



Michael Doucet

Fiddler

For more than two decades, Cajun fiddler Michael Doucet has been a leader in the renaissance of Cajun music. With his band, Beausoleil, he has given a new sound to Cajun music and has become one of the best-known Cajun musicians in the world. Born near Lafayette in 1951, Michael Doucet grew up with a variety of musical influences. The first one he recalls is his uncle, Will Knight, who played Cajun music on the fiddle, banjo, and bass. Inspired by Knight, Doucet began playing the banjo at the age of six and the guitar at eight. Many other styles of music influenced Doucet's music including artists such as Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, and Tennessee Ernie Ford. Doucet says he learned from cousins, aunts, uncles, and from classical musicians to rock-and-roll musicians to Cajun musicians. "I heard a gamut of sounds back then and went with the flow."

His first band was formed with friend Zachery Richard when they were 12 years old. They played mostly folk rock. However, Traditional French music was always around, especially at family gatherings. He rediscovered the value of Cajun music during a 1974 trip to France with Richard. They met young French musicians playing traditional Cajun music. Doucet remarked, "Here were serious musicians in their twenties playing and relating to Cajun music in terms of what it could be. I began to understand what we had and what we stood for."

Michael Doucet returned to Louisiana, found an old Acadian house in Lafayette to restore, and began to play the fiddle. He says he "wanted to understand the guts of the music. If I was going to play Cajun music, I wanted to play Cajun music. And if I was going to change Cajun music, I had to be sure of the directions." He set out to meet and learn from some of the masters he had heard of in France: Dewey Balfa, Varise Connor, Canray Fontenot, Hector Duhon, and especially Dennis McGee. In 1975, Doucet received a Folk Arts Apprenticeship Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to learn Cajun fiddle styles from some of these masters.

With friends, Doucet formed the innovative band, "Coteau," which played a synthesis of country, Cajun, blues, and rock. During the same period, he performed with friends Kenneth and Sterling Richard in a group they named "Beausoleil." The group had a strong traditional base with a wide range of influences like classical, jazz, and bluegrass. From early field recordings of Cajun music and older Cajun musicians, "Beausoleil" learned to play the old songs, in what Doucet calls a "search for the spirit of Cajun music." After "Coteau" disbanded in 1977, "Beausoleil" came into its own. Over the years, membership in the band has changed, but "Beausoleil" is now perhaps the most popular Cajun band in the world. With his wife Sharon, Doucet recorded an album of French children's songs. In 1977, Doucet began working with Dewey Balfa to educate children in the public schools about Cajun music. As an adjunct professor at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette, Louisiana, Doucet designed and taught the first course on Cajun music.

The group has performed at Carnegie Hall and played nationally and internationally at major festivals, concert halls, and clubs. Six of their many albums have been nominated for Grammy Awards and Michael Doucet was named a master folk musician by the Louisiana Folklife Center as well.

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