a negative side, he said with a laugh. “When I decided to do something, Lord, Lord — nothing can stop me. When I decided to drink… there was a time when I drank a fifth of Chevas Regal and played 18 holes of golf. Then, the heavy drinking before shows started.

“THERE’S no moderation for me,” he said. “I can’t do anything just a little bit.”

And now, Kershaw is putting his will to the task of getting a hit record, something he hasn’t had since the early ’80s. He’s recently recorded an old Hank Williams tune, “Cajun Baby,” with Williams’ son, Hank Williams Jr., who found the tune in his father’s effects, finished it and asked Kershaw to record it with him.

Kershaw’s hit-record dryness hasn’t slowed his performing. Last year he was on the road for 40 weeks. Country audiences, he says, don’t forget you just because you aren’t being played on the radio.

It was back in 1961 that his song “Louisiana Man” hit the charts. Since then it has been recorded more than 500 times. Kershaw feels pride about the song’s small historic niche — the first song broadcast to Earth from space, transmitted from the Apollo 12.

“That song proved my point that you could come from anywhere and sing about it, and make it a hit,” he said. “All I did was use the old Cajun music and put it into English, so the world could understand what I was talking about.”

This different sound made Kershaw unique. By being different, he found he could work with a variety of performers. He could do rock concerts, television, country shows, blues shows. “I don’t fit any bag except me, therefore I fit all.”

Last year, he did a video with his boyhood hero Fats Domino, in Domino’s “Don’t Mess With My Tub.” He did it for fun, he says, and loved it. “I wish we’d had videos 20 years ago, it would have made it so much simpler for me.”

Despite his flamboyant style onstage, Kershaw is shy, and a loner. Being on a stage is a fantasy where he can act — but not one-on-one. “I can tease girls from stage — it’s a lot harder offstage.

“And there’s a barrier. They can’t get to me — unless they have real heavy tomatoes.” He threw back his head and laughed, as if remembering the first club he’d worked — a place called the Bucket of Blood, where performers worked behind chicken wire.

Today, he works without any protective screen, including alcohol or drugs. At first, he was nervous, not knowing if the audience liked the “real” Kershaw, not knowing if he could still do it.

After the first show, he went backstage elated. “Hell, I was still damn good,” he said, grinning. “That’s the trouble with booze and drugs — they make you forget how talented you are.” Even with his roller-coaster career, Kershaw would still do it all again. But this time, he says, “I want to do it sober.”