Opeulasas native teaches fluid moves of Cajun dance

By KAYLA CHAILLOT
Advertiser correspondent

Dancing. One of the oldest and most expressive of art forms, dance
allows us to glimpse human movement at its most idealized, making
everyday people seem graceful, fluid, able to glide as effortlessly as
to water over smooth rocks.

With the upswing of interest in all things Cajun, dancing has
achieved a popularity and nightly practice unheard of in the days
when grandparents waltzed and two-stepped on Saturday nights.

Now, people of all ages want to know the dances their parents and
grandparents moved together at Breaux Bridge and Bristol, in
Rayne, Ossian, Chatigny, Kaplan, and all over south Louisiana.
Opeulasas native Miriam Fontenot, now of Lafayette, teaches
them.

"Everyone wants to learn the twirling movements of jitterbugging
that grew out of swing and rock and roll, but I teach them the waltz
and two-step first," said Fontenot. "It has to start from there."
Fontenot, the first Cajun dance teacher in the Lafayette area, has
been a dancer most of her life.

Born in Opelousas, Fontenot was the one in the family who always
seemed to be performing.

"Miriam was called 'Petite Danseur,'" recalled Fontenot's sister,
Paula LaFleur. "She's taken dancing classes since the age of 3. This
was in the early 50s when dancing classes consisted of a few
determined little girls dreaming of becoming ballerinas."

The daughters of Furry and Wilma LaFleur went to a little country
school at Prairie Ronde, then to the Academy of the Immaculate
Conception before attending Opelousas High.

All during those years, Fontenot took dancing and seldom missed
an opportunity to practice the Cajun dances with her parents and
grandparents on weekends.

"My grandmother Stella LaFleur's favorite dance was called 'The
Reel,'" recalled Fontenot. "It was sort of a line dance. But mostly
they danced two-steps and waltzes."

Here are the dances Fontenot teaches in the first two-thirds of her
six-hour, three-session course. In the last session comes the fancy
jitterbugging moves, after the students are grounded in the basics.

"I consider it a necessary foundation," said Fontenot.

While teaching standard little girls' dance programs in Opelousas
in the late 60s, Fontenot married her husband Jack, just out of
service in Vietnam. He is now a Lafayette mail carrier.

Teaching, but not dancing, went on the back burner for awhile.
We danced a lot socially during the years I was out of teaching.
To French Cajun music at La Poussee (The Dust) in Breaux
Bridge and to other kinds of music at places like Jay's in Canot or
Mother's Mantle in Lafayette," said Fontenot.

When her daughter Aimée began taking dance at Germain's Dance
School in 1981, Fontenot got back into teaching.

"So many people had been asking Miriam to show them Cajun
steps while out dancing, she decided to strike a deal with Rebecca
Landry (Germain's owner) for a place to teach," said LaFleur.

Thousands of students later, Fontenot, aided by LaFleur, is still
passing dance floor traditions down to eager devotees of Mulate's,
Prejean's, Randol's, Belzairre's, and other Cajun dancing havens.

Those who are intimidated by the super-twirling regulars at these
places, whose moves seem to become more complicated and
acrobatic by the season, shouldn't be, said Fontenot.

"It's not a competition," said Fontenot. "There's no one right way.
Dance what you know and feel, then add a step here and there as you
learn one. It's not necessary to do all the double-handed twirling and
fancy footwork. Just have a good time."

"Miriam is a very patient teacher," said former student Tommy
Delhomme. "Even with the terminal students, those who seem like
they will never get it right, she's extremely conscientious."

Delhomme now performs in public with a group Fontenot instructs.
Fontenot conceded that her students are said to be recognizable
because of the way they move to the music.

"Dance by its nature is very improvisational," explained Fontenot,
"but when I teach, I want my students to move in rhythm with the
music. First listen closely to the music, then move with it."

Fontenot said the fancy jitterbugging has been overrated as an
association to Cajun music, as has the modern sounds of groups like
potato chip pitchman Mike Ducey's Bouncing Beaus.

"The importance of the waltz and two-step to traditional rhythms
cannot be overstated," she contends.

Another former student and current member of Fontenot's public
troupe, Diane Utter, says Fontenot helps a student to develop his
natural pace.

Fontenot's former students include people who are now also
teachers, such as Betty Ceci of Randol's; T.J. Ledet, of USL's
Gumbo U, and Randy Speyrer, who has a Cajun dance video on the
market.

"Miriam is energy personified. She'll dance until the shirt on her
back is soaked," said Nick Breaux, another former student.

At the 1984 Ville Platte Cotton Festival, Fontenot learned the
Contradance, a traditional, 12-minute, circular group dance
while judging a dance contest for Acadiana Open Channel that
year, one of the other judges was filmmaker Glen Pitre, who asked
Fontenot to choreograph a shorter version of the dance for
his film "Belizeire."

Fontenot created a 15-minute version for the film and a 4-minute
performance that she brings on the road to fairs, festivals and
special engagements with a 16-member troupe mentioned earlier.

"I enjoy my work as a casting director, but my main mission as I
see it is to continue to make Cajun dance accessible and more
enjoyable to a wide range of people," she said.

Despite her varied work, she sits at her most natural while moving
across a dance floor with a partner, executing fluidly the steps
her grandmother showed her as a girl. "Petite Danseur" has grown
up.