

Louisiana Sounds

State of Louisiana in America's South has one of the most diverse and influential, indigenous musical histories in all of America. Its four leading cities have each put their distinct imprint on the development of American popular music throughout the 20th Century. New Orleans, once the state capital gave us jazz, originally termed Dixieland and a distinctive and wholly original form of R&B. Baton Rouge the capital today housed numerous blues singers and musicians whose output influenced musicians around the world. Shreveport was home to The Louisiana Hayride, where Elvis got his first break, the second most important C&W radio show after Nashville's 'Grand 'Ol Opry'. Shreveport was also home to Stan Lewis who's distribution company handled all the greatest independent labels and who was instrumental in finding talent for labels like Chess in Chicago and who eventually formed his own record labels, Jewel, Paula & Ronn. Lake Charles was where Eddie Shuler's Goldband Records was based and where Cajun music was recorded and swamp pop, as it was briefly called, was incubated.

Our overview of Louisiana music concentrates on Louisiana born artists and on hits that became nationally and internationally popular and we have taken a couple of liberties involving tracks that might not on first glance immediately bring Louisiana to mind. This is because geographically Louisiana borders Texas and the Texas border is not that far from Lake Charles and there was some business and artistic interaction mostly due to the existence of recording studios or record labels therefore certain Louisiana records may have been recorded there. The musical mix of South Louisiana where Lake Charles, Baton Rouge and Louisiana rest has an interesting history and rather than present potted biographies on each of our artists all of which you can easily find on the internet we shall concentrate on the history.

The state was named after Louis XIV of France and when the territory was claimed for France in the 16th Century. It was called La Louisiane – “the Land Of Louis”. Until the arrival of Europeans Native Americans had populated it for centuries. The original territory stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to within the southwestern border of Canada and included numerous mid western states of America. The Spaniards originally discovered the land in the 1540s but the French claimed it in 1682. During the 18th Century France yielded much of it to Britain and Spain and in 1800 Napoleon Bonaparte acquired the Spanish territory. For many years the territory brought thousands of African slaves there and in 1803 when France sold Louisiana to the United States the slave trade expanded dramatically. Soon the state had a complex population consisting of French, Spanish and English immigrants and its huge slave population this ultimately led to its unique blend of popular music. Into this mix came the Arcadians who left the Canadian territory to escape persecution by the British, a process that began in 1710, and settled across South Louisiana to be under French rule. The Cajuns as they were known brought with them their music, which was based on a mixture of French, Scottish and English folk roots in which the fiddle was the leading instrument. With the advent of recording in the early 20th Century this music became known as Cajun. The Creoles, South Louisiana residents of mixed race also performed a style of Cajun music, which eventually became known as Zydeco, which is based on various African words meaning ‘to dance’.

By the 50s all of this diverse music had evolved into various commercially successful strands. New Orleans R&B, Swamp blues, Swamp pop, country and zydeco. Across the state, labels, studios and distributors proliferated, all supplying the populace with the sounds that it craved. The population of Louisiana was big enough to support many artists in all genres with recordings that were often sizeable hits within the state thanks to the jukeboxes, nightclubs and radio stations that proliferated. There were many more local hit records than the national hits we have included.

This collection is programmed chronologically and these are some of the biggest and most influential hits that broke out of the state. The different genres are therefore spread across the fifty tracks and this is a rough guide to what they represent.

NEW ORLEANS

“Bon Ton Roula” (Let The Good Times Roll”) by Clarence Garlow was the first Zydeco record to chart in 1949. Garlow was born near Lake Charles but his hit was recorded by and released on Macy's a label based in Texas. “New Bon Ton Roula” was recorded in New Orleans in 1953 for Aladdin Records. His later recordings were for the smaller Louisiana labels like those owned by Eddie Shuler and Jay Miller who feature later in these notes. Other New Orleans recordings are Sugarboy Crawford's original version of “Iko Iko”, Guitar Slim's massive hit “The Things That I Used To Do”, The Hawketts, who featured the teenage Art Neville of The Neville Brothers with a song that is still played religiously in the city during Mardi Gras 56 years after it was recorded. Bobby Charles was a talented songwriter who worshipped Fats Domino for whom he wrote “Walking To New Orleans” but most famously wrote and recorded the song that became a worldwide hit for Bill Haley. Bobby's early work became one of the key influences over Swamp pop. Earl King recorded his blues classic in the city for Johnny Vincent who owned Ace Records in Jackson Mississippi and who also recorded Huey Smith, Frankie Ford and Jimmy Clanton in

the city. Fats Domino, Clarence Henry and Smiley Lewis were big New Orleans artists who either enjoyed or contributed to major pop hits. Big Boy Myles was a journeyman New Orleans singer beginning in doo wop groups before taking the solo route but this recording of "New Orleans" is not the original, that being by Gary 'US Bonds' but it was appropriate that it should receive a New Orleans cover.

CAJUN/ZYDECO

After Clarence Garlow's hit the next major zydeco crossover was via accordion playing Boozoo Chavis. Former Cajun musician Eddie Shuler who owned Goldband Studios and record label in Lake Charles produced the disc and after leasing it to Los Angeles based Imperial Records saw it move over 100,000 copies, a major feat for anyone in 1954. Whilst undoubtedly the King of Zydeco, Clifton Chenier, who also played accordion never had a chart hit but did enjoy many huge regional sellers. Louisiana Stomp" and ""Country Bred" were from his first recording session in 1954 in Lake Charles. The session was produced by J.R.Fulbright an African American label owner from Los Angeles who released the disc on his Elko label before he too was forced to lease it to Imperial. Chenier continued to be a giant of zydeco on an international level until ill health curtailed his touring and recording in 1979. "Sugar Bee" by Cleveland Crochet was an unlikely hit in 1960 and was again the result of an Eddie Shuler session. Because he was one of the few Cajun artists who could sing rock and roll he enjoyed the first Cajun record to ever grace the pop charts. Jimmy C. Newman and Rusty & Doug Kershaw represent the ultimate Cajun/country blending and led a serious revival in this new hybrid music during the late 50s.

SWAMP BLUES

Jay Miller was based in Crowley, Louisiana and owned a recording studio and a handful of labels beginning with Fais Do Do. Miller was another former Cajun musician and started his label in 1946 but used Cosimo Matassa's studio in New Orleans where most of our New Orleans hits were also recorded. By the early 50s Miller moved away from the Cajun sounds and concentrated on the new blend of country and Cajun, the popularity of which was spurred by Shreveport's "Louisiana Hayride Show". In addition he was persuaded by the success of the blues artist Lightnin' Slim who he recorded in 1954 to pay more attention the down-home blues sounds that were then popular. His geographical situation helped being close to Baton Rouge, which had a large musically hungry black population. After some success with local releases Miller realised he needed a bigger label to really move his blues recordings and he signed over much of his production work to the Nashville Excello label owned by Ernie Young who also owned the mail order company, Ernie's Record Mart. Many of Jay Miller's productions became internationally popular and his style of blues, by now being recorded in his own studios became known as swamp blues. Its biggest star was probably Slim Harpo who had his hits covered by The Rolling Stones and other rock acts. In addition to the Slim's Lighnin' and Harpo we feature Lazy Lester and Charles Sheffield.

SWAMP POP/ROCKABILLY

The term 'Swamp Pop' was actually coined by English record collectors to describe the records coming out of southern Louisiana in the late 50s and early 60s. Eventually the term caught on with the locals and it is now quite acceptable in the music's homeland. The music is a blend of Cajun music and the lilting lazy feel of New Orleans R&B as exemplified by many of Fats Domino's hits. Lloyd Price's 1957 hit was inspired by the sound too. Although signed to Jackson, Mississippi based Ace Records and recorded in New Orleans, Jimmy Clanton is the epitome of swamp pop as is Rod Bernard who was recorded by Floyd Soileau for his Jin label. In true fashion when the disc took off it had to be leased to the larger Chess label in Chicago. All of these ex Cajun musician/producers knew how they wanted Louisiana rock and roll to sound and that was how swamp pop came to be. Jay Miller was responsible for Warren Storm and Al Terry but it was Eddie Shuler who really hit pay dirt with the million selling "Sea Of Love" and with the showband Cookie & The Cupcakes whose "Mathilda" is probably the greatest of all swamp pop hits. Texan, Jivin Gene came via Texas based producer, Huey P. Meaux to Floyd Soileau's Jin label before being licensed to the major Mercury label. Eventually Meaux and Soileau formed a partnership and Joe Barry was the first result, which was licensed to Mercury's new label Smash where it became just that. Baton Rouge born John Fred had a major international pop hit in the 60s with "Judy In Disguise" on Stan Lewis' Shreveport label Paula but first charted in 1959 with "Shirley".

The huge hit by the Big Bopper and the two Johnny Preston hits really have no place in this collection. They are not Louisiana records but they do help to illustrate the activity that was happening musically during these times in the Southern states. J.P Richardson aka The Big Bopper was a DJ in Beaumont, Texas not far from the Louisiana border. These hits were also on Mercury and were licensed for the label by Shelby Singleton who also acquired the Jivin' Gene and Phil Phillips hits for the label. Johnny Preston was like Jivin' Gene born in Port Arthur and was also associated with many other producers, musicians and artists who were a part of the Louisiana musical heritage and these three discs are generally included in all references to South Louisiana chart hits.

Acknowledgements

“South To Louisiana” – John Broven (Pelican 1983)
Joel Whitburn’s Top Pop Singles (Record Research/Billboard)