

Zydeco King & His Red Hat Clifton Chenier. Louisiana Band

BY ART FEIN

Art Fein has been described by the L.A. Times as a "rockabilly activist." Maybe that explains the crazy t-shirt he wears around Hollywood — Free the Tennessee Three.

The story's the same wherever Clifton Chenier & His Red Hot Louisiana Band are playing, but my first encounter with him was at a club frequented by college students, in the hills outside of Santa Cruz, California.

The Club Zayante was alive. The walls were pulsating, and the shadows cast on the steamed-up windows — in summer! — showed packed-in bodies dancing wildly to a strange, heavy-beat, foreign-but-familiar music.

I turned to the guy next to me and said "Who is this?"

He grinned and slapped me on the back like it was a fraternity initiation, removed the beer bottle from his mouth and looked at me like I was the one from Mars and said, "Just the world's greatest rock & roll band, that's all."

I soon realized I had been leading an incomplete life before that night. When I got inside I could hear this sweet *unusual* music better, but I couldn't understand the words. And what was that instrument carrying the melody? I squeezed up front and got the answer: the room was under the control of a gold-toothed black man playing an accordion and singing in French! "We're from Louisiana," he boomed out between songs, "where even the crawfish got soul!"

You don't hear much about rock & roll accordions today. In fact, you never did. In the history of rock & roll no instrument has been as scorned as the lowly squeeze-box.

Put one in the hands of Clifton Chenier, though, and it's obvious that the problem hasn't been the instrument — it's been who's playing it. (Accordions appeared in the bands of Bill Haley in the 1950's, and Gary Lewis & the Playboys in the 1960's but it wasn't until the Seventies that musicians like the Band, Ry Cooder, and Ponty Bone of the Joe Ely band returned a semblance of respect to it.)

When Clifton plays, it's a little of this and a little of that — swamp music, rhythm & blues, country blues, Cajun — all so distinctly Rock & Roll with a capital R that none other than Mick Jagger (of the *other* "world's greatest rock & roll band") recently booked him into Carnegie Hall in New York.

He knew Clifton was great: Jagger has been seen digging Chenier performances in the Watts district of Los Angeles. He figured it was time other people did too.

Clifton was no overnight success. The ennobling hand of Jagger was late in coming.

Clifton Chenier was born in 1925 in Opelousas, Louisiana. His childhood accordion-playing was influenced by his white Cajun neighbors, as well as by pioneering black accordionist Amade Ardoin. Incorporating these sounds with the new, emerging style of rhythm & blues, he was instrumental in developing a new music called Zydeco.

The word, like Cajun, is a simplification like many coined by Louisianans. Cajun is short for "Acadian," the area from which

the Cajuns emigrated. Zydeco is taken from a popular French folk song whose first words were "les haricots."

Musically, Zydeco is French-Cajun American rock & roll and rhythm & blues, sung by blacks. Although its origin is the swamplands of the American south, its popularity extends around the world, and that popularity goes double for Clifton, who bills himself The King of the South and wears a crown to prove it.

A normal year's concertizing will take him to 3 areas: a route between Lafayette, Louisiana, New Orleans, and Central Texas; the California coastline, especially the San Francisco area; and Italy, France, or Switzerland!

To Europeans, the sight of this proud, weathered, mystical black man with a crown and a gold tooth singing rhythm & blues in French is, well... remarkable.

As it is here.

"Put on your dancing shoes," Chenier warns at the start of a set. Indeed, so many rhythms run irresistible crossing patterns, Zydeco makes sitting still impossible. Once heard, Zydeco isn't easily forgotten.

In Chenier's group, the Red Hot Louisiana Band, there's the massive, unrelenting drumming of massive Robert St. Judy. Coupled to it are the hypnotic, indescribable rhythms of Clifton's brother Cleveland Chenier, playing a self-designed neck-held metal washboard, stroked by a handful of bottle-openers(!) And then there's the man himself, who for many years stood and bobbed to the music but today is sitting, presiding regally over the proceedings, singing as his fingers dance up and down his upright keyboard.

Other band members vary, but there's usually a saxophone, a guitar and a bass, and perhaps an organ. Although the Chenier brothers occasionally perform as a duo, it is important to see him with his whole band.

Chenier's road work has been cut down after he fell seriously ill last year from complications brought on by diabetes. "Don't worry about me," Chenier



But since most of us *can't* live there, there are ample Clifton Chenier records to choose from. He's recorded for a lot of labels, but we'd recommend these: *Clifton Chenier "Live"* — (Arhoolie 1059) — Recorded at a Zydeco dance in Richmond, California in 1971. Play it for your friends and see if they can figure out what it is — if they'll stop dancing to talk. *Black Snake Blues* — (Arhoolie 1038) — One of his best studio efforts, with powerful drumming by St. Judy. *Bayou Blues* — (Specialty SPS 2139) — Recorded back in 1957 when someone at the label must have figured "Little Richard's a star — this guy with the accordion is weird too."

But, face it — every Clifton Chenier record is worthwhile. If your local record shop isn't hip enough to have a Clifton Chenier section (they exist!) you can order them through the Phonolog directory.

assured me after a recent operation, "I'll be out playing soon. Ain't no little thing like this gonna keep me down." He now plays an electric accordion that doesn't need squeezing. The band now takes a break after 2 hours instead of playing 4 hours straight through. All this points, also, to a reduced touring schedule which may make seeing him difficult, except for those who live in the Louisiana bayous, California, or Europe!