



C'est Zach!

An Interview with Zachary Richard

by Kevin Allman

Originally published in *Where New Orleans*, May 1999

Zachary Richard is perhaps the most well-known popular Cajun musician in America, and a talented writer besides. Some Cajuns aren't crazy about his melding of Cajun music with rock and other influences, but his recordings are wonderful, and he's done a hell of a lot to spread Cajun culture and awareness throughout the U.S. and the world.

Today Zachary records mostly in French Canada, where he's always been more popular than he has in the States. He's good on record, but he's terrific in concert.

We conducted this interview at his home outside Lafayette, Louisiana, and finished it over a multi-course meal (and a big bottle of red wine) at a Lafayette restaurant...

As he lopes into a Lafayette restaurant, Zachary Richard seems the complete Acadian, if a little more famous than most; the glances from the nearby tables make that point clear. Slight, with dark hair and weathered skin, he looks like any Tom, Dick, or Hébert. He sings about crawfish and Cajun women and bayou life; his bony fingers seem designed to fit around the keys of an accordion. When his words can't keep up with his thoughts—which is often—he lapses into French.

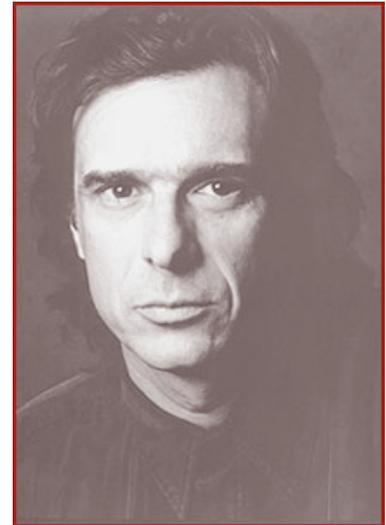
But Louisiana's most famous Cajun music ambassador is also a vegetarian in an area where fur trapping and sausage-making are traditional ways of life. He's a writer who's published two books of poetry - en français - who cites Allen Ginsburg and the Beats as his formative influences. He's also a former Catholic seminary student who now refers to himself as a Buddhist: "I try to chant 45 minutes a day."

In recent years, another facet of this multitasking man has emerged. Zachary Richard has sold hundreds of thousands of records and been a household name in southwestern Louisiana for two decades now, but lately he's become known in Acadiana for something different: as the state's most visible spokesman for preserving French culture in Louisiana.

"I - as a native French speaker of Louisiana - would consider it my official right to conduct my business within Louisiana in French," Richard says. "But I would settle for having another generation of children fluent in the language, and preserve the link that the language represents to the culture."

In April 1996, Richard co-founded Action Cadienne [Cajun Action], a cultural organization dedicated to ensuring French immersion programs in the elementary schools of the 22 parishes that compose Acadiana. The day we spoke, he had just come from a meeting with a local corporation, trying to get funding for a two-part documentary, *Contre Vents et Marées*, that will tell the story of the Cajuns down through the centuries. Richard will serve as executive producer.

Richard may be Cajun culture's most visible spokesman, but he's not the first. In 1968, Louisiana enacted legislation that established the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL), a state-sponsored and -funded organization designed to preserve and promote the state's French heritage.



Cajun French

According to the online Encyclopedia of Cajun Culture, Cajun French is a linguistic gumbo of Acadian French, Creole French, standard 19th-century French, and English, with influences from African, Native American, and Spanish terms. Despite some surface differences and regional idioms, Cajuns are able to communicate easily with Acadians from Quebec, France, and other Francophone lands. Says Zachary Richard, "It's about as different as British English is from American English."

CODOFIL's current president, Lafayette-based lawyer Warren Perrin, has high praise for Richard and Action Cadienne.

"[Action Cadienne] can lobby and take controversial, sometimes militant positions on issues affecting the preservation and promotion of French language and culture," Perrin says. "They can endorse candidates and force them to take positions, which we, as a state-funded agency, can't. This all developed under the leadership of Zachary, who's so attuned to these things."

Under Richard's leadership, Action Cadienne developed a manifesto demanding that "French immersion and bilingual education be made available to every student who desires to participate ...in all of the 22 parishes of Louisiana officially recognized as Acadiana." Since the group was founded, elementary-school immersion programs have been introduced or expanded in many parishes.

"This is a significant step," says Richard: "The fundamental premise of Action Cadienne," he says, "is that without the language, we cannot conceive of the culture; so that if we lose the language we won't be able to retain our link to the culture."

But it's going to be an uphill battle, and one marked by small triumphs rather than large victories. By Richard's own estimate, the number of Cajuns who speak French as a first or preferred language is now around 12 percent.

Zachary Richard returns from the bathroom, scowling. "That bathroom has a sign on the wall in English and Spanish, but it doesn't have it in French. And we're right in the middle of Lafayette! Man, every time I go in there it breaks my heart." He shrugs: See what we're dealing with here?

A bathroom sign might seem insignificant, but to Richard, it's symptomatic of a larger cultural war.

The Cajuns, deported to Louisiana from Canada in the late 1700's, found their way of life beginning to erode in the early 20th century. In 1921, the state adopted a new constitution requiring all Louisiana children to attend school - but it also forbade the use of any language besides English in the classroom. Subsequently, many Cajun children were punished - often physically - for speaking the only language they knew.

In 1950, when Richard was born, Louisiana hadn't had a French-speaking governor in the whole century (and wouldn't again until Edwin Edwards' election in 1971). Cajuns were regarded as country folk, derided with the epithet "coonass," and speaking French was seen as a sign of cultural inferiority. Richard's own parents spoke English around the house. His bilingual education came later. "Why do I speak French? Because I loved my grandparents, and they spoke French."

In 1968, he moved to New Orleans to study at Tulane University. A chance encounter with the poet Allen Ginsberg introduced him to both the hippie and the Beat movements (including the work of French-Canadian poet Jack Kerouac). Along with his interest in the alternative culture of the Sixties came an awakening to his heritage.

In the mid-1970s, Richard moved to New York and then Montreal, where he got his first record deal at the age of 27. By 1986, he had recorded seven albums of zydeco-influenced rock and folk music - sung in both English and French - and had built a strong fan base in Canada and France, where he continues to be a legitimate pop star. His latest album, *Cap Enragé* (sung entirely in French), sold over 180,000 copies, most of them in Canada, where his music is a radio staple. For the past two years, he's won Felix Awards (the French-Canadian equivalent of the Grammy).

"Zachary is one of those cultural links that keeps Louisiana close to the French culture," says David H. Jones, editor of the music magazine *OffBeat* and former Louisiana film commissioner. "For him to be popular all over the world provides



Louisianans with a link to their own French culture. He's the real living embodiment of French culture; for that and other reasons he should be a revered character in these parts."

"I've been able to establish a good following in the United States," Richard says, "but I haven't worked here, effectively, for five years. I've come to the realization, the resignation, the acceptance, that all my expression for the short term will be Francophile."

The government of France has declared Richard an Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres - not just for his music, but also for his two books of poetry, *Voyage de Nuit* and *Faire Récolte*. The latter received Canada's Prix Champlain for literature in 1998.

"The French thing has been my saving grace," Richard says. "I've been able to establish a good following in the United States, but I haven't worked here effectively for five years, so it's not like people are lining up."

Come August, they will be. French people from around North America, Europe, and Africa will be converging on Louisiana for the Congrès Mondial Acadien Louisiane 1999 - a two-week - long "family reunion" of Acadians from around the world. It's the centerpiece of FrancoFête, the state's tricentennial celebration and the world's largest-ever assembling of Acadians. On Aug. 15, Richard will be headlining at Lafayette's Cajundome in a three-hour show that will be the highlight of the celebration.

The Congrès Mondial is a huge step, considering that the first book in Cajun French wasn't published until the 1970s, and that the first-ever Cajun studies program was introduced only last year at Louisiana State University. Is there hope for keeping Cajun tradition alive?

"I've been called chronically optimistic," says Perrin. "I'm not an educator trying to make every child in Louisiana learn French. That's probably a lost cause. But we are winning the battle with Cajun pride, and without that, there is nothing to live for."

Richard is more skeptical. "We're talking about eight million people versus 200 million [in the United States]," he says. "There's very little cause for optimism for the French cause in North America...I probably will never be able to get 911 service in French and English. There is a certain amount of political realism here. And we've gone beyond the point where something like that becomes real."

That doesn't mean he's about to give up the fight.

"Here's my philosophy as a French man in Louisiana: Even though we're down to under 12 percent, the music hasn't died. Somebody like me, pushing fifty, who still speaks French in Louisiana 150 or 200 years after the decline of that language..." He pauses.

"We are the Jews of America. It's true. We are the Indians, the people who have been disenfranchised, and through all of that we have maintained a good spirit and we have been able to have a good time, laugh. The most beautiful aspect of Cajun music is that it speaks of nothing but difficulty and travails - my calf's dead, my bull's been kidnapped, my house burned down, and my baby is sleeping with another man. That's the story of Cajun lyrics.

"And yet it's a music that's absolutely joyous - even when it's in a minor mode."

Copyright ©2004 by Kevin Allman/Zachary Richard: American Singer/Songwriter - reprinted with permission
<http://www.kevinallman.com>

