If anybody out there is still looking for America—the America that's still (nearly) free of fast food and piped-in music—there's one film at the Mill Valley Film Festival, October 5–12, that celebrates a good piece of it, courtesy of two guys who work out of a garret above an El Cerrito record store. The film is called J'ai Été au Bal ("I Went to the Dance"), and it's the most comprehensive film ever made on the joyous homegrown music of the Louisiana Cajuns.

The two guys from El Cerrito are Les Blank and Chris Strachwitz. Blank, one of America's top folklore documentarists, makes movies that capture the life, music, and flavor of those corners of the country where crawfish étouffée is still preferred to a fast-food fishwich. Blank's old friend and occasional backer/producer, Strachwitz owns Arhoolie Records, one of the best folk labels in the country, and the Down Home Music record shop. The two met nearly twenty years ago. Soon afterward, Blank moved his Flower Films into the upstairs of the Down Home building. Blank, along with his collaborator, Maureen Gosling, and Strachwitz have worked together a number of times since, on Chulas Fronteras and Del Mero Corazon, celebrating the Chicano music of the Texas border.

J'ai Été au Bal represents Strachwitz's first co-directing credit, and the film is a departure for Blank, who made several earlier movies (Spend It All, Dry Wood, Hot Pepper, and Always for Pleasure) in Louisiana. While as lyrical, poetic, sheerly flavorful as any of these, J'ai Été au Bal vividly covers the history of Cajun and zydeco music rather than capturing just a moment of it in time. Along with such current practitioners of the art as Beausoleil, Queen Ida, and Rockin' Sidney, it includes footage and recordings of performers now dead, including Clifton Chenier, the Balfa Brothers, and Nathan Abshire.

Strachwitz had decided it was high time to explain the music clearly. "I got tired of people asking, 'What's zydeco?' everywhere I went," Strachwitz said. "People just don't know anything about it. That's why I really wanted some kind of commentary." This, then, became one of Blank's few folklore films with a narration. The story is told from within the culture, in the words of Beausoleil musician Michael Doucet and Cajun professor of Cajun folklore Barry Jean Anciault. The film premiered last April at the Liberty Theatre in Eunice, Louisiana, and the audience loved it—the guys from El Cerrito had gotten it right.

Other highlights of the festival: a Pacific Basin series—featuring films from Australia, China, Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines—including Malpractice, Island by Paul Cox, and First Date by Peter Wong. A French film series includes The King and Mister Bird by master animator Paul Grimault, whose technique is as good as Disney's—minus the saccharine.

Several films won awards at other festivals: True Love by Nancy Savoca (Grand Prize at Park City), Italy's Cinema Paradiso (Special Jury Prize, Cannes), and Performance Pieces, a short...