

# DL Menard (1932-2017): The voice of Cajun music

By Paul Bond  
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Two months ago DL Menard celebrated the 55th anniversary of his most famous song, *La Porte d'en Arrière* (*The Back Door*), which has surpassed the popularity of *Jolie Blon* and been described as “the anthem for Cajuns today”, earned its songwriter an enduring reputation as “the Cajun Hank Williams.” The revival of the fortunes of traditional Cajun music owes much to Menard’s love of country music, and his warmly nasal voice. Menard died July 27 in Scott, Louisiana, at the age of 85.

Doris Leon Menard was born into a farming family outside Erath, Louisiana. His father played some harmonica, but there was not much singing at home. He learned songs primarily from listening to a Texas radio station on a battery-powered radio. Every year the battery would die a month or two before the cotton had been sold: “I couldn’t listen to the radio then because we had to wait to sell the first bale of cotton to have money to buy a new battery. That was the hardest time, without the radio.”

That rural poverty had always played a part in shaping Cajun music. The Acadians expelled by the British from what is now Nova Scotia in the mid-eighteenth century brought their French musical heritage to Louisiana and incorporated local Anglo-American styles into their fiddle-driven dance music. The advent of the diatonic accordion from the mid-nineteenth century reduced the melodic scope of the repertoire (unlike the violin, the accordion is limited in key and in available notes) and gave the music its rhythmic drive.

This music was first recorded commercially in the 1920s, but economic factors were bearing on the culture that produced it. Oil had been discovered locally in 1901, which brought in migrant workers and financial speculators. Industry, improved transportation and then war drove a “melting pot” culture that served to isolate poorer French-speakers. From 1916 English-language

education was compulsory and French was banned from elementary education.

DL Menard spoke French at home but used English phonics because students were punished for using French at school: “Sometimes you were paddled. You were whipped. Oh, yeah. You had to speak English.”

Such divisions were exacerbated by the Depression. Upper and middle class Louisianans (what one scholar calls “genteel Acadians”) enthusiastically embraced the Americanization process and denigrated the French-speaking Cajuns with no economic route out of their isolation. This had an impact musically. The success of Hillbilly and Western Swing led to Cajun music being smoothed and shaped to fit. The accordion was increasingly dropped from commercial recordings from the late 1930s.

The isolation of poor Cajuns, however, meant that older musical styles survived locally. When Iry Lejeune recorded *La Valse du Pont d'Amour* in 1948 it was said that the young accordionist simply did not know any better, but he was heavily influenced by older recordings and the music of his neighbours and relatives. The enthusiastic response to Lejeune’s recordings—lent additional mystique by his tragic death aged just 26—encouraged local music store owners to fill a regional gap and record Cajun performers.

This resurgent Cajun music was no simple nostalgic revival. DL Menard was listening to English-language country songs on the radio. He learnt and sang these unaccompanied for his own pleasure. He did not encounter live Cajun music until he was 16, when the family quit farming and moved into Erath.

One night he visited a practice session at his uncle’s house, three doors down from his home, and fell in love with the guitar. He ordered a catalogue guitar and asked the guitarist to teach him. He was a fast learner. Two months later he bought the instrument he would play at

his first gig with Elias Badeaux and the Louisiana Aces. He remained a solid and elegant rhythm guitarist with a fine swing to his playing.

Menard had a repertoire of country songs that enabled the Aces to span the full range of Southern Louisiana music at the time. He did not start singing French songs until three years later: "In fact, my own mother and father were even surprised when they first heard me sing in French. Although I spoke French, they didn't think I could sing in French. It was like singing was yet another language."

Menard was particularly identified with the songs of Hank Williams, whose influence was not just directly musical. Menard met his hero in 1951 in New Iberia. Menard, a great raconteur, talked often about how Williams had talked to him "like I was a real person." He followed that example. Fiddler Terry Huval recalled that "When people would go to talk to him, he'd stop and talk to them. He listened to them and engaged with them. He always remembered how that made him feel."

Williams also gave him the advice that would make him as a songwriter. "He told me, 'When you write a song, you pretend it's happening to you.' ... And I'll be darned if he wasn't right."

He wrote lyrics for a waltz, which the Aces recorded in 1960 as *Valse de Jolly Roger*, and he found a way of setting his thoughts and feelings to music. The following year he wrote *La Porte d'en Arrière*, which was released to popular acclaim in 1962. Basing the tune on Hank Williams's *Honky Tonk Blues* Menard wrote the lyrics during a shift at a service station between jobs. "I knew exactly what I wanted to say, but I didn't have time to write it all out at once." It was further complicated by him not being able to write in French: "I wrote the words in English ... but the song was in French. I wrote it in English as close as I could to what I wanted to say in French."

There was some dispute within the band about recording the song, but producer Floyd Soileau announced after their first take "That was great ... that's going to be the hit."

The record came out on a Wednesday. By the Saturday it had already recouped the costs of the recording session, and it was playing on the jukebox when they arrived for their regular weekend gig. It became so popular that Menard would be asked to sing it repeatedly. He tired of this, but his wife Louella "sat me down and made it straight to me that I had a hit. I didn't know. I had no idea."

In 1973 the Aces were invited to play at the National

Folk Festival, an event that brought home to him the broader impact of his personal, down-home music: "The people gave us a standing ovation. If you had given me a million dollars cash, I would not have felt better. It seemed like my stomach wanted to jump out ... I never really understood the value of our music until then."

When the Aces disbanded Menard continued to travel with other Cajun musicians, and became a regular on the folk festival circuit. *La Porte d'en Arrière*, he would say, had taken him to 38 countries. He quit the service station to find work that would fit better with his music, and started making ashwood chairs, with Louella weaving cane seats and backs. He was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship Award by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1994, a year after the excellent "Le Trio Cadien" album with Iry Lejeune's son Eddie and fiddler Ken Smith was nominated for a Grammy.

In the sleevenotes for his wonderful 1988 album "No Matter Where You At, There You Are," he wrote that most people "seem to view us now as professional musicians, not just as people playing for the fun of it, and maybe we are. But that won't stop us from playing the kind of music you like, or singing a song that you like to hear."

That music remained warm and engaging, exemplifying his thinking about songs: "You know, nothing makes a better song than something ordinary that you see or do every day but never notice. It's like people who live around a beautiful mountain. They see it every day and almost forget it's there until somebody takes a picture of it."

Several of DL Menard's performances, live in concert, are available on YouTube. Here are two:

The Back Door (with Shetland fiddler Aly Bain)

La Porte ... with pedal steel

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