BY RYAN BERNARD

THE CAJUNS

Though their isolation has ended, this unique minority group is hanging on to its ethnic heritage. Which goes to prove that you can take the Cajun out of the swamp, but...

As distances go, my hometown isn't any farther from Houston than Dallas or San Antonio, or even Corpus Christi. Physically, it could pass for any other little Gulf Coast town. Before they tore the depot down, it was a mere whistle stop where the Southern Pacific passed by on its way across the coastal plain. But culturally it might as well be the other side of the moon. For the town lies in a region that to many Texans is unknown and mysterious: a place called South Louisiana, which is quite simply unlike any other place in the continental United States—a place where the standard laws of American social behavior don't mean a thing, an oasis of free living set like a full-color centerfold in the middle of the Bible Belt.
juns are college educated, live on dry ground in mundane ranch-style houses, and drive luxury cars, the old stereotypes and myths still abound. As recently as 1973, the American Heritage Book of Great Historical Places described the Cajuns as people who live in huts built on stilts, travel from place to place by pirogue, and earn their living from crafts such as basket weaving. With such misconceptions still rampant, it can be a touch-and-go proposition—even in these enlightened times—for a person of Cajun descent to venture into the great cultural mosaic of America. To paraphrase a well-known American comedian, we just can't get no respect.

I was with some surprise, then, that I recently stood outside an office door in a plush, six-story atrium building on the West Loop. I had just glided up through the open air in a glass-enclosed elevator and stood gawking at a series of names carved in bronze on the wall. There, in large block letters, was the inscription “Downman, Jones & Granger,” and beneath it—aerosol spray paint, "J. Weldon Granger." Weldon was a guy from my hometown whom I hadn’t seen in 15 years. We went to the same school back then—his the second of 11 children born to an uneducated laborer who worked in the nearby salt mines, one of seven children of a small-time sugar cane farmer. After graduation, Weldon and I both disappeared into that void where rural Louisianians sometimes vanish (in the eyes of their townfolk), only to turn up later as brain surgeons in New Orleans, oil field workers in the North Sea, or statistics on some grim casualty list. As it happened, we both turned up in the same place—I near downtown Houston as writer and editor for a slick monthly magazine, Weldon on the West Loop as managing partner of a law firm specializing in personal injury cases for railroad union employees.

I paddled onto the thick carpet in the waiting room and asked the secretary for Mr. Granger. I pronounced it “grain-ger,” figuring that Weldon—like most Cajuns who ventured out of Southwest Louisiana—would have Anglicized the pronunciation of his name. I had seen “Luh-blawns” (LeBlancs) become “Le-blanks,” “Ay-bears” (Héberts) transformed into “Hee-berts,” and “Duh-wants” (Drouens) restyled as “Dee-wants”—all to spare Anglo-Texans the kind of face-wrenching glottal contortions they seem to require to pronounce the simplest French names. Even then, they rarely get the names right.

The secretary looked me over, then motioned to a nearby clerk. “Tell Mr. Groun-jay there’s someone here to see him,” she said. I was impressed. She got it right.

I was ushered into an inner office, a plush affair with mahogany paneling and an arresting view of the West Loop. There, ensconced behind a broad wooden desk, was Weldon, or at least Weldon’s eyes and his smile in a bigger body. The Weldon I remembered can still be found in the dog-eared pages of our slim high school yearbook—he was short and scrawny, with coal black hair and an engaging smile. This new Weldon was “just a little fatter and grayer,” as he noted while we were shaking hands and commenting on how much he had changed. At 33, his black hair was already streaked with strands of silver and his lean build had gained a few layers of padding. These years of winning plump attorneys’ fees from the railroads had fattened him to the point where he looked like a compact freight train.

Weldon, it turns out, is probably more successful than he ever thought he’d be when he got his industrial engineering degree from the University of Southwestern Louisiana (home of the Ragin’ Cajuns) in 1969. After working at Monsanto in Texas City for a while, he found that he “didn’t like the idea of having to work for someone else” the rest of his life. At the urging of a friend he enrolled in South Texas College of Law, became president of the Student Bar Association, graduated with honors in 1974, and went straight into the law firm then known as Downman, Jones & Schechter. Within six years he had helped build the firm into one of the largest railroad labor firms in the country and become a managing partner.

His subsequent success—measured in dollar signs—allowed this Cajun from the bayou to out-Houston most Houstonians. (After all, as the old Cajun joke goes, a tycoon is nothing more than a coon-ass with a tie.) In his spare time, when he’s not flying around the country on legal business, Weldon is a real estate developer. He is majority owner of Magnolia Estates, a luxury subdivision project under development near Intercontinental Airport. He’s turned art patron as well, owning a half interest in a limited-edition print company called Wells Limited that markets the works of Southwestern artist Ronnie Wells. These days, he’s also looking into tilt-wall warehousing as another potential investment and tax shelter.

In fact, Weldon is so successful that he mildly protests his situation. It has turned him into a bit of a workaholic, something Cajuns are not supposed to be. “The more you have, the more you have to worry about,” he said. “Sometimes I think the guys who really have the right idea are the guys back home who make a thousand dollars a month and get to go home at five.”

But we need not feel sorry for Weldon. Already a millionaire in his early thirties, he talks about “slowing down” at 40 to enjoy the fruits of his investments. He plans to spend his free time in Las Vegas, or visiting with old fraternity buddies (Kappa Alpha) from USL. And every year he likes to take his mom and dad away from the salt mines on a trip to “San Francisco, Las Vegas—someplace exciting where they can enjoy the benefits of my success.”

Though he’s zoomed from the edge of the marshes to the room at the top of this atrium building in something like a decade, Weldon has few pretensions. He still has the pleasant manner that made him so popular in our little high school and won him the presidency of the student council. And he’s still quite proud of his heritage. “I travel all over the country on this job,” he says, “and people everywhere know me as a Cajun or a coon-ass.”

Though he doesn’t have much of a Cajun accent anymore, he’s still capable of some fairly salty French and enjoys using it when the situation merits. As my experience with the secretary proved, he’s decided not to make it any easier for Texans by changing the pronunciation of his family name. (“With a name like Granger, hell, it would have been a lot easier to go the other way,” he says.)

And in a special place in the family freezer back home in Meyerland, Weldon keeps a package of that basic, life-giving substance known to all who were born on the bayou: a good 20 pounds of frozen crawfish. “My wife [a DeBaillon from Lafayette] cooks excellent étouffée [crawfish stew],” he says. “I have people from all over the country come into my home and eat crawfish, and I haven’t heard one complaint yet.”

Weldon is proud of another part of his upbringing that is not so exclusively Cajun. “My biggest plus in this job was being from a blue-collar family,” he says. “I still enjoy being with people from the working class, and I realize that being a lawyer now makes me no different from them. In fact, I enjoy being (continued on page 110)
To understand Cajuns, you have to understand their attitude about food. For a Cajun, food is a source of love and inspiration. To cook a meal for someone else is an act of love; to share a meal with someone is an act of brotherhood; and to eat a good meal is one of the highest pleasures of life.

All of this is more easily comprehensible once you taste Cajun cooking. In the last 200 years, Cajuns have created one of the finest folk cuisines anywhere on earth, using only the ingredients available in South Louisiana: the crawfish, which are everywhere; the ducks that migrate into the marshes each winter; the rice that grows in Louisiana fields; the shrimp, oysters, and crabs that are plentiful along the marshy coast; and the cayenne pepper that grows in great abundance around New Iberia, and from which Tabasco and other brands of hot sauce are made.

The Cajun repertoire is actually a blend of several historical influences. From the French heritage comes a high concern for quality in cooking, and the love of rich sauces and gravies. African slaves and freedmen brought okra and gave gumbo its name. The Spanish who once ruled Louisiana contributed the use of hot peppers, and the Native Indians lent ingredients such as ground sassafras (filé) which is sprinkled over gumbo.

Cajun cooking is not Creole cooking, though the two do have much in common. Creoles are the natives of New Orleans, descendents of the First French and Spanish colonists in the Louisiana Territory. Their food is more a haute cuisine, a blend of French, Spanish, and Italian influences, with fancy names like “pompano en papillote,” “oysters Rockefeller,” and “shrimp remoulade.” Cajun cooking is more earthy, with basic names like “duck gumbo,” “boiled crawfish,” and “dirty rice.”

There is plenty of confusion here in Houston about what Cajun cooking is. That confusion has resulted in some bizarre concoctions at local eateries—and often people don’t even notice the difference. At least one Galveston tavern (the Turf Lounge) thinks gumbo is served on a plate like rice and gravy, rather than in a bowl like soup. One Houston restaurant (Frenchy’s) advertises a dish called “boudin and dirty rice” when in fact the boudin is nowhere to be found—it’s just plain dirty rice. Another (Treebeard’s) serves something it calls “jambalaya,” which is in fact a kind of sauce piquante. Such ignorance in a city only 200 miles from the best Cajun restaurants is scandalous. Here, then, is a Cajun food primer.

**Crawfish**

The humble crawfish—even though Texans have grotesque names for it like “mudbug” and “crawdad”—is nothing more than a small freshwater cousin of the lobster. Crawfish do live in mud, but they are perfectly clean once they’ve been washed and cooked.

Crawfish meat is very bland for Cajun tastes, so it usually has plenty of seasoning boiled or stewed into it. The most popular way to eat crawfish is the crawfish boil, in which each person sits before a pile of up to six pounds of whole crawfish spread out on newspapers (making it easy for the host to wrap up the mess once everyone’s finished).

Each crawfish must be peeled before it can be eaten. The tail is pulled away from the body and crushed between the fingers. The shell is pulled away from the meat, and the meat is popped into the mouth. (Veteran eaters will also wedge a finger into the body cavity and dig out a dollop of “crawfish fat”—the delicious, amber-colored paste that is the essential ingredient of crawfish étouffée. Neophytes and slobs prefer to extract the fat by “sucking the heads,” which is totally unnecessary.)

Though crawfish peeling must seem a tedious process to novices—who might prefer to have a big pile of peeled tails served to them on a plate—it should be remembered that the crawfish boil is mainly a social function. The slow pace of eating allows plenty of time between bites for shooting the bull and qualifying large quantities of beer.

Crawfish appear in a number of other Cajun dishes: crawfish étouffée, a rich golden stew made with the above-mentioned “fat” and plenty of peeled tails, all poured over steaming rice; crawfish bisque, a gumbolike soup in which float individual crawfish stuffed with spicy breading; and crawfish pie, like étouffée in a pie crust. Batter-fried crawfish tails are also common.

Crawfish are in season from early winter to late spring. But thanks to modern crawfish-farming methods and refrigeration, they are now available at most restaurants year round.

**Gumbo**

Since there are so many varieties and styles of gumbo, it’s hard to point to any one version and say, “Now this is how gumbo is really supposed to be.” Generally, gumbo is a thick brown soup, made that way by an ingredient called roux (roux). The secret to a good gumbo is a good roux, and the only secret to a good roux is to stir it constantly over a medium-low flame until it’s deep brown (about half an hour). To this base are added flavorings such as onion, bell pepper, garlic, celery, and green onion tops; meats such as chicken, shrimp, crab, oysters, or sausage (rarely beef); and water.

Unlike the New Orleans Creole version, Cajun gumbo doesn’t usually include okra or tomatoes; if it does this is indicated in the name. For example, “chicken and okra” (continued on page 112)
What makes South Louisiana so different is its people, an ancient race of French folk called Acadians, or Cajuns—refugees who were thrown out of their colony in Nova Scotia by the British before the Revolutionary War. Resettled in the backwoods and prairies of Louisiana, we remained in isolation with most of our archaic folkways intact until the 20th century sucked us out of our time warp.

Being Cajun in the Fifties and early Sixties was like straddling the chasm between the modern world and the Middle Ages. On one hand there were automobiles and TV sets and all the accouterments of technology that would eventually modernize the landscape and nearly strangle the Cajun culture. On the other hand there were wizened old people everywhere who still spoke a dialect from 17th-century Normandy; who plowed their fields with mule-drawn harrows and lived in mud-walled houses; who sought relief from their illnesses through their healers (faith healers who used herbs and charms to ward off disease); and who played an ancient folk music so arcane and soulful that it might have come from another galaxy.

Those were the last of the real Cajuns, though—the old folks in their eighties and nineties today, who grew up in Louisiana as it was before the modern world stumbled upon it. For most of their history, Cajuns were cut off by impenetrable swamps and countless unbridged bayous that could best be navigated in flat-bottomed canoes called pirogues. So, even though Louisiana joined the Union in 1812, South Louisiana kept to itself until much later. Until recently, in fact, English speakers who wandered into the region were called Américains, in much the same way that Mexicans call outsiders “gringos.”

Several pithy things worked to change this, not the least of which was an invasion by hard-pressed Texans during the oil boom in the early part of this century. In the Thirties, legendary Louisiana governor Huey P. Long (not a Cajun but a redneck from politically dominant North Louisiana) began a process that would bridge the swamps and lowlands with a network of new roads. The public school system began teaching English to the Cajun children—indeed, forcing them to abandon French. And through radio and TV, America invaded Cajun air space.

Within a few decades, the land of the Cajuns—the geographical triangle stretching from Alexandria on the north, to Shreveport, Texas, on the west, and thence eastward to the coast south of New Orleans—was transformed from a pastoral backwater to a bustling industrial area with petrochemical refineries, ports, oil wells, and barge terminals. And the Cajuns were transformed as well, from rustic peasants living off the land to middle-class Americans with eight-to-five jobs, carpentry, and air conditioning.

By the time I was a youngster, a Cajun family could pile into the Plymouth, get on one of the first interstate highways, and zip over to any other state, there to mingle with distinctly non-Cajun folk. Even easier, a Cajun kid could flip a dial and watch Américains such as Roy Rogers or Ozzie and Har...
Italian-American who graduated from Houston’s St. Thomas High School and worked briefly at French Quarter Po-Boys in Lafayette in the early Seventies while attending USL. In 1976, Mandela found himself back in the poor boy business, along with his brother Frank and a longtime family friend named Ray Hay. A round man with a typical East Texas accent, Hay (it’s not a Cajun name) lived in Lake Arthur, Louisiana, briefly during his infancy, moved to Houston at the age of six, owned a Broiler Burger on Telephone Road for over a decade, and worked more recently as a liquor salesman.

As the story goes, the Mandela brothers talked Ray into getting back into the restaurant business, though Ray’s version is that it was his idea and he went to them for financing. Either way, Hay’s Cajun credentials—though somewhat sketchy—ultimately proved quite useful. Ray Hay’s Cajun Po-Boys is now going strong at two locations, on Richmond and Hillcroft (the latter location is managed by Frank Messina, another friend of the Mandolas from Lake Arthur via Port Arthur, Texas). Although poor boys are not a Cajun invention, and though Ray Hay’s stands at authentic Cajun dishes like crawfish étouffée and gumbo have been disappointing, this joint really packs them in.

The restaurant has its own funky charm, in the form of a dazzling collection of Louisianaiana: old USL yearbooks, a rainbow of bumper stickers, posters, and souvenirs from South Louisiana, and a rollicking selection of Cajun music on the jukebox.

More important, Mandela succeeded in making the restaurant headquarters for the Cajun Club of Houston (a group of USL alumni, 400 strong, that anyone can join for $5 a year, according to Mandela). He managed this by compiling a mailing list that the USL Alumni Association confirms is the definitive listing of USL grads in Houston, and by serving for a while as the club’s president. Some of the organization’s annual events—which include a crawfish boil, Cajun dance, a red beans and rice dinner, and trips to USL sports events—are held at the restaurant itself.

If you go to Ray Hay’s on Richmond on any warm Houston afternoon, you will likely find Ray in there bellowing and yee-hawing over the P.A. system like a genial madman, urging people, “Y’all come back now, hear.” I suspect someone told him that’s how Cajuns are supposed to act.

While Cajuns and semi-Cajuns in the cultural swamp of Houston continue to find ways to cope with or exploit their identity, the folks back in the Mother Country have been busily shoring theirs up. In recent years, Louisiana Cajuns have rediscovered their roots with a passion. Festivals like the popular biannual Crawfish Festival in Breaux Bridge, the Festivals Aca- diens each September in Lafayette, and 32 others now celebrate the Cajun way of doing things with food, drink, street dancing, and general frivolity. The French language is blooming again after being banned for years in public schools and falling out of use in homes. (Legend has it that an old Cajun once whispered on his deathbed, “Tell me, do they still speak French in France?”)

This last miracle is the work of a feisty old Cajun lawyer named James Domeneuex (doh-man-joh), a former Louisiana congressman who organized the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) over a decade ago. CODOFIL is now an official state agency dedicated to reviving Louisiana’s bilingualism through educational programs and cultural exchanges with France, Belgium, and particularly the separatist Canadian province of Quebec, where many distant relatives of the Cajuns still live, and where the old French-British colonial hatreds still fester.

In recent years Domeneuex’s program has come under attack from purists for teaching standard French and not traditional Cajun French. Respected folklorist Alan Lomax, an Américain research associate at Columbia University, recently joined the fray by criticizing the use of foreign teachers in the program, arguing that the Cajun folk language (and even the music) could be “possibly distorted forever if the wrong kind of speaking style is employed in the schools.” Use of foreign exchange teachers, Lomax holds, “would be the equivalent of having English, if it were a second language, being taught here by graduates of Oxford.”

Domeneuex, on the other hand, argues that Cajun French is like redneck English (which it is: full of contractions and slang and colorful expressions). While he certainly wouldn’t ban it, Domeneuex gives the impression he wouldn’t teach it either.

Despite all the ruckus, the fruits of Domeneuex’s programs are evident in the daily life of Louisiana today. Though French is certainly relegated to a second language in Louisiana, its use is becoming more apparent with the blossoming of more French TV and radio programs, as well as bilingual newspapers. There has been a tremendous resurgence in ethnic pride. But, in true Cajun fashion (and very unlike their French cousins in modem-day Quebec), the Cajuns express the pride more in a spirit of self-parody than sindent militancy. T-shirts now sport slogans like “Cajun Power,” with a picture of a clenched fist holding a crawfish. Another declares the wearer a “Registered Coonass” with a picture of a smiling raccoon flashing his rump at the world.

So the Cajuns have decided to chuckle under their breaths rather than raise the roof about the injustices of the past (much to the chagrin of their Québécois cousins). There are no Cajun Defense Leagues to shout down snide references to the culture. There is little of the self-pity and overbearing truculence of other ethnic movements (although a federal court recently held that Cajuns can claim discrimination under the Equal Opportunities Act). It’s probably a good thing, too, mon cher. After all, the Cajuns could have tried to pull their little swath of marsh-land and prairie right out of the country, just like their relatives are trying to do right now in Canada. And we all know what happened last time that kind of stuff got started.

**DIRTY RICE**

(continued from page 43)

“Gumbo” would have okra (and possibly tomatoes), while plain “chicken gumbo” might not have either. This confuses tourists used to New Orleans gumbo, who sometimes think Cajun gumbo is not authentic because it lacks okra.

**Boudin and gratons**

Cajuns have always had their own snack foods, among them boudin (boo-dahn) and gratons (grah-tawns)—also known as cracklings. These are usually available in grocery stores and meat markets throughout the state; even Louisiana’s version of U-Tote-M often sells hot boudin at the counter.

Boudin is basically a pork and rice sausage. The best boudin will have tender chunks of pork (and often pork liver) mixed with equal quantities of steamed rice, and seasonings such as salt, pepper, fresh parsley, and green onion tops. Unlike regular sausage, the casing for boudin is often inedible, so the insides must be eaten by squeezing them out of the casing into your mouth, much like toothpaste out of a tube. You can tell you’re getting bad boudin if it tastes like hoghead cheese, if there are hunks of fat in it, if an overabundance of rice makes it dry, or if its color is anything other than tan or gray (one Houston variety I’ve sampled had an orange tinge and tasted like tamales). In my experience, none of the brands of boudin made in Texas is very good.

Gratons are deep-fried pork rinds; the Cajuns usually fry the pork skin with the fat still attached. This may not appeal to non-Cajun tastes.

**Jambalaya and dirty rice**

Jambalaya and dirty rice are often confused, since both are made with rice. Jambalaya is a pot of rice with whole chunks of meat (chicken, sausage, shrimp, and so forth) cooked right into it so the juices blend into the rice. Dirty rice, also known as rice dressing, is similar to cornbread dressing—it’s made from ground giblets and beef that are stewed (sometimes with oysters), then stirred into a pot of steamed rice. Jambalaya is often served as an entrée, while dirty rice is usually a side dish.

Frozen rice dressing mix is available in most Louisiana groceries. Once heated and mixed with steamed rice, it can be quite good; and it’s an easy way for non-Cajuns to try this Louisiana specialty.
For many Cajuns, sublimating their identity is a necessity, a way to avoid endless and tiresome ribbing.

money, jobs, opportunity.

I’ve seen them come to the big city and blend in as well as any accountant from the Midwest or salesman from Tulsa. I’ve seen them bury the accent like linguistic masters, polish up their rough country manners, and learn to eat things like chicken-fried steaks, quiche, and tacos, instead of the regular infusions of crawfish and boudin (a Cajun sausage) they were accustomed to in Louisiana, I know, because I went through all that.

For many, burying the accent and sublimating the Cajun identity is almost necessary, a way of avoiding the endless and tiresome ribbing about being a “coon-ass” and all the ignorance and boodleyness that word seems to imply. (I can’t recall all the times I’ve been asked to “talk like a Cajun,” as though I were some kind of performing seal.)

Others, although raised in the heart of Louisiana, find the traditional Cajun stereotypes simply contrary to their nature. Houston architect Anthony J. Frederick—a former project architect for Howard Barnstone whose German surname is considered just as Cajun as “Boudreaux” in his hometown of Abbeville, Louisiana—is about as reserved a fellow as you can find, belying the stereotype of the Cajun as a boisterous, half-drunk lout. Tony spends much of his time in the pacific calm of his spartan Montrose office, hunched over broad architectural drawings—many of them renovations of solemn River Oaks or Memorial-area mansions. When he’s ready to go out and have some fun, Tony prefers to attend a lecture or spend a sober evening at the symphony, thank you. But when he’s ready to show off his Cajun talents, he will install himself in front of the stove in his West University home and whip up “the best crawfish étouffée you’ve ever tasted.”

There is the other extreme. Local music producer Huey P. Meaux (mob) plays his Cajun heritage to the hilt. (His name itself is a montage of Louisiana flash: “Huey P.” comes from the aforementioned Governor Long, who was gunned down in the Louisianan state capitol in 1935; “Meaux” is simply one of the more outrageous Cajun names.) Born in Kaplan, Louisiana, during the Depression, and raised from the age of 12 in Winnie, Texas (just east of Houston), Meaux was a barber and member of a Cajun dance band called the Rambling Aces until he landed a mid-Fifties gig as disc jockey on “The Cajun Show” at Fort Arthur’s radio station KPCD. There he recorded Cajun rhythm-and-blues singer “Jivin’ Gene” Bourgeois and produced his first big hit, “Breakin’ Up Is Hard to Do.” During the Beatles era Huey managed his own British-style rock group, the Sir Douglas Quintet from San Antonio, headed by popular guitarist Doug Sahm. More recently, working out of a studio off Old Spanish Trail, Meaux helped catapult Rio Grande Valley singer Baldemar Huerta (better known as Freddy Fender) to national prominence. In all, Huey claims responsibility for 50 gold records, two platinum albums, and three gold albums.

I met Huey six years ago, before the Freddy Fender period, when he had just opened his Sugarhill Studios here and was doing a radio show on KPFT-FM, the local Pacifica affiliate. Meaux’s style then was manic, to say the least. Typically, he would spin some funky South Texas or Cajun hit from the Fifties or Sixties, hang onto his headphones with both hands, whoop and holler over the music such comments as “Sing it to me, babeeey!” and “Aawwrlight!” (during the roused parts) or “Come-on, come-on, come-on”—nearly falling off his stool in the process. He called it “The Crazy Cajun Show.”

Huey comes from an older generation than mine, one that fully experienced the humiliation of the Cajun awakening. “In those days,” he says, “we were the minority of the minority. They used to whip me in school for speaking French, and it did a thing on my head.” Looking back on those experiences, he figures that “things like that have a way of turning around and making you push harder. I think it put a drive in me to prove I was just as good a human being as anybody else. I knew I was going to make it—that I had to make it.” Those sentiments are echoed in the experience of most modern-day Cajuns.

Huey’s coped with his Cajun identity by smearing it on for all it’s worth. His accent is thick as axle grease, and his conversations are laced with expressions that are kaleidoscopic in their color (though too off-color to repeat here). The tactic paid off, too. “When I was in New York, in the record world, my Cajun accent was a real asset to me. People really paid attention when I talked because it was different, something they never heard before.” Recently, though, Huey’s fortunes have declined along with those of the recording industry. Last time I talked to him, he said that the old Sir Douglas Quintet was interested in getting back together again—seems they had started playing a kind of music called “new wave.”

There are others who have found it profitable to play up the Cajun connection. One of the most popular Cajun hangouts in town is the brainchild of three Houstonians. One of them, Luke Mandela, is an

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*Many ethnic groups that settled in South Louisiana—including Africans, Germans (with surnames such as Frederick and Hurst), Spaniards (Romero, Soria), and even Arabs (Abdalla, Hauk)—now call themselves Cajuns, even though their ancestors didn’t hail from the original Acadian French colonies in Nova Scotia.*
like to be secure and have the time to do anything you’d like when you get older, wouldn’t you? Of course you would. But what do you think ends up happening to most people? They get sick, that’s what. The body gives out. You get emphysema from not taking care of your lungs; you get diabetes from being overweight for years; you get heart problems because you never exercised regularly. Then where will you be? Either bedridden, in a nursing home, or dead—that’s where.

After giving this intimidating warning, our job was to make the sale by bringing the “death point” closer to home.

One of the Michigan salesmen, a fellow named Dennis, had his own variation on the pitch. Dennis was young and innocent-looking. He came on with all the sweetness of a child, smiling away even at the end of his pitch, when he would pull a Xerox copy of a blank death certificate out of his desk drawer and set it in front of the customer. “Well, Mr. Jones,” he would sigh, “you might as well fill in your name right now, because it won’t be long before you need one of these unless you do something right away.” This was, as Dennis quaintly called it, his “killer close.”

One day Dennis brought in five pounds of animal fat wrapped in Saran Wrap and dropped it in his desk drawer. Throughout the day, whenever he had an overweight woman (“Never a man, or you’ll be running for your life!”) resisting the sale, he pulled the pack of fat out of his drawer and said, “Do you suppose you’re more than five pounds overweight? Well, this is five pounds of fat. I want you to know what it feels like. Do you realize that kind of stuff is hanging on your body right now? Do you really want that stuff hanging all over your body, or do you want to get rid of it right now?” He called this the “slob sale.” The slob sale was short-lived, however. Dennis came into the club the next day to find his desk crawling with cockroaches.

The Michigan people swiftly and surely brought about their own demise. By virtue of their ironclad edict, “produce or vamoose,” they eliminated themselves. By this time, Nautilus/Supernautilus had been the subject of a week’s worth of Marvin Zindler reports prompted by the attorney general’s Dallas investigation, and had gone through various closings. People weren’t coming in to be sold, no matter how dazzling the patter.

At this point Randy Ward was finally realizing that the business was in big trouble, and he wanted a way out. I met with him and the other managers several times to discuss solutions to the problem. Ultimately Ward broached the subject of closing Supernautilus and taking over the whole show under the name 21st Century Fitness Centers.

The decision to change the name was made, and on July 1, 1979, it went into ef-
Cajun music is the catalyst for such goings-on—an earthy mélange of whining fiddle and complex accordions, occasionally backed by a steel guitar, a snare drum, or even an alto sax. There's no music anywhere quite like Cajun music. It can be manic and syncopated in a jazzy style that seems to shed from note to note (we called it "chancy-chank" because of the sound of the accordion), or it can be mournful and wailing and waltzy in a style that seems to slide all over the musical scale. (Hank Williams' "Jambalaya" and Doug Kershaw's "Louisiana Man" are not Cajun music, though the latter could be considered a pop version of it. Classics like "Jolie Blanc," "Big Mamou," and Kershaw's "Diggy-Diggy Lo" are what we're really talking about.)

South Louisiana blacks raised in the Cajun tradition have their own form of Cajun music, called "zydeco," that has enjoyed great popularity in recent years even among young whites. While white Cajun music is closely related to traditional folk and country-and-western music, zydeco (a mispronunciation of les haricots, the French word for snap beans, from a song named "Les Haricots Sont Pas Sale") relies heavily on rhythm-and-blues influences for its uniquely funky style. One of the most popular zydeco artists is Clifton Chenier, a native of Louisiana who now lives in Houston.

There are several Cajun dance halls worth visiting. For Cajun folk music, try La Poussière (la pousse-yehr) in Breaux Bridge or the Triangle Club in Scott. Black zydeco music can be heard at Slim's Waikiki Club in Opelousas or the Blue Angel Club in Lafayette.

**Fun at the races**

Perhaps more than most other ethnic groups, Cajuns have a passion for gambling. It would not be unusual to encounter flocks of oil-rich Cajuns traipsing the streets of Las Vegas on any given night. In most little towns throughout South Louisiana, there is likely to be at least one bar or night club with a smoky back room in which a group of old Cajuns are gathered around a table playing bateau (boo-ray), a Cajun form of poker. And just as rural Texans have a passion for dogfighting, some rural Cajuns like to bet their small change on the bloody outcome of cockfights. But the most ubiquitous form of gambling, and the one most accessible to outsiders, is the horse races. Although Lafayette's Evangeline Downs (open April through Labor Day), Vinton's Delta Downs (open September 11-August 2), and New Orleans' Jefferson Downs (open March through November) are the biggest and most luxurious, there are smaller country race tracks throughout Cajunland where farmers and other rural folks gather to swap bets.

Even so, Louisiana, gambling is not as widespread as or as varied as it once was. At the age of 12, I played slot machines in South Louisiana cafés and watched crap games at numerous bars. Zealous law enforcement has virtually wiped out such diversions.

**Grand's fêtes**

Outsiders are generally amazed and delighted by the all-out carousing that accompanies most Cajun fairs and festivals, where you wipe knee deep in beer cans and have to elbow your way around couples dancing in the streets. Some 34 festivals with a Cajun theme have sprung up within the last few decades. The most popular—probably because is gets the most out-of-state publicity—is the Crawfish Festival held in Breaux Bridge in the spring of ever-numbered years. A new contender for best festival is the four-year-old Festivals Acadiens, a five-day tribute to Cajun food, music, and crafts held from September 17 to 21 this year in Lafayette. Though it's too late to catch the Festivals Acadiens or the Frog Festival in Rayne (September 19-21), there are plenty of others coming up soon:

- **Sauce Piquante Festival, October 4-5,** Raceland (south of New Orleans). Featuring turtle and chicken sauce piquante cookery, plus other Cajun foods, a boat show, pirogue races, live bands, and dancing in the streets.
- **Lagniappe on the Bayou, October 6-8,** Chauvin (south of Houma). Authentic Cajun cooking, crafts, fairs-dodo, and carnival.
- **Gumbo Festival, October 10-12,** Bridge City (near New Orleans). Featuring Creole gumbo cookery, Mr. Gumbo body-building competition, continuous live entertainment, gumbo-cooking and eating contests, and (continued on page 113)
The road into Cajun country starts not too far to the east of Houston, beyond Baytown and the I-10 signs for Liberty and Anahuac. Sixty miles out, the tiny farming community of Winnie—hometown of music entrepreneur Huey P. Meaux—sits at a crucial juncture in the prairie. Here you start noticing Cajun names on mailboxes. This is about as far into Texas as the Cajun culture penetrates before dissolving into the redneck and cowboy influences.

From Winnie, most people continue east on a boring stretch of I-10 that speeds across the flat prairies of East Texas and Southwest Louisiana, reaches a high-point past Lafayette (where it skims over the moss-festooned surface of the Atchafalaya Swamp), and cuts briefly through Baton Rouge en route to New Orleans. A much more scenic route, however, begins at Winnie where Highway 73 splits off from I-10 and zigzags across 30 miles of rice fields and wetlands into Port Arthur, the home of the largest concentration of Cajuns in Texas. From there, Highway 82 arcs over a 130-foot-high concrete span, turns south for a few miles, then cuts across a Sabine River drawbridge into the flat green wilderness of the Louisiana marshes.

Two hours out of Houston, you're on the Creole Nature Trail (Highway 27), a smooth two-lane path that follows Louisiana's marshy coastline past several wildlife sanctuaries and countless majestic groves of live oaks before turning northward (back on Highway 82) into Abbeville and the heart of Cajun country. From Abbeville, roads branch off to Lafayette and New Iberia, the twin hubs of Cajunland, and thence south along the "Evangelie Throughway" (Highway 90) past sugar cane fields, plantation houses, and occasional oil field equipment yards on the way to New Orleans.

Which route you take depends on what you want to see and how long you have to daily. Because of its proximity to Houston, Cajun country is excellent territory for a scenic, adventurous, and gastronomically rewarding weekend tour. Here are some of the things you are likely to find.

Jambalaya, crawfish pie, filé gumbo...

Some of the best Cajun restaurants in the state happen to be located in the tiny village of Henderson, just east of Lafayette on the edge of the Great Atchafalaya Swamp. The oldest and most legendary of these is Pat's, which has held its choice location overlooking Bayou Peyronnet for several decades. Coming up fast, however, are relative newcomers like Robin's (roh-bants), my choice for best restaurant in Henderson; La's (lazz-ez) and Landry's Seafood Inn, both comfortable, quality restaurants; and Collette's, a tiny converted gas station renowned for its fried catfish (though its fried crawfish tails are even better).

Lafayette, which calls itself the hub city of Acadiana, is also home to a few Cajun restaurants, among them the famed Don's Seafood and Steak House downtown. Don's, founded in the 1930s, is the great-grandfather of Cajun eatery and has sired a sizable family of some 12 seafood restaurants in Louisiana and Texas (three of them in Houston). The flagship's reputation is far more substantial than its cooking these days, having even been surpassed by its Lafayette relative, Don's Seafood Hut on Johnston Street. (Differences in quality at any of Don's restaurants can be blamed on the fact that the entire group has only one thing in common: the name "Don's" or "Landry's." The original Landry brothers, who started the Lafayette Don's, have handed out franchises to their children and former employees in helter-skelter fashion—Don's on Post Oak and Landry's Seafood Inn on the Katy Freeway are managed by children of the clan; Don's on North Belt and in Beaumont are run by former employees. The patriarchs of the Landry chain thus exert little control over menu selection or food preparation.)

Half-shell-oyster lovers will find plenty of good eating this fall at two of the best oyster bars in the state, located within two blocks of each other in Abbeville, a sleepy old town on the banks of the Vermilion River about 20 miles south of Lafayette. Conventional wisdom has it that out-of-towners prefer Dupuy's (doo-pwee) while the locals go to Black's. I prefer Black's.

Abbeville has one other great Cajun restaurant. Richard's (ree-shards) Seafood Patio, south of Highway 14 just across the river from Abbeville, offers boiled crawfish and shrimp that are brought to the table in steaming, troughlike pans. When crawfish season gets into full swing (at the end of December) it will be well worth a visit.

Farther east, boiled crabs and crawfish (in season) are the specialty at the legendary Guiding Star, on Highway 14 west of New Iberia, and at the relatively new Boiling Point, on the Evangelie Throughway between New Iberia and Lafayette. (As a matter of fact, they are the only thing on the menu at the Guiding Star.) Such specialization allows wondrous concentration of culinary talents, as the superb boiled shellfish at both of these places shows.

In the far reaches of Cajun country, Opleusas offers the talents of Sollein's (swallows) Dinner Club, specializing in crawfish dishes. In the Bayou Lafourche country—the southeasternmost segment of Cajun country near New Orleans—lies the town of Thibodaux (tieh-boh-doez) and B FormBuilder's Restaurant and Lounge, with oyster and crawfish specialties. The Yellow Bowl, on Highway 182 between Jennette and Franklin, has long been renowned for its crawfish dishes and seems to be doing well under new management.

The best boudin (a spicy Cajun meat
Rice and gravy

By now you may have noticed that nearly every Cajun dish has rice in it. The most basic dish on Cajun tables is simply rice smothered with a ton of gravy. The Cajuns have a couple of stews that are used in this way (besides the crawfish étouffée mentioned above). Fricasse (free-cah-say) is a rich brown stew made with roux and some type of fowl or wild game. Sauce piquante (sow pee-cahnt) is a thick, spicy tomato stew made with shellfish, game, or fowl and served over rice. (Shrimp sauce piquante is sometimes called shrimp creole.) R.B.

CAJUN COUNTRY

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beer-drinking contest.

Rice Festival, October 17-18, Crowley (be- tween Lafayette and Lake Charles). Parades, dancing, frog derby, fiddle and accordion contests, and rodeo.

International Acadian Festival, October 21-23, Plaquemine (south of Baton Rouge). Boat parade on Bayou Plaquemine, fireworks, Cajun cooking, arts and crafts, and carnival.

French Food Festival, October 24-26, Larose (south of New Orleans). With over 25 specialty food booths, a bouchee (animal slaughter), fais-dodo, and carnival.

Andouille Festival, October 24-26, LaPlace (west of New Orleans). Featuring gumbo and jambalayas made with andouille (a thick, salami-like sausage), music and entertainment, skydiving, exhibits.

Plaquemines Parish Fair and Orange Festival, December 6-7, Fort Jackson (at the mouth of the Mississippi River). Seafood-cooking contests, duck-calling contests, oyster-shucking contests, fais-dodo, and carnival.

Lagniappe

Lagniappe (lon-yap) is the Cajun word for “something extra.” Here are a few extra sights—alternately odd and beautiful—to spice up your trip to Louisiana.

The Great Atchafalaya Basin. Nature’s loss is our gain. When the state decided to launch a superhighway across one of the nation’s last great wilderness areas, environmental considerations were thrown to the winds; but now that the project is a fait accompli we might as well enjoy it. 1-10 between Lafayette and Baton Rouge is one of the most beautiful stretches of road in the country—25 miles of cypress trees, lakes, wetlands, and rivers. Though some consider it forbidding, the great swamp has been a cornucopia of fish, game, and fungi for many generations of Cajuns. For a closer look at the swamp, try the Atchafalaya Basin Tour Service (318-228-2411) or McBee’s Boat Tours (318-228-8523), both near Henderson. Or you can drive along the scenic levee road from Henderson to Catahoula.

Jungle Gardens at Avery Island (south of New Iberia). Avery Island is actually a salt dome rising out of the surrounding marsh; it’s connected to New Iberia by two-lane Highway 329. There, in a picturesque old factory, the McElhenny family produces its excellent Tabasco brand pepper sauce. Next door are the family’s gardens, planted by a progenitor who was in the nursery business in a big way. What might have been a mere tourist trap, however, is actually a verdant maze consisting of 200 landscaped acres of gardens, oak alleys, bird sanctuaries, and even a Buddhist shrine thrown in for lagniappe. Entry to the gardens is allowed between 9 and 5 daily ($2.50 adults; $1.50 children). Tours of the Tabasco factory are available free from 8:30 to noon and 1 to 4.

St. Martinville. This ancient village on Bayou Teche is one of the first Cajun settlements in Louisiana. It’s also the setting of the legend of Evangeline. Here you can see the St. Martin of Tours church, originally built about 1765; a statue of Evangeline; a museum of Cajun memorabilia; the Evangeline Oak, where the star-crossed lovers were supposedly reunited; and a lovely state park filled with gnarled live oaks.

The Drive-In Way of the Cross and the Alley of Oaks and Pines (Highway 96 between St. Martinville and Catahoula). The more medieval aspects of Cajun culture show themselves in a slavish devotion to mystical Catholicism, with a cultlike fixation on the Blessed Virgin Mary and the crucified Christ. Precast concrete grottoes featuring Our Lady of Lourdes have been the hottest item in Cajun lawn ornaments for years. A more recent innovation is the rural Way of the Cross: nailed to every live oak along Highway 96 is a scene from the Catholic Lenten ritual that commemorates Christ’s march to Calvary. Though it was originally designed to be walked, devotees can now drive from oak to oak through the countryside and perform the entire ritual without ever getting out of the car.

Along the same highway, by chance, is the two-mile-long Alley of Oaks and Pines, the former entrance avenue of a now-demolished plantation house. The curious legend of this scenic alley can be found on a plaque at the entrance.

Plantation Alley (Highways 182 and 90 between New Iberia and Morgan City). This route winds through sugar cane country, the broad expanse of fertile delta land that stretches from New Iberia to New Orleans. Here the plantation system was once in full flower, and there are a number of old mansions along the route, among them Shadows on the Teche, Oaklawn Manor, Albania Mansion, the Grevemberg House, Frances Plantation, and Dulcito Plantation. Though plantations are non-Cajun phenomenon (most were owned by Creoles or Anglos), it would be a shame to visit Louisiana without seeing some. Other concentrations of ante-

bellum homes can be found near St. Francisville and along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

Acadian Village (off Highway 342 south of Lafayette). For the museum minded, a collection of Cajun shacks reassembled into a village on the prairie near Lafayette. Gardens, gift shop, and tours.

The Swamp. University of Southwestern Louisiana campus, Lafayette. A Cajun university, it seems, looks much like any other university. Except for the dark little swamp that was re-created right in the heart of the campus—aligators and all.

R.B.

SOUND ADVICE

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ing an improvement. Since you’re not shopping for the first time, and are not as concerned with system prices, visit a lot of stereo stores, particularly independent dealers that carry some of the esoteric speaker brands. Some small companies offer stiff competition to the well-known names. There are definitely more great speakers on the market now than there were a decade ago.

The turntable should turn without a sound of its own. Because it is a mechanical rather than an electronic component, the turntable is the most likely candidate for replacement. It also makes the least direct difference in sound quality. The most important improvement is the low-mass tone arm. You might see a lot of advertising hype about direct drive (in which the platter is part of, or sits directly on, the motor), but it is not distinctly better than the belt drive (where the motor spindle drives the platter with a rubber wheel). If you have an old idler-drive turntable, or if your machine has a big, heavy, clunky tone arm, it’s time to move up. Low-mass arms (provided they have good bearings) track warped and deformed records better than high-mass arms. More important, low-mass arms can take advantage of today’s best cartridges.

The cartridge is the most often neglected component in your stereo system. Most customers accept the one the dealer throws in with the system. The cartridge is as important to the sound, however, as the speakers are. Although the cartridge lasts a long time, the stylus (needle) doesn’t. You’re probably overdue for a stylus replacement, so take the big step and buy a better cartridge. The cartridge that comes with many systems has a retail value of about $50 (although, with discounting, you may find it on sale for $25). There are a dozen outstanding phono cartridges in the $100 to $200 price range (which means, with discounting, $75 to $150). These include cartridges from Shure, Audio-Tech- nica, Stanton, Signet, Pickering, Empire, Sonus, Ortofon, and ADC. Even if you have a top-of-the-line cartridge from five years ago, it’s time to trade up. The improvements have been extraordinary. Relate on the advice of a competent dealer about which cartridges

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