Pair raise voices to preserve Cajun songs of old

By CHRISTINE WORD
Advocate correspondent

LAFAYETTE — The voices of Inez Catalon of Kaplan and Marce Lacouture of Broussard blend to preserve the French songs of days gone by.

They sing home music, folk songs of Acadiana, some hundreds of years old.

Catalon, 79, learned them as a child from her mother. Lacouture learned them much later when she was looking for her Cajun roots.

Lacouture, 43, is originally from Austin (her Acadian French grandparents settled in parts of Texas after leaving Louisiana in the early 1900s to find work), and she was raised in an Air Force family and moved around often. She lived in Europe three different times before she was 12 and was interested in cultures of all kinds.

"It wasn't until my late 20s or 30s when I started realizing that I didn't know anything about my own," she recalled.

She read whatever she could find on Cajun culture, and she came across a book in the Austin public library called "The Cajuns." In it, she found a picture of Catherine and Ed Blanchet of Meaux and was drawn to it. The caption said the Blanchets ran a Cajun culture school.

"I just had a feeling that I needed to meet them," she said.

A year later, she jumped in a pickup with a friend and showed up unannounced on the Blanchets' doorstep.

Catherine Blanchet, now 71, introduced Lacouture, a professional singer, to the home music which she had studied and collected for almost 20 years, starting in the 1930s, compiling them into a thesis in 1970.

"Catherine's life work has just been invaluable," said Lacouture, who lived with the Blanchets while studying the French songs.

In their country home near Meaux, the Blanchets are visited by people from around the world. When she was music supervisor for the Vermilion Parish school system, teaching vocal music in 18 schools, she felt the children should be proud of their French heritage, although she's of English and German descent. She taught them songs, and in turn the children brought her songs from their homes, and she recorded 50 for her book.

She also wrote "Les Danses Rondes," a compilation of round dances with instructions.

"The difference between a folk song and any other song is you know who wrote the other song," Catherine Blanchet said.

She classifies songs into two groups, one for dancing and the other sung without instrumentation.

Some of the songs are from Normandy, some from Acadia and some were made up in Louisiana. Different types of home music include entertainment, ceremonial for funerals, drinking songs, children's songs and bawdy songs.

A recurring theme is "Oh ya yie... (the woman has deserted the man) and he is mourning," Catherine Blanchet said.

She introduced Lacouture to some of the old folks who still sang the songs, including the late Lula Landry, and Inez Catalon.

"The difference between me and Inez is I'm a folklorist; she's a folk," Blanchet said.

Lacouture claims to be somewhere in the middle, treasuring the songs and performing them for the people rather than preserving them for posterity.

Listeners might well wonder about the unlikely duo. Singing the same songs each in their own way creates a lively sort of rapport.

Lacouture remembers the first time she met Catalon.

"I was going to impress Inez with one of her songs I'd learned from another woman," she said.

Lacouture sang while Catalon listened with a skeptical ear.

Catalon admits she was not impressed.

"I say 'Girl, have you been singing that song to people?' I say 'You messed up the whole thing!' She laughed and laughed," Catalon said.

Lacouture had learned the words, the melody and the story, but had not learned the significance of the subtleties written between the lines, and she sang with the wrong cadence and tone.

"No one will ever be able to sing songs that Inez learned as a child the way Inez sings them," Lacouture said. "She's a storyteller. Her life is the story. The reason Inez is such a living treasure is not because she knows lots and lots of songs, but because of who she is."

Catalon has performed for years, and her appearances include the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. Like Catherine Blanchet, Catalon receives visitors from around the globe. She says her front door is an extension of Interstate 10, and she likes to open it and see who comes in.

When they sing together, Lacouture sets the historical context for the audience, admitting she's not fluent in French. She says she gets helpful feedback from appreciative Cajuns in the audience.

"It's a bit of their past that the see they can hold on to."