

Todd Mouton is a native of South Louisiana and a longtime writer, record and concert producer, and advocate for a cultural economy. He has received numerous awards for his work in non-profit agencies, including the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Public Humanities Programming Award, a Hearbeat Award from *Offbeat* magazine, a Louisiana Governor's Arts Award, and numerous Addy Awards.

RW: What region does Lafayette belong to? What makes the music scene around there so unique?

TM: We're talking about south Louisiana, from New Orleans all the way across. We inherit a lot of music down here, you're born with it. There's a lot of repertoire to choose from, including blues, jazz, Cajun, and Creole music, there are traditions to be part of. A lot of the music is social. It's really designed just for getting people together. It's OK to call a lot of it "background music. It's loud for a reason, because you're expected you to talk, drink, dance, and court, and do all the things you do over it. It creates a framework and soundtrack for the different ways of living and the rituals of just being a human, a social being.

You've got an inherited repertoire, this social basis, and then, more recently, this tourism phenomenon, which is everything from casual folks dropping in and just wanting to get a little skim-the-surface kind of experience, to people who are looking for a transformational experience. It's changed their lives. It helps better them. I've seen a lot of middle aged people become attracted to what we have down here. The music's attached to these things.

TM: How did you get involved doing cultural work?

TM: I was a music journalist for about 10 years. I had a radio show playing all varieties of Louisiana music, including music about Louisiana or influenced by it. It was an interesting time, there were still record labels, and so there were opportunities for bands to record music and get distribution. There were opportunities for journalists, radio stations, and the like. There were a lot of touring opportunities. There were more and more festivals starting up particularly the U.S., and a lot of them featured roots music. There were also blues bars booking a lot of the zydeco bands in the 80s and 90s. A lot of it was piano-accordion based and more bluesy in its style. There were many little pathways where folks could get out and build careers. There was a vibrant sort of folk singing and regional indigenous scene, which is partially because of the geographic isolation of our region for so many years. These pathways led to new audiences. We also had an opportunity for people including professional musicians to come visit, and we had people writing new songs and creating new music.

There were a lot of things at that point that got me interested in trying to connect those little slivers and to try to make a little bit bigger piece of the pie. And I think that today, a lot of those conditions have changed, but the dynamics are still similar. There are places in there where folks can build careers as an entrepreneur, as artists, as performers, entertainers, and touring musicians. We play a lot of accordions, sing a lot in French, and play fiddle, but I think that the opportunities are not different from other regional music scenes and other cultures. We just have gotten a lot of press and done pretty well with it over the last few years, In the last few decades the tourism community has jumped on the bandwagon and recognized that folks love the food down here, but the music kind of goes with the food, and it's constructed similarly from a wide range of influences and component parts.

RW: After the collapse of the record business, what are musicians doing as entrepreneurs to make a living

TM: One of the challenges we have here locally now is that there are about six or seven regular free concert series and several free festivals. So on the one hand, it's tough to charge a cover and go play in a club when you're going to be exposed to folks basically for free several times a year. But on the other hand, that's a lot of opportunities to get out in front of people, especially for up-and-coming bands. The Internet killed the record industry, but now these musicians can teach lessons via video conferencing technologies like Skype, can host folks in their home studios, and offer music camps and intensive workshops.

The culture has evolved and matured. There used to be a time a couple of decades ago where, whenever a musician was booked for a words-and-music style presentation, you would typically hire a facilitator or presenter or interviewer or host. It didn't take very long for these bright artists to figure out how to tell their own stories and put the history together with lecture demonstrations and stuff like that. Academia is another place where artists are finding opportunities to present their work and connect with audiences, like in the traditional music program at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and in other places.

It's definitely fragmented and arguably harder for artists than it was for someone like Beau Jacque during the heyday of Rounder Records and Cajun and zydeco music in the late 80s and early 90s. But by the same token, Rounder was putting out maybe 10 or 12 records in south Louisiana every year or two, but less than half of those bands were touring regularly. There's always going to be this aspect of trying to climb to the top of the pile. How do you get there? You can send an email to anybody in the world, but will they see it? Will they open and answer it? It's still a tricky business.

RW: Some people are saying that we're moving from a products and services economy to one offering experiences and transformation. You mentioned that some middle-aged people are interested in workshops and camps. Do you think that that's a direction to go in the future for people who play music with a strong cultural tradition?

TM: I think definitely there's an opportunity there. I think those are the fundamental principles of why people come here. If you want to have an experience, stop in Louisiana. We have the landscape that gave rise to the food, and the people and cultures that gave rise to the music. I'm not a fan of the word "authentic" because it's overused, but I think that there's a great opportunity for people to visit a place like south Louisiana and have a very real and meaningful experience. These traditions are real, and many people do incorporate them by learning some dance steps, catching these bands out on the road, and visiting Louisiana regularly. There are definitely thousands and thousands of people who support this culture in a lot of different ways, for natives, but particularly for non-natives. I think there is sort of a transformational or rebirth experience where you connect with this music and find meaning out of these old melodies and these rhythms that have been tested for years.

I think there's definitely an opportunity for this music to stick around. First of all, even here locally, you'll see bands come and go. You'll see crowds come and go. So many people today are starting into their phones instead of observing or participating in what's going on around them. We're offering an opportunity to turn off their devices and connect. We live in a place where

dance is really important, and there are plenty of bands and dancers around here. There may be less than there used to be, and there may be fewer real dance halls, but the music is generally designed to dance to and socialize to. That's kind of our bedrock foundation. The cool thing is obviously that, from this base of traditional music, artists can go anywhere they want to in terms of improvisation, adaptation, and coming up with new things.

RW: Why are people so happy in south central Louisiana? My understanding is that the Cajuns settled there after getting repeatedly kicked out of other places, in the swamp where people left them alone. Louisiana is towards the bottom of some desirable things and towards the top on some undesirable ones, but I've seen surveys that say the people there report high levels of happiness.

TM: I believe you've got to consider everything when you look at something, and I think that you could certainly argue that people in south Louisiana have been through a lot, and in response to the hard things they've endured have adopted a little bit of a devil-may-care attitude. But I think that the dynamic that's probably much more dominant is that we're down here at the mouth of a great river, and a great plentiful estuarine land where there's all sorts of seafood. Yeah, it's hot, and you have terrible mosquitoes and things like that. But this is a place where a lot of things are coming and going. There's a lot of cultural sharing, a lot of things that come in and out. It's not a really buttoned-up culture. People are going to be sitting on the porch, talking slowly, drinking cold beverages while getting to know one another, and I think this celebratory aspect is definitely something that we have somehow come up with. Whether that's a defiance against hard times, a "I just don't care anymore" attitude, a "Thank God we're finally here" attitude, or "Wow! Can you believe all the cool stuff that is here and going on around us?" process, I think that we've got all that working for us. It's a result of being coastal, at the mouth of the river, with lots of commerce and exchange of ideas and concepts.

I think that culture's an additive process. If you smell something good being cooked in your neighbor's yard, you're going to probably go find out what it is, and if you like it, you're going to make it. And similarly, if you hear a lick or a rhythm or a melody, you're going to make that your own. I think it's like a pretty powerful stock or broth, it's very rich and has certain characteristics. Within that, there's not just joy. There's pain and heartbreak and sorrow, and the music and its traditions are not only what sustains the culture and society but also the individuals through the hard times. There's a real sense of identity and a sense of meaning, and the music can bring that to everyone in every setting. Down here we're lucky that it's very pervasive.

RW: I think live music and dance evolve together. Bands observe what gets the audience on their feet and makes them happy, and naturally do more of that. It's something that is missing in the music produced today in studios, where you have teams of people putting together grooves and laying lyrics on top without ever seeing the audience. What connection do you see between the style of dance and the style of music in south Louisiana?

TM: Most of the dancing that we have in south Louisiana, especially down around south central Louisiana, is couples dancing. Back in the day, the dance hall was the place where you might meet a perspective boyfriend or girlfriend, courtship rituals would take place, and parents would watch you. There'd be little kids, there would be a whole family setting. There's a little bit of pride in learning how to dance, coming up with your own style, and then yeah, once you're out there on the dance floor, it's an instant feedback loop for the band and the musicians.

A great simple example is two of the most popular forms of Cajun music are the waltz and the two-step—one is slower and in a 3/4 time signature, and the other is faster and in 4. The order of songs that a band will play will depend on the audience. In some dance halls, you'll play two-step, two-step, waltz, two-step, two-step, waltz, and in others you'll play waltz, waltz, waltz, two-step. That's partially based on the place and how it's normally set up, but it's also depends on what happens when the crowd gets out there, and whether they want more fast or slow songs. Some people say there are only two songs in Cajun music—the fast one and the slow one. Sometimes the audience is caught up in the moment and just want more of a particular thing, and someone will simply request more fast music. But there is a rich repertoire of tunes and melodies, and people really do know them. There's a ton of songs, and there are a lot of new songs that are continuing to come out even just in those two song forms. Some that had been lost that are being revived thanks to recordings.

RW: How did you choose the era to focus on in your book?

TM: My book was an attempt to memorialize the baby boomer wave, the Buckwheat Zydecos, Zachary Richards, Sonny Landreths, and Michael Doucets, and some that came before and some that came after. They were a generation that came out of the 60s, who discovered or rediscovered their roots. It was a form of rebellion. In the book, Michael Doucet says he got into the music because he liked it. because it wasn't popular. It was kind of the folk scene of the 60s. So these baby boomers who left such a big imprint on the culture globally in so many ways, they came in and really did a lot with the music. The purpose of the book was just to show that it's all connected and everybody has a piece of it. You might read about this Dewey Balfa person in one chapter, and later you might read about this woman, Christine Balfa and realize that, "Oh, gosh, they're related. And he was a big influence on this particular person." And she actually was an influence on this particular person. There's a landscape beyond the book. The book was sort of like a core sample.

That is the process of culture. It's just like good old cells and organisms just piling onto each other and connecting and reconnecting. There are cycles and waves. From what I see it seems to still be going on. Whether it's millennials or X'ers, or whatever we've got out there, there are new bands forming and putting music together. There are new recordings coming out. There's new material in French, new material in English. I don't know if we'll ever get to the point where people feel like we're not in danger of losing our connection to all this music in this past, but I think that for many years now, people have felt like it's in pretty good hands, and the ecosystem around it is fairly healthy. In the 80s and early 90s there were maybe 40, 50 musicians from Lafayette out on the road touring in bands on a regular basis. That number might be slightly smaller now, but it seems as though there's more bands here at home putting out their own records, playing around, touring occasionally, and flying out for the occasional festival or workshop. I think a lot of it is that we live in a fairly enlightened age fueled by the Internet and having access to information, but there's still a need to organize the information and sequence it to reach a goal.

RW: It's good to see musicians taking control of their own business.

TM: Yeah. It's good you're writing this book. The world needs it. There's a lot of great historical material locked up the folk music archives at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Unfortunately no one got the musicians to sign release forms when the recordings were made. There are a lot of resources on the music industry out there, but someone's got to sequence it

and explain to you how to go from A to Z. The good news is that it's as good a time as any to be an artist, probably better in a lot of ways.

RW: Why is that?

TM: Because of the tools to record, mix, master, and distribute your music. You have to get your vision out there and connect with people that share it and want to support it. Those are the only things that have ever taken it farther. There are so many opportunities today to document your music and share it with people who want to help.

RW: Nobody wants to pay for music anymore, and there's too much of it out there. It's just overwhelming. I think the way to add value is to curate, to find the good stuff, and make it easy for people to get to. I'm looking forward to the time when there's a format to distribute multi-track recordings to civilians, to let people record themselves and remix their own, like the 11 seasons of the *Louisiana Crossroads* series that you recorded.

TM: That's a great point. I hadn't actually thought about that, but you have to believe that's coming.

RW: It's an example of the type of edutainment products that I think will be popular in the future. Trying to make hit records and sell recordings is just not going to be viable anymore. One opportunity in music is to help people participate, not to just entertain them. There's such a wealth of interesting cultural experiences from south central Louisiana that I think people would enjoy. It's a goldmine!

TM: You're exactly right about opportunities in helping people to participate. I was talking earlier about the landscape that gave rise to the raw ingredients in the cuisine, that gave rise to the celebrations that the music was created for, and the dance steps go with and all that. Down here, pretty much everyone participates, even if you're just tapping your foot or nodding your head, you're probably participating. People say this all the time, that it seems as though everyone down here is either a chef, or a musician, or both, or a dancer, or all three and more, and I think that also goes to something that's interesting. Imagine that you lived in some kind of a bubble, and you could get a music book, and you could learn how to play an instrument, and you could create your music and do your thing. I'm sure that could happen, but in this kind of era of access to global traditions and sounds, the thing that we have in Louisiana has wide application.

I know dozens of people like myself that you could call a researcher, or writer, folklorist, scholar, musician, composer, producer, promoter, and teacher. We have all these different labels that can be applied. In our context you have to be all those things. In the modern world, that's how we all participate, by being a little bit of a scholar, a little bit of an active participant, we're a little bit of a documentarian. I think it's important for people to be aware that not only can you do all those things, you have to do all those things or some version of all those things, which of course parallels writing, recording, promoting, distributing your own music. You have to create your own cover and a favicon for your website.

RW: How well is music from your area represented on Spotify? How does that experience compare with local radio?

TM: Good question, you're talking about curation again. That's one of the biggest issues for me. I have a lot of friends who listen to streaming services like Spotify, but I think there is inherent weakness in relying on algorithms like they use. I grew up with real radio with real DJs who had freedom over the playlist. In fact, our public radio station here, KRVS, is full of locally produced shows that are very curated and adapted to what is going on locally, regionally, and in the world. It's great when a DJ can tell me that the last song they played was by Sydney Bechet, and how it is related to the song that came before it. What do I want to hear and need right now? What are my preferences? What's going to fit my mood? I really don't feel like they've cracked that yet. It seems like when someone puts on Pandora or Spotify or something, and it starts off with a song or an artist you know or love, and then, three or four songs in, something comes on that I don't want to hear. I relish the fact that in my iTunes library or my personal musical library, I can arrange my digital files in the playlist to suit my moods, needs, and events. Radio provides a human, personal touch.

RW: Besides KRVS, what radio stations would you recommend?

TM: I really like WWOZ in New Orleans. They're hyper local. They're maybe even more local than KRVS. A lot of the DJs volunteers, or are paid just a few dollars an hour to do this stuff. They're generous and have a little spare time. You would think that that sort of expertise would be more in demand, and people could maybe get more compensation.

RW: What's the difference between New Orleans and Lafayette musically?

TM: There's a lot of ways to try to explain that. Obviously, New Orleans is a large port city, and we're kind of a rural country town. But one thing Lafayette has going for it is it's known as the "Hub City". It's in the center of a much larger region, so that's a lot of commerce in and around Lafayette and going through it. It's sort of like the comparison of Professor Longhair with Clifton Chenier. They were both African-American men playing keyboard accordions. In Clifton's case, he came up speaking French in a very rural environment, where a real loud, stomping downbeat and a loud singing and accordion style were what you needed for a house party. Longhair was playing in taverns and clubs around New Orleans, in intimate, up close situations. He didn't necessarily need to shout to be heard. If people wanted to dance, you could do some more elaborate rhythmic things. In New Orleans, there's plenty of that and a demand for it.

Clifton was intertwined with our traditions, like Mardi Gras. Down here it is a horseback kind of affair, with smaller-scale parades. In New Orleans, Longhair was like the anthem at Mardi Gras in New Orleans and stuff like that. Both artists interacted with what they had in their environment. It might have started off as house parties. Clifton's toured a whole bunch, Longhair not as much.

RW: Do you think the music in New Orleans is more for tourists than Lafayette?

TM: I think both towns have a tourist-facing side. New Orleans has just got so many more musicians, it's just so much bigger, there's such a bigger landscape. You have plenty of blues bands and R&B bands, and lots of bands working in different genres. The New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival is going to be 50 years old next year, and that means it will have eclipsed most musicians' careers. Even in New Orleans, where people play into their 90s, there aren't that many musicians that have a 50-year-old career. This year at the jazz fest you didn't have Allen Toussaint, Fats

Domino, the Meters, the Neville Brothers, or Dr. John. For many years, those five kind of groups and all their offshoots were essentially Jazz Fest, or certainly a big core piece of it, and now it's not there. And so you think, "Well, gee, is it going to continue?" It absolutely will, because unlike a lot of other festivals in the modern era of the Bonnaros and Coachellas, this festival comes from a culture, and the younger artists are doing their best to do their part and add their piece to the story. There are plenty of people tending the flame of New Orleans music in all its various styles, from Mardi Gras Indians to Dixieland to street parades, all that sort of stuff.

RW: Can you see any sort of general trends or unique opportunities for musicians in the south as compared to other parts of the country?

TM: Again, "south" is a pretty broad term. You've got a lot of different market dynamics, and then cultural bases to work from. There are opportunities for touring and finding audiences. I think it's interesting when you look at the history of the music business, particularly like in south Louisiana, Mississippi, those kind of places, you had a lot of entrepreneurial activity over the years. There were small labels pressing their own vinyl singles and records. Maybe touring would happen. What you had was just tons and tons of local musicians, many of whom could find work in bars and saloons, dance halls, and restaurants, and stuff like that, but never that many who toured or capitalized on song writing or publishing. The big success stories, like Fats Domino and Dave Bartholomew, those are really the exceptions. It really has been more of a commoner's trade like so many others. To be a big star like Britney Spears or Hunter Hayes, you would need someone to catapult you out.

In many ways, it's similar to what you'd find anywhere else. We're far from the two coastal hubs of the music industry, but that's less important now that things are becoming decentralized. C. C. Adcock said that now that the great tall ship known as the music industry has come firmly to rest on the bottom of the ocean floor with a giant thud, up at the top of the last two feet of mast sticking out of the water, there are a bunch of rats. They're called TV and film publishing, it doesn't mean there's no opportunity, but it's not the old, "Oh, I'm going to get a major label record deal," "Oh, I'm going to get a major management firm," or "Oh, I'm going to get a major booking agent, and he's going to hook me up with all the major festivals in Europe and beyond, and boom, that's what I'm going to do. I'm just going to do that."

There's a ton of opportunity for music for moving pictures, with all these new content producers like Netflix and Amazon. The entire south have a regional identity and style going for us. When they need music for something specific like a country fiddle, a bluegrass guitar lick, or a Dixieland jazz funeral, they're going to be looking for composers and people with access to and libraries of that kind of music. We are sitting in or on a goldmine in a lot of ways. But the tricky part is refining it, as it always is in the music industry, and then distributing and selling and monetizing, and trying to accumulate some wealth based on the power of the creations.

RW: What's the best time to visit Lafayette

RW: I think Lafayette makes a good side trip from New Orleans. You don't want to come on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday when the town's pretty dead, but if you come for the weekend, it's really easy to find out what's going on. You can find a little bit more rural, accessible, down-home kind of a scene. We don't have the number of restaurants or venues that New Orleans has by any stretch, but I think we can hold our own in terms of the food and the culture.

TM: The city's premiere event is Festival International de Louisiane, which takes place each year at the end of April. It started as a brilliant concept, to bring the music of all the French-speaking world here. It's a little exotic. You might have heard music from Canada and Belgium before, but here's a chance to get to know bands from Guadalupe and Barundi. It helps maintain awareness of our heritage, keeps French alive, and serves as a spring board for commerce, travel, and exchange. The Festival also kind of helps reconnect with the story of the far-flung Acadians— French colonists of maritime Canada who were brutally exiled by the British and kind of scattered to the wind, and eventually made their way down here to the swamps that was a Spanish territory at the time. They were really just a few people when they got here but are now kind of a dominant cultural force.

When you talk about the French-speaking world you are inevitably faced with issues of colonialism, which wasn't necessarily a good thing. There have been many terrible atrocities that happened as part of colonialism over the years. But getting together for a week to share food, music, dance, and stories is cathartic, instructive, and healing. I think that's why it gets a lot of attention, because it gets a lot of international press.

The Festivals Acadiens is held during the second weekend in October. It features bands from here who are playing locally and doing a really good job. It's much more of a deep dive into local music than a broad survey.

RW: What led from doing cultural work to your position at the Pugh Family Foudation? How well are you able to separate your work in education from your love of the culture and friendships with musicians in the community?

TM: I've done a wide variety of jobs and was always trying to raise money. At one point thought, "What would it be like to work for a funder?" I the case of the Pugh Family Foundation, they work in public education and are mainly concerned with getting folks to read and write. But if you can read and write, you can do everything. The cultural identity we have here is not in the forefront of what we're doing right now, but it's in the background of some of the strategies we're going to use to just communicate with people. In the south, we have the great stain of slavery and racism and so many things, so many challenges. We also have a history of working together in spite of a lot of those things, and I think that's a real strength that we can lean on. So hopefully the work we're doing is going to help create some great musicians and cultural ambassadors and chefs and all that. But we're working on the more fundamental levels. It's a little bit of a broader challenge, but one that will hopefully help build a rising tide to lift all the boats.

I mentioned that it's very much a participatory culture down here that comes out of either familial or quasi familial bonds, just like anywhere. You always hear that the punk scene in New York in the late 1970s was the same, that it was like a family. Down here, we have a lot of families that have been around a long time, large families, so you have all these relationships. I'm not very good at saying no, or maybe I'm just I'm good at saying yes, but it's hard to resist the chance to participate when someone calls you up and says, "Hey, look, I've got a record coming out. Could you help me write a bio?" Or, "I need something for our website," or "So-and-so musician passed away. Can you help me write something?" or "Would you help me promote this?" It's just really hard not to jump in and help your friends, especially when you have some experience.

For example, I produced a show last Thursday night. I was the junior producer on a show with C. C. Adcock, Ani DiFranco, Keith Frank, Tommy McLain, Marcia Ball, David Torkanowsky, Irma Thomas, Tiff Lamson of the Givers and this woman Princess Shaw. We did a brunch on Sunday that was a tribute to David Egan. We had about a dozen songwriters including Zachary Richards, Kevin Gordon, Kristin Diable. They all played one of David's songs and one of theirs. It was amazing. I'm sure I'll be back to the music. It's in my blood, and it's what I love. If I can help things go a little bit, I'm certainly going to do that. I'm going to definitely keep doing things that fire me up and keep me enthused, and hopefully it can help push things forward a little bit.

©2018 Todd Mouton and Robert Willey