Whew, boy — Let's stomp!!

By EDDY ALLMAN
Music critic

I like the people at the Baton Rouge Arts and Humanities Council. I even respect them. They're intelligent, dedicated to the arts and, usually, very helpful.

But ever since they started the "First Annual International River City End-of-the-Summer Musical Extravaganza and Stomp!!" (try saying that with one breath), I've gotten the feeling they had more in mind than a simple good time. Like, perhaps, the croping of certain writers' fingers. Or maybe they just wanted to see if modern data terminals were all they're cracked up to be.

But while I have my suspicions about the AH Council's S&M tendencies, there's no question they've created a self-renewing musical tradition. As they have with the now- institutionalized Blues Festival and Festival for All, the AH Council has provided another benchmark for checking the progress of new and established local talent. It goes without saying that bands like Toncato, The Circuit Breakers, Tabby Thomas and The Nightingales all got healthy boosts from their exposure at the festivals.

This year's Stomp will be no different. Again set under the oak in the basin of the Old State Capitol Grounds — the only logical, and certainly the most scenic, downtown location for such events — the Stomp will feature a variety of familiar talent as well as some exciting new music collectives many people will be seeing for the first time. And this year Louisiana Showcase will be filming the festival for an upcoming broadcast.

As usual, the event — scheduled for 1 p.m., Sept. 4 — will feature an array of wonderful junk food concessions, ranging from hot dogs and nachos to stoppy pies, pickles and popcorn. If those empty-calorie delights make you thirsty, you can wash the refreshments down with soft drinks and beer. Local car dealer Price LeBlanc will be master of ceremonies during the afternoon with Lou Carter taking over the duties at 7 p.m. co-judging the jitterbug contest with Morning Advocate columnist Smiley Anders.

Besides the music — we'll get to that in a minute — you can look forward to a Haagen-Dasq ice cream eating contest at 3:30 p.m. (The winner, assuming he's alive, will presumably get to eat more of the stuff home; no prisoners allowed), an exhibition of real "stomping" by the Red Stick Cloggers at 6:30 p.m. — stiff shoes, Dr. Scholl's footpads and all, "Fiddle-Faddle Fiddle-Off" featuring area fiddlers (5 p.m. — see if the devil went down to Louisiana) and, finally, at 7 p.m., a jitterbug contest.

The line-up this year, with the exception of the Louisiana Soundstage Orchestra, is another roots-conscious marvel, with bands closely identified with one or more variations of Southern American Louisiana music.

Beginning with Major Handy and the Louisiana Band (1 p.m.), the schedule calls for a upbeat look at both modern and traditional Zydeco and Cajun music.

Major Handy is something of a new phenomenon, even though he got most of his touring experience as a guitarist for the famed Rockin' Dopsie and the Twisters Zydeco band. Handy broke off from Dopsie not too long ago to head his own band, with whom he sings and plays accordion and keyboards. Handy's first gig at a local club called The Chimes seemed to indicate that Handy's star potential is at least as bright as his better-known counterparts, Dopsie and Clifton Chenier. Because of his relative youth, Handy may be in a position to cash in on modern radio's new fascination with ethnically-derived music. He has, in any event, the talent, charisma and drive to become a regional fixture.

Sady Courville and Dennis McGee (2 p.m.) are traditional Cajun fiddlers from Eunice who've been playing essentially the same music for the better part of the 20th Century. Courville, 78, and McGee, 88, have been together for over 65 years.

Red Beans & Rice Revue (2:30 p.m.) has long been one of south Louisiana's most essential groups. The nucleus of the group — guitarist/vocalist Tommy Shreve, sax player Pat Breaux, bassist Steve LaCroix and drummer/vocalist Danny Kimball — dates back, off and on, to the late '70s. Two celebrated offshoots of the band — The Studebakers and the phenomenal coupling with Leigh Harris and Wesla McDonald in Lif' Queenie & Backtalk — have done little but enhance RBARR's status. This band plays a powerful and danceable blend of r&b, rock, Cajun and N.O. funk and may be, when it comes right down to it, the area's most representative music makers.

While Red Beans & Rice's return gig in Baton Rouge is bound to cause a lot of excitement, the debut show by The Bluesomatics (4 p.m.) should generate the biggest stir. A rumor in their own minds for most of the year, the band has sweated and drunk and walked and shopped again as the group developed its focus and style along the lines of a mini-big band blues unit. As guitarist Mike Armasew puts it, the combination of shapes and players, particularly in terms of the individuals' tastes and moods, required a lot of organization and fine-tuning over the past several months.

As it stands, The Bluesomatics first gig will showcase three of the area's very best blues/ r&b vocalists in Duke Bardwell (also currently a member of Toncato), Boco LaTour (a veritable Cajun Queenie, whose experience dates back to the Napoleon St. Shufflers, Boney Lacuzzl and others) and Buddy Broussard, a relative newcomer who's jammed with the likes of The Nightcinders and Kicks.

Add Armasew, sax player/vocalist Steve Hutter, bassist Doug Johnson, sax player Herbie Bone (all of whom are mainstays with The Nightcinders) and young drummer Randy Carpenter (a regular with The Rite) and you have what stands to be one of the most prestigious first-time collectives assembled in the city.

The band may very well play only a few times a year, so this Sunday is definitely the time to catch them.

Another band to watch for, by all means, is a young, Gonzales-based band called The Rite (5:30 p.m.). An instant hit with their musical peers when they debuted in Baton Rouge at the beginning of the year, the band has a loyal, growing following, turned on as much by the band's tightly tight playing and eclectic repertoire as by lead vocalist Verna Weimer's astonishing range and power. Weimer is obviously the band's focal point, but each one of its members — bassist Chuck Bergeron, keyboardist/vocalist Armasew, guitarist/vocalist Gary Daigle, drummer Randy Carpenter and sax player Rey Steeven — is superb at his instrument. And their repertoire — from Rickie Lee Jones to Morna Purim, from Steely Dan to Dan Fogelberg — is a constantly pleasant surprise.

Finally, the Louisiana Soundstage Orchestra, a Friday night regular at Best Western's Holiday Room on Airport Hwy., will wrap things up at 7 p.m. The LSDQ, as if their name isn't a dead giveaway, plays the big band sound of Glen Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Count Basie, et al. All of which should serve as a fitting backdrop to the jitterbug contest.

Even if you can't say "Fourth First Annual . . ." to its illogical conclusion, don't miss it. It's free.