Cajun heart beats on
Louisiana folk workshop keeps cultures front-and-center

CULTURE
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BREAUX BRIDGE — Jackie Miller started making the ragged, multi-colored costumes because her sons needed the garb to run the countryside looking for chickens and sausage in the traditional Tee Mamou-Iota Mardi Gras celebration.

Word got around, and 20 years later, Miller etched together about 100 of the distinctive suits, wire masks and conical hats a year — still the apparel of choice for rural Mardi Gras festivities that have been held since Acadians came to south-west Louisiana in the 1800s.

"I learned mostly by doing, copying the old-time, traditional masks and costumes that I've seen all my life, since I was young," she said. "A lot of people used to do it. It was a thing to make your own mask — kind of a personal expression."

In a series of workshops sponsored by Louisiana Folk Roots, a nonprofit cultural promotion group based in Breaux Bridge, Miller will share her knowledge with anyone willing to take a few evenings to learn.

The Fait à la Main series, which began Nov. 25 and will run through March, will also offer classes on music, history and folk crafts.

"These are things that we are all so busy that we seem to be losing," said Folk Roots Executive Director Christine Balba. "These are wonderful traditions that really add quality of life.

Fiddle and accordion classes, offered for both Creole and Cajun styles, will be led by some of the most well-known players on the local scene, with demonstrations by some of the old stalwarts.

A session also will be taught on French home music — the lullabies, ballads and drinking songs that once served as home entertainment.

UL Lafayette professor Carl Braasseaux and folklorist Ryan Braasseaux will teach Acadian history, and local naturalist Bill Fontenot will lead a class on local geography, plants and animals.

Geraldine Robertson will teach the traditional craft of weaving baskets with split white oak.

D'Alma Garnier, a musician who taught Creole fiddle for the first workshop in the series, said he sees his role as one of trying to breathe a bit of life back into Creole music.

The style is associated with black French musicians in south Louisiana but has been overshadowed in recent decades by zydeco and Cajun music.

"Creole music is not just on its knees, it's on its death bed," said Garnier, who apprenticed under legendary Creole fiddler Camra Fontenot. "I've always tried to do something to keep it going. I want to introduce people to the style and get them listening to the recordings."

"A culture cannot be kept alive under a piece of glass in a museum."

Dewey Balba
Late Cajun fiddler and archivist

The workshops are a precursor to sorts to Louisiana Folk Roots' Dewey Balba Cajun and Creole Heritage Week in April at Lake Fausse Point State Park. The event attracts people from across the country and a few international visitors.

The week of intensive classes on music, food, dancing, language and folk crafts is named in honor of Christine Bel-"fiddler, the late Cajun fiddler and cultural activist Dewey Balba. He once said: "A culture cannot be kept alive under a piece of glass in a museum."

Balba's daughter subscribes to the same philosophy.

"Ultimately, Louisiana Folk Roots is trying to get things back into our lives that we used to do automatically," she said.