Queen Ida Cookin’ in More Ways Than One

BY LEE HILDEBRAND
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FOR THE past three years, between frequent tours with her Bon Temps Zydeco Band, accordionist Queen Ida Guillory has busied herself collecting recipes for a creole and Cajun cookbook. Set for publication in October, “Cookin’ With Queen Ida” will feature such Louisiana staples as gumbo, jambalaya, boudin, shrimp creole and crayfish étouffée. Some of the recipes her family brought to California from Louisiana; others were borrowed from friends.

There’s little difference between creole and Cajun cuisines, Guillory, 61, explained in the living room of her Daly City home, a shiny Holmjer accordion resting on the carpet beside her. Like zydeco, a highly rhythmic variation on Cajun music, creole cooking is just a bit spicier.

Guillory’s cooking, especially her boudin pork sausage, is legendary among local zydeco enthusiasts. For many years, she supervised the kitchens at Bay Area zydeco affairs — held in Catholic church social halls and called “French dances” by members of the local creole community — until the growing demands of her musical career forced her to turn the pots over to others.

A closet accordionist who went public 15 years ago, Guillory is now one of the world’s leading exponents of zydeco. She has recorded eight albums for the Los Angeles-based GNP Crescendo label, the latest also bearing the title “Cookin’ With Queen Ida.” Four were nominated for Grammy awards; one won. She regularly tours the United States, Canada, Europe and Japan and last fall made her African debut on a U.S. Information Agency-sponsored tour. Later this year, she plans to take her music to Australia and New Zealand for the first time.

Of the six African countries, Guillory has performed in, five — Algeria, Senegal, Cote d’Ivoire, Togo and the Congo.

Spicy zydeco accordionist shares recipe collection of Cajun/creole fare

Republic — were once French colonies. Audiences in those nations, she said, had no trouble understanding her lyrics, most of which are sung in French, the only language she spoke until she was 8.

“For me it was like going back to Louisiana, where the people speak French, or going to France or Switzerland,” she explained. “It gave me a chance to speak my patois with the people there. They understood me better than I understood them.”

She said that audiences in Cote d’Ivoire were especially receptive to her music, particularly to a catchy traditional creole call-and-response tune titled “Hey, La Bas.” “When they left the concert, you could hear the youngsters ways and ways away singing ‘hey, la bas’ and the others would answer ‘hey, la bas’. They knew what it meant. It means ‘hey, over there. It’s like getting someone’s attention.’”

As a child in her native Lake Charles, La., and later in nearby Beaumont, Texas, Ida was surrounded by accordion music. “They were playing more Cajun music than zydeco then,” she recalled. “Almost every time the family got together, they were playing the music. It was like a party every time.”

Although fascinated with the accordion, she never considered playing one herself. “They didn’t think that it was very feminine for a girl to play the accordion,” she explained. “Actually, at that time, it wasn’t feminine for a girl to play an instrument unless it was a piano or a violin.”

Leaving Beaumont, where Ida drove a tractor on her father’s rice farm during World War II, the family settled in San Francisco in 1947. Three years later, she married Ray Guillory, an admirer of her’s since they were both teenagers in Beaumont. While in the Air Force, he had begun stopping off at nearby Travis Air Force Base in order to call on her.

The Guillorys started hosting parties in the basement of their home during the early 50s. They’d invite other Louisiana-born creoles they’d met at church, including a rubboard player and John Simien, then the only zydeco accordionist in the Bay Area. Ida made the gumbo and, eventually, her younger brother, Al Lewis (now known as Al Rapone), began joining in on guitar.

For 14 years, Ida drove school buses in the morning and afternoon. But during the rest of the day, while her husband was at work and their three children at school, she had little to do. Bored, she began experimenting on a diatonic accordion that belonged to Al, painstakingly pushing and pulling as she fingered the instrument’s buttons. Gradually, she began producing coherent melodies.

Armed with only a handful of tunes, some of which she only knew partially, Ida made her public debut backed by Al’s band in 1975 at All Hallows Church in San Francisco. She had to talk into doing it and intended it as a one-time affair. But a free-lance writer attended the dance and her photograph ended up on the cover of California Living magazine, with the article dubbing her “Queen Ida.”

CALLS from club owners began coming into the church, which gave out her number. Considering herself only to be an amateur musician, she suggested they hire her brother’s band. Al insisted, however, that she front his Latin-tinged rock group and soon they were performing every weekend around the Bay Area as Queen Ida and Her Bon Temps Zydeco Band. In 1977, she quit her bus-driving job to enter the music business full time.

Al, who’d shared vocals with his sister in the band, left the group in 1981 to form his own and to concentrate on playing the accordion, causing Ida to have to do more singing than she initially cared to do. The band, however, remains a family affair. Her husband, now retired from his job as a meat company dispatcher, serves as road manager.

And their son, Myrick “Freeze” Guillory, plays rub board and second accordion with the group. He’s now working on his own album for GNP Crescendo.