



Louisiana: A Guitarist's Paradise

By Ben Sandmel

The sonic saga of Louisiana is often dominated by fiddles, accordions, brass, woodwinds, and keyboards. But alongside the rich legacies of Harry Choates, Clifton Chenier, Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, and Jerry Lee Lewis, Louisiana is also a land of great guitarists. From Shreveport's James Burton to Slidell's late Gatemouh Brown, from West Monroe's Kenny Bill Stinson to New Orleans' Snooks Eaglin and Lafayette's Sonny Landreth, guitar heroes contribute to the world-acclaimed standards of musicianship that have distinguished Louisiana for generations. The wealth of indigenous guitar styles—blues, country, traditional and modern and jazz, Gospel, Cajun/zydeco, rock, and beyond—reflects the contributions of all the state's many ethnic communities.



Guitarist Kenny Bill Stinson. Photo: Susan Roach.

Louisiana guitarists tend to ignore the artificial constraints of musical categories. Consider, for example, the recently-departed elder statesman, Clarence "Gatemouh" Brown. Brown was based in Slidell, until his home was destroyed in Hurricane Katrina. Already quite ill, he passed away days later. Brown was raised on the Louisiana-Texas border and absorbed all that he heard there, developing a style of seamless finesse that embraced blues, swing, country, fiddle, hoedowns, funk, and many hybrids in between. "Do not categorize me as a 'blues artist,'" he would admonish. "Yes, I have had some hits that were considered blues, like 'Okie Dokie Stomp' back in 1954. I cut that for the Peacock Label, one of the first successful black-owned record companies. 'Okie Dokie Stomp' is classified as blues but it has beautiful horn charts, a big-band arrangement. I won a Grammy award in 1993, for my album *Alright Again*, and that was considered blues, too. But again, it was big-band jump blues. And when I play blues, it's positive blues. I'm not impressed by that down-hearted, negative blues."

"You see," Brown would continue, in a speech delivered many times, "I play music: Cajun, country bluegrass, jazz, polkas, calypso, Caribbean, all of that. I cut a country album with Roy Clark and played with him on TV on *Hee-Haw*. People think of me as a guitarist but I play fiddle, too. I donated a fiddle to the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville. I love country music. And I don't dress like a typical bluesman either. I wear a cowboy hat and Western clothes, always have. That's part of my heritage. I was raised around horses. A lot of people don't know their history, but the first cowboys were black. I want to record a bluegrass album. My favorite bluegrass fiddler was a black man—my daddy. The other musicians I admire the most are all in the jazz field—Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Louis Jordan. I've had great jazz saxophonists work in my bands, like Arnett Cobb and Illinois Jacquet. And I always admired Count Basie's guitarist, Freddie Green. He knew how to play in a

horn band, and so do I. My guitar phrases are just like horn lines." The thoughts and prayers of Louisiana's folklife community go out to Brown's family.

The equally prominent James Burton has an equally eclectic resume. As a member of the Louisiana Hayride house band during the early 1950s, Burton backed up a broad cross section of country and rockabilly stylists. Taking a radically different approach, Burton also crafted the raw, bluesy signature riff that galvanized Dale Hawkins' 1957 hit "Suzie Q." Moving to California in the 1960s, Burton's trademark "chicken pickin'" sound complemented Ricky Nelson's vocal on "Hello, Mary Lou," establishing him as an in-demand session guitarist. Burton went on to record with such diverse artists as The Monkees, Buffalo Springfield, Elvis Presley, Emmylou Harris, Rodney Crowell, Jerry Lee Lewis, Gillian Welch, and literally thousands of others. He has returned home to Shreveport but remains active on the national music scene.

Kenny Bill Stinson is a generation younger than James Burton, but he approaches music with a similarly broad perspective and vast repertoire. Steeped in north Louisiana's overlapping traditions of country, blues, rockabilly, and Gospel fervor, Stinson also has an encyclopedic knowledge of the British Invasion rock that bloomed from such roots. What's more, he is an expert pianist. Stinson leads his own fine band and is a highly-sought accompanist throughout Louisiana.

Many prominent guitarists have emerged from Baton Rouge's fertile blues scene. Rural stylists such as Silas Hogan, Arthur Kelly, Tabby Thomas, Rudy Richard, and Lightnin' Slim made their collective mark in the 1950s and 1960s, alongside noted harmonica players including Slim Harpo and Lazy Lester. The dynamic Buddy Guy, best known as a Chicago artist, is a native of Point Coupee Parish who began his career in Baton Rouge before finding fame up North. The Baton Rouge blues guitar tradition continues to flourish today, thanks to artists including Larry Garner and the futuristic Chris Thomas King.

Close by—yet across the cultural border into Cajun/Creole Louisiana—the accordion and frottoir-driven sounds of Cajun musician and zydeco are also propelled by some powerful guitarists. Sonny Landreth, Sherman Robertson, and Paul "Little Buck" Senegal are all zydeco alumni of Clifton Chenier's band who now lead their own groups. D.L. Menard strums his acoustic guitar with rhythmic precision, anchoring his plaintive, primarily French vocals. Working as both a member of BeauSoleil and a solo artist, David Doucet has created a unique blend of Cajun music with the acoustic finger-picking and flat-picking styles more typically heard in Appalachian music. The steel guitar's poignant tone also works well with Cajun music, as adapted by such first-rate players as Terry Huval, Rodney Miller, and the late Papa Cairo. Guitarist Glen Croker of the Hackberry Ramblers, once a steel player, blends steel-guitar ideas with R&B and rockabilly in an eloquent, economical style.

In New Orleans, the related genres of traditional jazz, blues, and rhythm and blues have benefited greatly from the input of guitar soloists and accompanist alike. The late Lonnie Johnson made dozens of brilliant records of his own, and recorded with the likes of Louis Armstrong, jazz fiddler Joe Venuti, and classic blues singer Victoria Spivey. Danny Barker—renowned as an author, raconteur, banjo and cultural activities, beyond his guitar skills—started out on guitar accompanying such Louisiana blues pianists as Little Brother Montgomery, and spent years on the road with Cab Calloway of "Minnie The Moocher" fame. Returning to New Orleans, Barker led his own band, the Jazz Hounds, often his featured wife, Blue Lu (of "Don't You Feel My Leg" fame) on vocals. Over time, Danny Barker became a beloved, venerated elder in the city's music community. He was instrumental in the city's late-1970s brass-band resurgence, encouraging neighborhood teens to form a then-fledgling band called The Dirty Dozen.

The late Justin Adams also bridged the gap between jazz, jump-blues, and R&B, most notably

through his work with Fats Domino on such hits as "Boll Weevil." Today, guitarist Snooks Eaglin works in a similar mode. In addition, his seemingly endless set list also includes "Malaguena," miscellaneous TV/radio commercials and theme songs, and virtually every song and R&B hit from the mid-1950s onward-hence his nickname, "the human jukebox." Eaglin also plays a fair amount of country music, a genre that is often underestimated in terms of New Orleans' multi-cultural melting pot. The Crescent City's notable country guitarists include Pat Flory, Dave and Cranston Clements, Jay "Johnny J" Beninati, and steel guitar/dobro master Harold Cavallero. Modern jazz is articulately expressed by Steve Masakowski, Bill Solley, and Jimmy Moliere, while flat-out rockers of note include Dave Malone and Camille Baudoin of the Radiators, Bill Davis of Dash Riprock, and Tommy Malone of the subdudes (the lower-case spelling is deliberate), among many others.

These are but a few of Louisiana's great guitarists; if space permitted, many more would be mentioned here. Readers are encouraged to do further research on their own to discover the riches of Louisiana, a Guitarist's Paradise.

The article first appeared in the 2005 Louisiana Folklife Festival booklet, just before Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown passed away on September 10, 2005. New Orleans folklorist Ben Sandmel is the author of Zydeco! (with photographer Rick Oliver, University Press of Mississippi, 1999). Sandmel's article "Mr. K-Doe Goes to Washington" appears in the anthology DaCapo Best Music Writing 2000), and he is currently working on a book about Ernie K-Doe. Sandmel is also the drummer/producer for the Grammy-nominated Cajun band The Hackberry Ramblers.



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Louisiana Folklife Program, PO Box 44247, Baton Rouge, LA 70804, tel 225-342-8180

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