

# Terrance Simien

↳ The Zydeco Experience

## Creole for Kidz

and

### The History of Zydeco



Art by Vergle Banks

The indigenous music of the black  
and multiracial French speaking  
Creoles of South Louisiana

*"This project addresses a long standing need in Louisiana's educational system which has regrettably ignored the critically important historical, cultural, and linguistic contributions of the states large Creole community."*

Dr. Carl Brasseaux, Professor of Louisiana History , UL Lafayette

# the past and the present



**Zydeco** is the indigenous music of the French speaking Creoles of south central and south west Louisiana. Not all agree as to the origin of the word, but **popular folklore** finds its origin in the phrase "*les haricot sont pas salé*" that translates to the "**snapbeans are not salty**", describing that the times were so hard for the rural Creoles that they could not even afford seasoning for their food. The first part of this phrase (*les haricot*) spoken very quickly would sound like the word Zydeco: "*lezadico*". **The academic interpretation and the one we favor** finds the word rooted in the **African words, "zai'co laga laga, zari'ko, zari"** meaning "**dance**".

This *multicultural* music genre is an exotic blend of many sounds and cultural influences. At the roots this music blended rural blues with jazz using religious and secular lyrics and sung only in French. There are also traces of Native American rhythms however this indigenous roots music was and still is today **anchored by the essential Afro-Caribbean rhythms of the frottoir**. The music that was once just a form of storytelling with few or no instruments has evolved into a powerful sound that is known and loved all over the world!

Zydeco music now fuses many **contemporary** sounds with the traditional: like rock n' roll, R&B, reggae, funk, soul, blues and other urban styles



of music that vary from artist to artist.

It is heard in major motion films\* and on television, advertising everything from toothpaste, automobiles and light-bulbs to medications, pizza and candy bars! A music performed for Presidents at Olympic Games and for millions of people worldwide who find it absolutely impossible to sit still while listening!

\* *Mission to Mars, Passion Fish, The Big Easy and The Waterboy* to name a few.

**The earliest form of Creole music is called juré music.** All music begins in a more basic form and evolves: Zydeco is no different. **Juré translates into jury**, whereas the Creole singer would **testify** to their audience about the hardships of their day, how much they loved their mother or God or even how their heart had been broken. Many times people would sing the **juré** gathered in a circle, which was very common in many forms of roots music here and in other countries. Parents would also sing juré style to their children, making up songs and clapping to entertain them. The **juré** music was performed with only clapping hands, stomping feet and French lyrics.

There is no real documentation as to when juré first emerged, but **it is clearly descended from the African and Native American heritage of the Creole people.** In the 1930's the great folklorist, Alan Lomax recorded this music for The Library of Congress and said it "**was the most African sound he'd found in America.**"

**O**ne of the most famous Creole musicians and one of the first to ever record Creole music (1934 in New York City) **was Amédé Ardoin, born March 11, 1898 and died Nov. 3, 1942.** Amede played accordion, wrote many songs and of course sang only in

French. The music was simply called **Creole, French Music or La-La.** In those early days the Creoles would have something they called a "**house dance**", where the furniture would be moved outside into the yard so that there would be enough room inside to have an afternoon or a late Saturday night dance. The Creoles work hard, go to church and dance to zydeco: they have been doing it this way for decades!

**A**fter the days of the house dance of the early 1900's the music took a radical turn when a young **Clifton Chenier, born June 25, 1925 in Opelousas, LA (The World Capitol of Zydeco Music)** would change the identity and the future of zydeco music forever! This "**architect**" of modern Zydeco who in the 1950's and 1960's was the first to incorporate blues and rock and roll with his indigenous Creole Zydeco music. He created his **own** style of contemporary zydeco music. **He blended the old with the new**, singing in both French and English. Clifton was **also one of the first zydeco artists to play amplified** with an entire band: drums, bass, guitar, keyboards and even horns. He was honored with a **Grammy award in 1983, for "I'm Here" on Alligator Records. Queen Ida Guillory and Rockin Sidney Simien both from Lake Charles, also won Grammy Awards in 1982 and 1984.** Clifton followed his artistic vision and he inspired generations of others to also follow theirs.

**Terrance Simien** who has also stayed true to his own artistic vision as Clifton advised him to do, "has created a sound that seamlessly blends the exotic sounds of the past with the contemporary music of today. Some say he has become the symbol of the future for the culturally rich sound of Zydeco music." \* \*House of Blues

Rockin' (Alton Rubin) Dopsie 1932-1993 ; Clifton Chenier 1925-1987 ; John Delafosse 1939-1994  
 Rockin' Sidney Simien 1938-1998 ; Boozoo Chavis 1930-2001 ; Beau Jocque 1952-1999  
 Canray Fontenot 1922-1995 ; Am?d? Ardoin 1898-1942

# Creole Roots

## multiracial and multicultural

**T**he Creoles of South central and southwest Louisiana are part of one of the most fascinating multicultural phenomenon's in North America. Our Creoles are born natives of Louisiana and have lived on the prairies west of the Mississippi River for over 300 hundred years. *The Creoles are some of the first families of Louisiana.* Official records indicate the **Simien family** was one of the earliest families to settle the area in the mid 1700's.

The Creoles are a multiracial and multicultural tapestry of African, French, Spanish, and Native American heritage whose first language is French. It is nothing short of phenomenal how so many different cultures converged (came together) to create this diverse identity. An identity that no other place on the planet shares. One that developed from old world and new world ingredients to create a new culture. **A culture that has created authentic cuisine, unique architectural styles, language and an indigenous music** which gives Louisiana an international reputation. Our Creoles have made rich, important and specific contributions to the cultural and racial identity and history of Louisiana. They shared a unique history unlike any other

blacks or free people of color did in the United States.

First of all we know that it was the **Native Americans who inhabited all of North America** before any of the Europeans discovered the New World. In Louisiana we have several sizable tribes: the **Chitimacha, Coushatta, Houma & Tunica-Biloxi.** Enter the **French** who controlled the Louisiana colony during most of the 18th century until **Spain took over in 1762.** Actually they shared it with the British. Spain got Louisiana west of the Mississippi and the British got all of it east of the river. Prior to that the Africans had already been here for awhile, for as we know the unfortunate reason why: **slavery.** Under Spanish and French rule though, the **culture of the African slaves was applauded** for its uniqueness. As a result, West African dance, gatherings, music and cuisine continued to survive openly without the **relentless oppression of the British** who controlled many of the early colonies in other parts of the U.S. **This is a pivotal point in the history of the Creoles,** Louisiana and our country. **Racial co-habitation existed** in this state in a way it did not in any other part of the country.

**This tolerance of cultural diversity contributed greatly to how the Creoles later thrived as a strong and unique multicultural presence in Louisiana.**

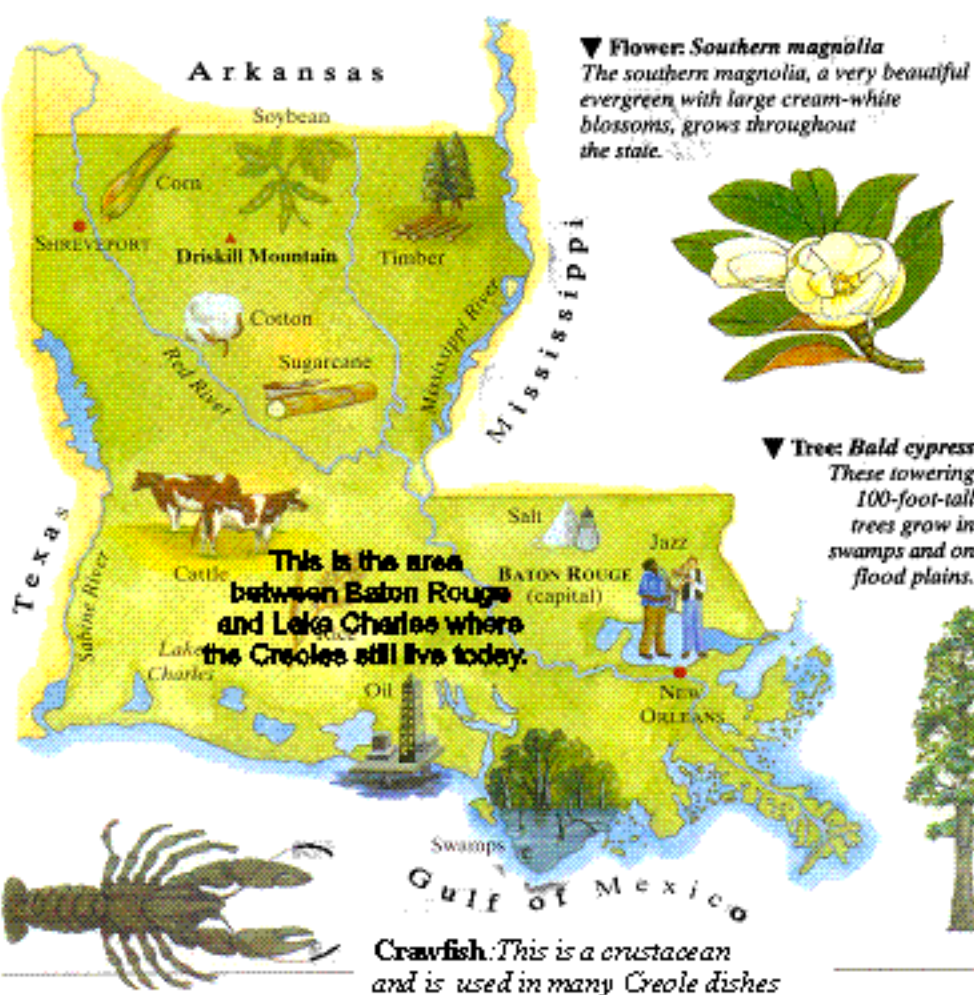
However with all this racial and cultural diversity it was also difficult to classify the Creoles into the standard categories of European immigrants or African slaves. They were neither black nor white. They existed during the colonial and antebellum periods as a **separate class,** distinct from the dominant white

or the enslaved black Africans.

By the early 18th century there were enough Creoles, or free men of color (gen de couleur libres), as they were also called, the French decided they needed special laws for them. **In 1724 the Code Noir was established.** It had many restrictions, but gave Creoles one important privilege enslaved Africans did not have: **the right to own land.** They took full advantage and began to establish their communities that gained strength, prospered and functioned as a self reliant, self contained society that in some ways still exists today.

We are now in the early 19th century when Thomas Jefferson was President. The U.S. finally got control of Louisiana by buying from France, every thing from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico from the Mississippi to the Rockies: **The Louisiana Purchase (1803).** Things changed radically for the Creoles at this time. Until the Civil War ended in 1865, the **Creoles enjoyed their separate status for nearly 150 years.** When Union officials resisted their distinctions they were forced to deny their French, Spanish and Native American lineage and give up their status in the "3 tiered" society that had defined their identity for so long. It was during this time that the US government racially identified all persons with any African ancestry as black. **This is another pivotal point in the history of Louisiana Creoles.** The Creoles accepted this reality and during **Reconstruction became the leaders of their community** as they had experienced the problems of being free in a white mans world, were better educated, were property owners and postured to be leaders of their new community.

Today though, with all that we now know about **the history of the Creoles, the scope and definition of both the word and the concept has evolved even further.** In Louisiana, **Creole is defined as an ethnicity and culture.** Culture really has no color, but as an ethnic group with multiracial distinctions, the color palette of our Creoles range from white to black and all shades in between! Our Creoles have helped shape the cultural identity of this state and **we are very proud of their unique heritage!**



▼ **Flower: Southern magnolia**  
The southern magnolia, a very beautiful evergreen with large cream-white blossoms, grows throughout the state.



▼ **Tree: Bald cypress**  
These towering 100-foot-tall trees grow in swamps and on flood plains.



▼ **Crawfish:** This is a crustacean and is used in many Creole dishes

# Fact Sheet

you will become more aware

Did you know? Did you know? Did you know?

This about the rubboard?

That Creoles have?

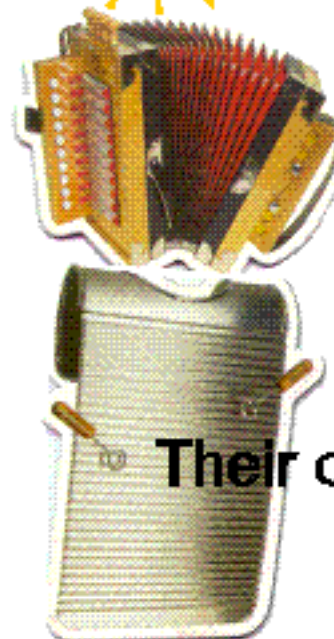
Their own Creole Heritage Day

Frottoir is the French word for this instrument that was designed especially for this genre of music and it means "friction strip"

In 2002 this unique percussion instrument was entered into the permanent collection at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, DC

The Frottoir is now regarded as one of the first percussion instruments created in the U.S. as most instruments originally came from other countries.

In addition to all the zydeco bands using the rubboard, several popular rock and country bands like ZZ Top, Shania Twain & Bruce Springsteen have also used this instrument in their music



In 1991 Governor Buddy Roemer proclaimed January 22nd as Creole Heritage Day in Louisiana. Since then 22 other states and 36 cities have also proclaimed this date Creole Heritage Day

Their own Creole Heritage Center

Established in 1998, the Louisiana Creole Heritage Center at Northwestern University in Natchitoches has a partnership with Tulane University in New Orleans. They are one of the most respected leaders of the Creole preservation effort in this state and in the country. Visit them at [www.nsula.edu/creole](http://www.nsula.edu/creole)

Gumbo is a world famous Creole dish. It comes from the African word for okra

Did you know that May is ZAM, Zydeco Appreciation Month in Louisiana?

They have their own flag



The Creole Flag  
Designed by Pete Bergeron  
for Creole, Inc.

The fleur de lis represents their French heritage. The lower and upper right both represent the African heritage of Creoles with the flag of Mali and the star of Senegal. The Spanish Heritage is represented by the Tower of Castille all connected by a cross signifies their deep Christian faith

Mardi Gras is French and it translates to "Fat Tuesday", Mardi-Tuesday Gras-Fat.

In medieval France, a fatted bull was butchered the day before Lent, a period in which eating meat was forbidden. Today many Creoles still make this sacrifice for Lent. They may also give up other things they enjoy eating as well. Some of the children give up candy for the Lenten period that lasts 40 days from Ash Wednesday until Easter Sunday.

The colours of Mardi Gras:  
purple=justice  
green=faith  
gold=power

The accordion provides the melody in zydeco music. It was brought to America by the Germans and sold to the Creole after the Civil War.

In Zydeco music the chromatic and diatonic button accordions, as well as the piano key are all commonly played in zydeco. The accordion is an old world instrument that is played in folk and roots music all over the world: Russia, Germany, Italy, Poland, Brazil (Forro) and in the Cajun and Cajunto music of the US

Or this about the accordion?

# Resource and Activities for teachers, parents and students

## Write a Review

Imagine you are the music critic for your local or school newspaper. You have been assigned to review this concert or the CD if your class has one. You have brushed up on the career of Terrance Simien and know more than you ever did about zydeco music!

In fact you have an advantage because you know a little something about Creole heritage as well.

Be very honest as you write your opinions about the concert or the CD. Let the reader know about the instruments that were played or what the song lyrics meant to you. How did the show make you feel? Which songs were your favorite?



## To make a Rubboard

Using a legal size file folder, cut off the larger side and fold into approximately 6 one inch pleats. Turn paper over for the next pleat and use the previous one as a guide, etc. Leave 2 inches at the top to decorate with your name, your dog's name or the ZYDECO name! Use magic markers, jewels or anything you have on hand to decorate it. Punch two holes at the top corners to lace string through so it hangs from around your neck. Play your frottoir with the handles of plastic spoons



The reference materials used for this study guide were carefully selected. There has been little written specifically on the subject of the Creole culture and the few that have been published about the music have been written by those from outside the culture and the genre. We urge you to exercise caution as well when researching these subjects on the Internet because as you know there is a lot of questionable material out there on the information highway! We do however, sincerely appreciate your interest and your enthusiasm for the music, the culture and the upcoming performance. If we can be of further assistance in helping you prepare for the performance please be sure to contact us.

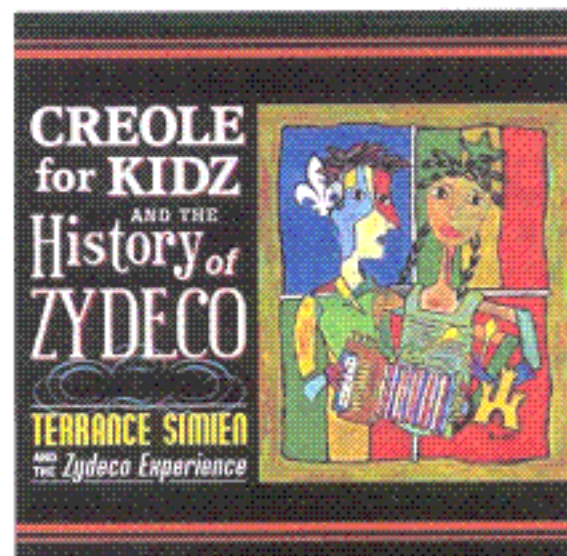
## Recommended reading

*Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country*  
Dr. Carl Brasseaux,  
University Press of Mississippi, 1994

*Africans in Colonial Louisiana*,  
Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Louisiana State  
University Press, 1992

## Design a Flag

If your family or community had a flag that represented them, like the Creoles do, how do you think yours would look? Would there possibly be a cow or a horse if you came from a family that raised cattle? Or possibly another animal, bird or fish that was important to your family or community in some way? Would there be a mountain, forest or lake depending on where your family settled? Would there be a musical instrument indigenous to your culture? Is there a person who is really important to your family that would be featured? Get creative and really think about those things that represent your family, your history and your heritage!



## Creole for Kidz and the History of Zydeco CD

This is a wonderful tool for preparing your students for the concert. The songs are connected by narration tracks that offers more educational content for the students. We are told that many, upon hearing this music, want to hear very little of anything else after that! So make those little rascals happy and get your own classroom copy. 5 -page study guide included. CD available at the website

# A Glossary of Creole & Zydeco Terms

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**Creole:** A native Creole of South Central and Southwest Louisiana is considered a multicultural and multiracial African American (their birth certificates indicate their race as black), but many Creoles consider themselves mulatto-a person of mixed race. Their heritage is a rich tapestry of African, French, Spanish and Native American ancestry. The word Creole is French, that was borrowed from the Spanish word Criollo that was taken from the Portuguese word Crioulo. Experts say the Creole's are part of one of the most complex rural sub-culture in North America. The Creoles here are often referred to as Creoles of Color or black Creoles. During the Code Noir period (1724-1865) they were called "gens de couleur libre" (free men of color). The Afro-Creole culture of Louisiana shares an important and proud history with the west African countries of Mali and Senegal as shown on the Creole Flag. Research has indicated that the majority of the Africans who settled Louisiana were from Senegal and Mali.

**The Creole Flag of South Louisiana:** Designed in 1981. The West African heritage (Afro-Creole) is represented by the Star of Senegal flag and the Mali Republic tri colored flag. It also illustrates the French heritage of the Creoles with the Fleur De Lis and the Spanish Colonial heritage is represented by The Tower of Castille.

**Zydeco:** The indigenous music of the black and multiracial French speaking Creoles of Louisiana. The origin of the word is African. Since there are 100 African languages all of these mean dance: Zari, zariko, zodico and zai'co laga laga. Common folklore tells the tale that the word is a language corruption of the phrase "les haricot sont pas sale", meaning the snap beans are not salty that described the hardships of the rural Creoles during the early 1900's when times were tough that they could not afford to salt their food. Spoken very quickly, "les haricot" could sound like the word zydeco. In 2007 a Grammy category for Zydeco music was established after many years of advocating and educating by Terrance and Cynthia Simien.

**Accordion:** The accordion was invented in 1829 and the word is derived from the German word "akkord" which means "agreement or harmony." The button (diatonic and chromatic) and the piano key accordions are both used in zydeco music. The accordion is an old world instrument and used in native, indigenous and folk music all over the globe. The German immigrants introduced it to the Creoles in Louisiana after the Civil War.

**The Zydeco Rubboard (also known as the Frottoir)** This percussion instrument was designed and created in 1946 specifically for Zydeco music. It is fashioned after the washboard that was used to wash clothing and then later used in early American roots music. The rubboard is part of the percussion collection at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, DC as one of the few percussion instruments that originate in the United States as most musical instruments originate in other countries. The French word for rubboard is frottoir. It means friction strip (like on a box of matches) or scrubbing brush.

**Gumbo:** This comes from the African word for "okra". It is a stew that was once thickened by only using okra by the Africans who settled in Louisiana. It is a world famous Creole culinary favorite and is also thickened with "roux", a flour and oil mixture. There are many famous culinary classics that were created by the Creoles.

**Mardi Gras:** This is a holiday that is celebrated before Ash Wednesday and Lent by Catholics mainly in Brazil and Louisiana. It is a French phrase and translates to "Fat Tuesday" in English. Mardi: Tuesday and Gras: Fat. The traditional colours of Mardi Gras are purple, green and gold. They symbolize justice (purple), faith (green) and power. (gold). The reason it is called Fat Tuesday is because in medieval France a fattened bull was butchered the day before Lent for the people to feast on one last time before Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent, when eating meat was forbidden.

**Louisiana:** Nickname, The Pelican State, became the 18th state to enter the Union in 1812. It became an organized territory in 1804 after the Louisiana Purchase (from France) in 1803. It is located in the "Deep South" of the United States and it borders the Gulf of Mexico, (south) Texas, (west) Arkansas (north) and Mississippi (east). The capital is Baton Rouge. The state flower is the fragrant Magnolia, the official tree is the bald cypress and the state bird is the pelican. The population is 4.5 million. Top industries are natural gas, salt, petroleum and sulfur production. Louisiana produces large crops of sweet potatoes, sugar cane, rice (in the same ponds where they raise crawfish) and pecans. Tourism is the second largest industry and millions visit our state each year for our Creole cuisine and to experience our music like our New Orleans jazz and funk, gospel and blues music as well as our infectious, internationally known and loved ZYDECO!