

CITY OF EUNICE, LA. PERSONAL PROFILE

Marc Savoy - Accordion Builder, Recording Artist, Cultural Ambassador and Cajun Philosopher.



Marc Savoy's love for the music of his culture is rooted deep in his own family.
(Written By Barry Jean Ancelet, Quotes From His Interview Of Marc Savoy)

"I was born in 1940 on a rather isolated rice farm near Eunice. It was an area which was saturated with oldtime Cajun musicians. The first contact with music of any sort that made an impression on me was about in 1947, when I accompanied my father on a visit next door to his father's house, which is now my home. It was a winter evening and my grandparents were sitting around the fireplace when I arrived. After a while, my father asked my grandfather, "Pop, get out your fiddle and play us a tune. " My grandfather slowly got up, went into one of the back rooms and returned with a small oblong black case which he proceeded to open with the most gentle affection. From the little black case, he removed a very oddlooking wooden object and began turning little pegs while plucking the strings. Then he removed from the case a long black stick with whitishlooking, threadlike fibers on it and began drawing the stick across the strings. At this young age, of about seven, I think the thing that impressed me as much as the sounds being emitted from the little wooden box was the look that came over my grandfather's face.

Thinking back on that moment, it was as though he was no longer in the room with us. He had escaped to some private little world all his own. From that moment on, I remember thinking, "When I grow up, I want to be able to make sounds like that." Nearly every afternoon after my return from school on the school bus, one of my favorite pastimes was to walk across the fields to my grandparents' home. There was something very magical about the place that I found very satisfying. Besides my finding it very interesting, it was as though I could relate to and identify with those people in that scene much better than with my peers in school. To me, these Cajun people represented a way of life that was like a big, soft, warm blanket on a winter night. "

Young Marc was intrigued by the accordion and the sounds it made in the hands of the great musicians in his neighborhood. He repaired an old accordion so that he could learn to play, and word soon spread that "Joel Savoy's boy" was fixing accordions.

"My father and mother were no musicians themselves, but they have always had a deep love for music and, even today, they enjoy sponsoring a bal de maison at their home. After the parties would break up in the wee hours of the morning, I would go to bed at night hearing those beautiful tunes over and over again. My father realized that I was getting desperate for a musical instrument, so the day finally arrived when the postman delivered to our mailbox a brand new Horner accordion from Sears Roebuck for \$27.50. With all the music that I had soaked into me before my new accordion arrived, it was only natural that some had to leak out through my fingers on the buttons. I think my rate of improvement must have been about directly proportional to the degeneration of my Horner. Then, one day, my family was invited to a party at my father's cousin's home who was married to Cyprien Landreneau's brother. I didn't know who Cyprien Landreneau was at the time, but I had been told that he played accordion and fiddle and that he, along with his cousin Alton Landreneau (an accordionist extraordinaire) would be providing music for the party. The moment we arrived, I jumped out of the car and, hearing the sound of the accordion, I told my family, "Wow! Listen to the sound of that accordion!" My father said, "What do you mean? It's just an accordion." I replied, "Oh, no, it's not." That was my first contact with a pre World War II Monarch accordion from Germany. There was to be no peace and quiet in our home until I was able to find and purchase a very dilapidated Monarch. By that time, I had already disassembled my Horner at least a dozen times to see what made it tick, so I felt reasonably sure that I could get the Monarch going again. With a minimum of tools and a lot of patience, I was able to restore the old accordion to its original condition. Soon the news spread like wildfire throughout the neighborhood that Joel Savoy's boy had restored his accordion to mint condition. Whether or not I had intended it that way, I soon found myself as an accordion repairman. I had been told that there was a man in Lake Charles who was building copies of the old Monarch, but using Horner parts since there were reportedly no others available. By that time, I had become a good enough player to realize that there were many shortcomings to the famed prewar accordions. I realized that they were only famed because the instruments prior to the Monarchs and Sterling's were even more inferior and that the instruments which emerged after World War II were also inferior. So, relatively speaking, the Monarch seemed damn good. I began to realize that my famed Monarch

accordion took an unusual amount of bellow pumping to keep the reeds speaking, that it was almost impossible to keep it in proper tune, that the pitch of the reeds varied with air pressure, that the sustain was very poor, response wasn't very good, and finally, I had begun to notice that the timber was too muddy and not bright enough. I began to realize that my technique and talent on the accordion were limited to my instrument. There were certain things I wanted to do, but my instrument couldn't keep up with me. Since I couldn't understand how reeds and bellows could be any good coming out of an accordion that sold for only \$27.50 at the time, I decided to import reeds and bellows of the finest quality available and I attempted to make accordions that would have the criteria that I dreamed about but couldn't find in any existing singlerow diatonic accordions. My first instrument was not even as good as what I had been playing on before, though I had used the finest quality materials. I realized that there was hope in my endeavor but also realized that I had made a very big mistake. I had been given the test before the lesson. I had jumped into something which I really didn't know much about and with no one around to help me, I would have to do a lot of trial and error and experimenting before I would understand what to do to be able to bring my ideas into a working model. So, with a few instruments such as Db meters, electronic tuners, a few pressure gauges, and my mother's vacuum cleaner, I commenced to determine what effect I wanted to create. How could I create a powerful tone, but still be able to swell a note without portamento effect? How could I achieve instantaneous response without dampening the tone? What must I do to get a continuous, high Db reading with a minimum of bellow movement? Needless to say, I was faced with years of making and remaking until I finally began to get an actual "feel" for my work. It became almost like a spiritual communion just by touching my work. I would grasp a piece that I was working on and I would get a feeling that this piece had completely delivered itself to my every whim. It was as though I was in total control over something that had potential but was also inert. "

Marc continued his formal education, eventually earning a B.S. degree in chemical engineering. After an interview with a major chemical company in the northeast, however, he decided two things: that he did not want to leave Louisiana, and that he wanted to pursue his interest in accordions.

"By 1965, I decided to open up a music store and build accordions on a fulltime basis. I was then faced with an even larger dilemma. I had always prided myself with enough common sense to know the difference between superior and inferior, good quality versus poor quality, but I was soon to learn that this one commodity was found lacking in the general public. People would come to my store and laugh at me when I quoted them a price for my "Acadian " accordions, a figure which was not competitive, since quality materials to build my instruments are expensive. These people would reply that they could buy two accordions for that price from the other accordion makers. Even though I would point out the differences between the two instruments, I could see in these people's eyes that I was just not getting through to them. I spent many frustrating years trying to justify my instruments until one day it dawned upon me that go percent of all the better players were playing my Acadian accordions, so why should I bother trying to convince a mediocre musician of the difference in quality when he himself was

not yet advanced enough to be able to demand the difference in the first place? Something that never fails to amuse me is the fact that these mediocre musicians always demand the complete opposite of what I breed into my instruments. I think that every artist, craftsman, musician, etc., is faced with this same problem. Anyone who produces anything is working under two forces, the first being that of his own personality which is generated by what he has seen and heard and expresses itself onto his work. The second is that of the general public or potential buyers, whose tastes and demands exert pressure on the artist to the extent that he may decide to cater to the majority so that he may have a market or recognition for his work. I think very often that this second pressure can be very detrimental to expressing the artist's true art form and also limiting the quality of his work for the sake of finding a market. I think it takes a very stubborn and hardheaded person who believes enough in his work to be able to disregard the opinion of the majority and cater only to a select minority. What I am saying really is that, even though the price would be exactly the same, if the choice was presented to the general public to choose between a Martin guitar and a plywood model with glitter and plastic, the visual stimuli of the ornate model would probably overpower the aesthetics of the Martin, though there would be a minority to appreciate the tonal quality, construction technique, and warmth of woods in the Martin. Naturally, the feedback of the majority would be much louder than that of the minority; therefore an artist must be very careful not to be too influenced by what the general public demands. "

Marc Savoy's involvement in folk festivals throughout the United States and in Canada gave him connections with folk music circles outside Louisiana which eventually led to a breakthrough in his craft as accordion maker and reinforced his efforts for cultural survival.

"By 1974, I was satisfied with my work. My instruments were recognized and in demand by those who knew what to look for. I was satisfied also because I knew that the quality of my accordions exceeded the abilities of even the better musicians. I had become stagnant, not having any goal to improve or advance with my work. Then, one day, a French Canadian by the name of Gilles Loisier walked into my store, introduced himself, and said that he played with the world's best button accordion player. He backed up this surprising statement by playing me a cassette tape of Philippe Bruneau's music. After listening to the tape for several minutes, I asked of Gilles, "How many people are playing on this tape?" When he replied that there was only one person playing all that music, I began to doubt that Gilles was telling me the truth. I just could not believe that one man could make all that music on a singlerow accordion.

Gilles remained in Louisiana for several months and we became very close friends. The only thing that exceeded his sincerity and human warmth was his musicianship. After his return to Canada, I began getting letters from Bruneau inquiring about my accordions. Several weeks after he received the first one that he ordered, I received a phone call from him saying that he was satisfied with everything except the tuning, and could I possibly retune it if he would ship it

down? By that time, I had become addicted to his music and desired to hear more, so I asked why not come down to Louisiana and bring the accordion so that I could tune it to his specifications. Unable to spare the time because of TV work, he replied, "Why don't you come up to Canada?" I arrived in Montreal the next day, thinking I had a fair knowledge of music and that I could make out well enough playing the accordion. I was soon to learn that I knew very little about both. When we arrived at his home, he sat down in front of me and said, "Now I'll show you what your accordion can do." The only accurate recollection I have of that moment was my hair standing straight up and goose bumps all over my skin. Not only did I realize that I was in the presence of musical genius, I also realized that my Acadian accordions were not good enough for a musician of such talent. I became re-inspired by my involvement with these musicians. I returned to Louisiana thinking about what Philippe demanded from an instrument and how I could incorporate these criteria into my present model. It was back to the drawing board again.

When I was satisfied that I had an instrument that could keep up with Mr. Bruneau, I called him to say that the new accordion was completed but that the only way he was going to get it would be to come down to Louisiana and pick it up personally. He replied that he couldn't because of TV work which he was committed to. Several weeks later, he finally realized that I was not going to ship it to him, and after many accusations that I was the most stubborn man he had ever met, he finally arrived in Louisiana. "

Marc's Savoy Music Center just outside of Eunice serves as a clearinghouse for information and instruments for the community of Louisiana musicians and beyond. There is a constant stream of musicians who come to buy instruments, to talk about buying instruments, or just to talk about playing instruments, but when they come to Marc Savoy's turf, they have to talk turkey with the boss.

Marc and his wife, Ann, restored his grandfather's house in the Savoy community near Eunice and settled there to raise a family. There they cultivate their own garden according to Voltaire. Marc has learned the important lesson to concentrate his energies in the directions which are most likely to bring tangible results. His life is efficient and effective. He and a few kindred spirits like Michael Doucet formed the Society for the Preservation of Ethnic Culture in Acadian Louisiana (SPECIAL) to keep a constant vigil over the survival of tradition in the backyard of South Louisiana,

"I am constantly at war against the forces which are destroying our culture so rapidly. Can't these people see that they are giving up a beautiful, rich heritage to pursue something which is totally meaningless in comparison? Often times, I've been asked why I continue in this futile

attempt to preserve my culture, and I think the only answer I can allow is that when my children become parents, I hope that they can pass on to the next generation other things besides disco music, glitter swinger vans, and the like. I hope they will still remember some of the beautiful old Cajun ballads, still remember some architecture other than mobile homes, and our way of life that has endured for so many years unchanged. I hope they remember that they are direct descendants of a strong people who came to a foreign land and developed the most powerful ethnic culture in America that withstood the test of time for two hundred years until along came the generation who thought that the artificial turf on the other side of the fence was grass. "

For more information call Savoy Music Center at (337) 4579563

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