



# MUSIC Makers

LOCAL INSTRUMENT MAKERS, THE UNSUNG  
HEROES OF LOUISIANA MUSIC, CARRY ON THEIR  
TRADITIONS TO SAFEGUARD THE LOCAL SOUNDSCAPE

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**FOR SEVERAL YEARS**, the Illinois-born singer-songwriter Andrew Bird has been travelling into natural and urban landscapes — the Coyote Gulch canyon of Utah, say, or under the Glendale-Hyperion Bridge in Los Angeles — to compose music that he bases on the temperament of each place. Bird calls the project “Echolocations.”

Unless you climb a levee, cross a bridge onto the Westbank or fly into or out of Louis Armstrong International Airport, it's possible to live your entire life in New Orleans



without ever seeing the Mississippi River. The chances of living in Acadiana and not hearing the music that emerges from this land, or of knowing one or more of the musicians who make it, are much slimmer. Music, much like language, arises from the landscape, history and cultures of its inhabitants. While we often measure the progress of a place through its industrial and technological advancements, there's a parallel history — one that sustains and enriches our inner lives, if not always our bank accounts — in the arts that its people create and pass on to future generations.

Incredible to think of the first instrument played in Louisiana. Incredible to think of the first time that people gathered to celebrate — here, in this new place — in the sonic aura of a fiddle. Incredible to think of the first time someone scratched at a washboard, inciting dance. “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music,” wrote English essayist Walter Pater, giving us one reason why we often elevate our local musicians above our poets and painters. Music accompanies us wherever we want to carry it. Within that music thrives the people who make it. They're the ones who enhance our day through tinny car speakers, on stages and streets, on TV screens and wagons and floats during parades. In these and other places, they offer solace, elation and the full sweep of emotions in between.

“Making music with fiddles and accordions, guitars and triangles, spoons and scrubboards, Cajun and Creole musicians have become culture heroes as South Louisianans reaffirm their pride in their tradition,” wrote Barry Jean Ancelet and Mathé Allain in 1984 in “Travailler, C'est Trop Dur: The Tools of Cajun Music.” “But the unsung heroes are the traditional instrument makers who have provided performers with the tools of their trade ...” If you live in Acadiana, chances are high that you also know one or more of the many who carry on this long tradition. Some of them build and sell their instruments when they're not touring with their bands. Others work full time, providing possibility for musicians in Louisiana and beyond.

Tee Don Landry of Key of Z Rubboards carries in his bloodline the origins of the instrument that he's played in Zydeco bands all over

(Left) **Tanner Fontenot plays an Acadian Accordion at the Courir de Mardi Gras Les Malfecteurs in Church Point** (Bottom) **Jay Steiner makes a 'tit fer in the forge at Vermilionville** (Right) **An in-progress violin rests on Chris Segura's workshop table in Lafayette**



the world. Landry began making instruments in Sunset — the “Rubboard Capital of the World” — in 1995, a decade after he began playing them. The story of the rubboard, or frottoir, begins with that first time someone scratched at a washboard, the original tool that gives the instrument another of its names. One day after Landry and his rubboard had been touring for several years, he saw a video of Zydeco pioneers Clifton and Cleveland Chenier discussing the crudity of the early instrument, typically a tin washboard with rope tied around the top so that a musician can hang it from the neck. Landry watched, riveted, as Clifton Chenier discussed a pivotal moment in 1946. “They weren't famous yet,” Landry says. “They were just young guys making music.”

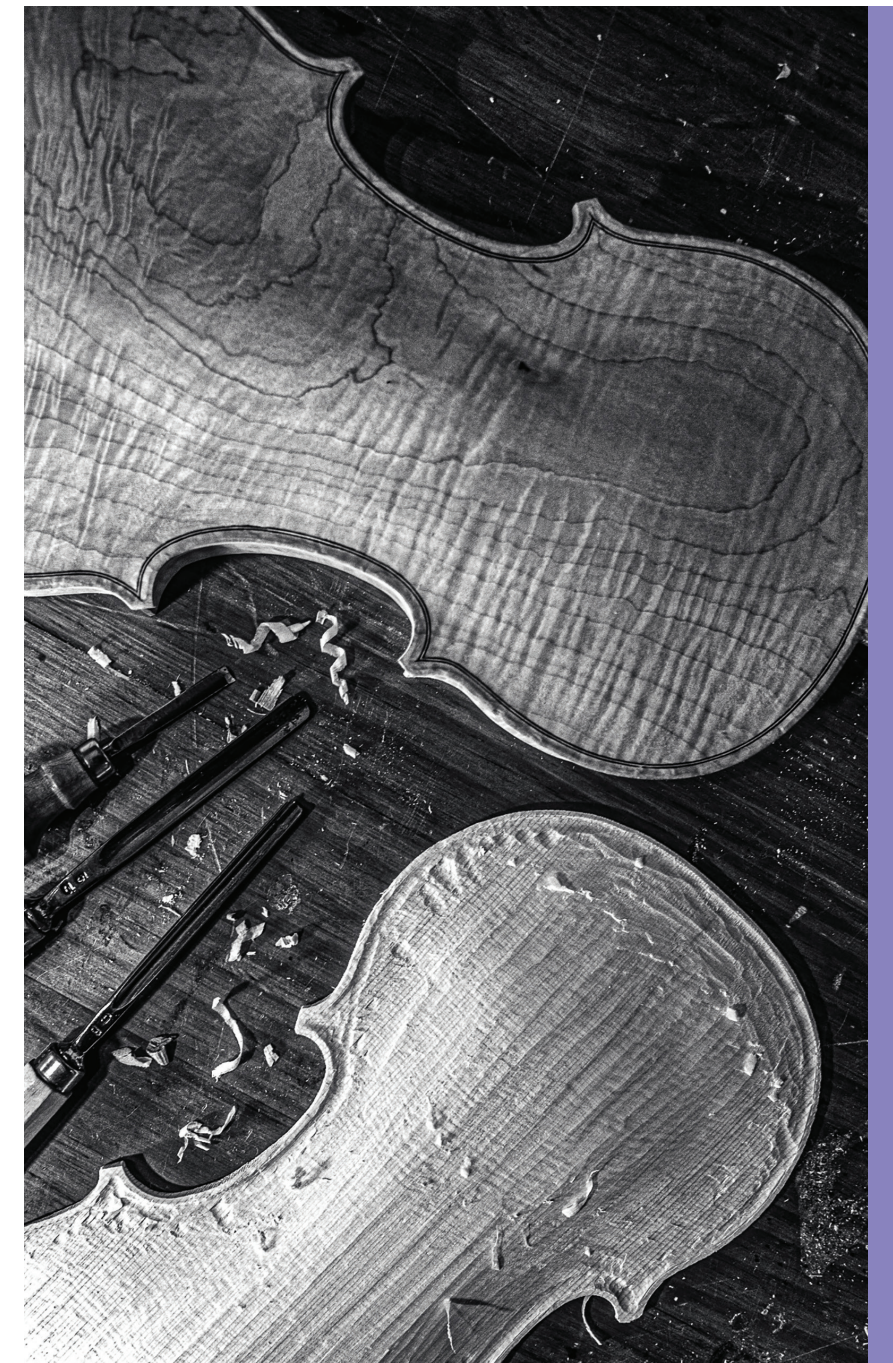
In the video, Landry says, Clifton recounts how he and Cleveland needed a more portable instrument for their performances. Standing over a sandy patch of earth, Clifton draws an outline of the instrument he envisions. Then the brothers talk about how they found someone who made it possible.

Landry, whose name is synonymous with rubboard making in Louisiana, if not the world, describes the moment like an archaeologist discovering a vanished civilization. Needing to share the story, he showed the video to his mother. Afterward, she turned to him and said, “Mais, Don, you know that was your daddy.” Landry didn't. His father, by then deceased, had been a master iron worker. All Landry

knew at the time was that this moment on the video felt like an epiphany, something that helped to explain an urge that had been stirring inside of him for several years.

Years before, in the 1980s, Landry went to see Joe Coleman, who ran a sheet metal shop in Lafayette, where he built rubboards on the side, and commissioned an instrument. Soon after Landry received his rubboard, the two lost contact. Then Landry heard that Coleman had stopped working. “I called him and said, ‘I wouldn't have done this if you hadn't retired, but I really feel something is telling me to make these rubboards.’”

From Coleman, Landry learned about what equipment he would need to begin and how





to modify steel — ultimately, the stainless steel that he works with now to make the “crisper, clearer, louder, resonant sound” that distinguishes his Key of Z Rubboards. “He was completely generous with his knowledge,” Landry says of Coleman.

Such generosity ensures the preservation of tradition. Today, Landry sells rubboards all over the world. On one table in his workshop rises a stack of five composition books with names and addresses of customers, along with the serial number of the rubboard they purchased. He started keeping this information one year after he began making rubboards, so it’s missing entries, but his notebooks and the clippings and memorabilia on his workshop walls show that he’s sold instruments to ZZ Top, Kid Rock, Rihanna, and, he says, “most of the Zydeco bands that tour.”

As for the bend of the sheet metal that goes around the shoulders — the detail that made the instrument portable — that’s one “trade secret” that Landry won’t talk about, he says while turning to check a new message on his

(Left) Kevin Rees plays a Cajun Accordion at Vermilionville (Bottom) Tee Don Landry works in his Key of Z Rubboards workshop in Sunset (Right) These details distinguish Jay Steiner’s ‘tit fers

phone. “I just got a sale from Amazon,” he says. Soon, he will open that top composition book and record the details for rubboard number 4,571.

Joseph Carrier, band leader of Chubby Carrier and the Bayou Swamp Band, refers to Landry as “the rubboard man.” Late in this year’s Carnival season, his damaged accordion needed urgent care so that he could fulfill his performance obligations. “Martin Accordions is the place to take our accordions to be worked on,” Carrier says. Worked on, he notes, but not made, for while Acadiana has become a mecca of melodeon (diatonic) accordion makers, Carrier can’t name anyone who builds the piano accordions that most Zydeco musicians play. “We have to go overseas,” he says. “The go-to accordion is made in Italy by Dino Baffetti.”

Through their ability to generate high volume, the arrival of the accordion in Louisiana in the late 1800s altered the history of local music. Fiddlers and players of the ‘tit fer had to generate extra energy to keep up with that new volume. Some of the earliest accordions that made their way into the hands of local musicians were the German-made brands Monarch and Sterling. From German factories, they sailed across the Atlantic to the Manhattan instrument distributor Buegel-eisen and Jacobson, eventually travelling south to the Rayne department store Mervine Kahn. For decades, many Louisiana accordionists played German-made instruments that often bore the stamp “Made for B & J.”

Without local makers, and with no one here to repair or tune, musicians had to send their accordions away when they needed work.



Andre Michot, the accordionist of Grammy Award-winning Lost Bayou Ramblers and maker of Michot Accordions, imagines a scene: A group of local musicians arrive at a friend’s house, loading his truck with their damaged and out-of-tune instruments. They then send a lone driver west to Houston to see the Czech-born music store owner John Mrnustik.

Such trips increased in the late 1930s after German accordion factories converted to war production. With the rise of the Berlin Wall, East German products were no longer available in the West. This created a shortage in local availability. Then, in the 1950s, Church Point-born Sidney Brown changed the history of the accordion in Louisiana.

“He went from repairing to making them, applying reverse engineering,” says Michot, illustrating the moment as he stands in front of a mid-20th century Hohner, one of many accordions in his collection. “He took apart a Hohner and learned to build by putting it back together again.”

After Brown began making accordions, other locals learned the process, among them Lawrence “Shine” Mouton, Marc Savoy, Clarence “Junior” Martin, and Randy Falcon, mythic names in the pantheon of Louisiana music. Martin, who worked in construction, began much like Brown. One day more than 30 years ago, Pennye Huval stepped into her father’s home and saw his Acadian accordion dismantled. The parts of the instrument that Marc Savoy made for him lay scattered across the room.

“Has Momma seen what you’ve done?” Huval asked.



"I want to try to make one," Martin said. From then on, father and daughter spent several years studying and planning. Huval, a retired principal at Breaux Bridge Primary, would leave school at the end of each day to commence work building that first accordion with her father, now age 81 and still working every day in the family shop, Martin Accordions, in Scott. Together, they have been making instruments for more than 30 years.

"The actual date is hard to say," Huval says, "because we spent so long studying and asking questions. What kind of parts would we need? What name would we give it? What would it look like?"

To that latter question, Martin Accordions eventually provided an iconic answer. Across the bellows, a crawfish stretches its claws wider and wider as the instrument expands. This detail came after California artist Jim Bartz requested permission to add an image to the bellows of his own Martin accordion. "We told him to go ahead," Huval says. Now, even when the instrument's face is turned away, that crawfish distinguishes a Martin accordion.

Nearby, in Broussard, Andre Michot works alone as he maintains the lineage of Louisiana accordion makers. About 20 years ago, recognizing that few locals had the skills to tune accordions, Randy Falcon suggested that Michot learn. Then in 2006, Falcon started teaching Michot how to make accordions. He admires the distinct sound of local accordions,

noting that he can detect a Falcon or Acadian in the first notes.

"Tuning the reeds is where a lot of the distinction comes in," Michot says, estimating that he spends an average of three hours tuning an accordion. Building one, on the other hand, requires between 80 to 100 hours. He makes them in batches, usually three at a time. In a small room in the back of his shop, Michot sits in front of a reed block from his current batch. With a dropper, he applies beeswax — "My neighbor is a beekeeper, and he gave this to me," — and pine resin to hold the reed block to the reed plate, then a layer of linseed oil to prevent it from becoming brittle.

After finishing, Michot moves to the front room of his workspace, equal parts accordion shop and museum, to survey his collection: Monarch and Sterling brands, some with that B & J stamp, also Globe, Lester, Paolo Soprani, as well as accordions by Louisianans Sidney Brown, "Shine" Mouton and John Hebert. Eventually, he opens a glass case from which he selects one of his earliest instruments. "I used to play this one on stage. Then my drummer backed his car over it. I don't think it's fixable." Carefully replacing the busted instrument, Michot smiles as he closes the cabinet door. Behind him, guitars hang from a front wall. Accordions fill shelves and cases. Faces, reeds and bellows sprawl on a table next to a tuner that looks like it's on loan from NASA, and yet there's a serene order here, one

that matches Michot's demeanor as he talks about the history of the accordion, occasionally stopping to play. Exchanging one instrument for another, he says, "I love all of this."

Michot's joy, infectious in its authenticity, also exudes from violin makers Anya Burgess and Chris Segura. Burgess plays fiddle with Bonsoir Catin and The Magnolia Sisters and runs Sola Violins in downtown Lafayette. In those moments that she can carve away from these and other obligations, she also makes violins, although she hesitates to call herself a maker. "If I can build one a year, that's amazing. Even full-time violin makers, if they build one a month, that's serious production. You have to be crazy to be a violin maker."

(Above) Fr. Trey Ange, Jarrett LeBlanc, Josh Regan, and Smith Stickney perform at the *Courir de Mardi Gras de L'anse in Mermentau Cove* (Right) In his workshop in Broussard, Andre Michot works on the reed block of a Michot Accordion

As a student at Indiana University, Burgess remembers feeling nearly woozy with delight when she saw a course listing for violin making. She enrolled at once and continues to practice the Italian method that she learned in school, using all hand tools, a tradition that she has passed onto Segura, a founding member of Feufollet and fiddler for the Pine Leaf Boys. Several years ago, when Segura expressed interest in learning how to make the instrument that he's played since age four, the two applied for and received a fellowship grant from the Louisiana Division of the Arts. The grant lasted one year. They continued for another, working side-by-side, with Segura driving to Burgess's workshop in Arnaudville two, sometimes three days a week.

"I think that Anya is the first classically trained violin maker to make violins in south Louisiana," Segura says as he sits before an in-progress violin in his Lafayette workshop. As a child, he remembers being in the Vermillion Parish home of fiddle maker Lionel Leleux. "Tools and violins were piled up on tables. Pieces were everywhere," he says of that first vision of what making an instrument might look like. Leleux's instruments were a major advancement upon the cigar box violins of early makers such as Joseph "Bébé" Carrière.

As they continue this tradition, Burgess and Segura carry small cases of tools to Sola Violins, where they restore instruments and prepare new ones for sale, and then back to their separate workshops, where in-progress violins await. The one laid out on Segura's table will be, once finished, his fourteenth. In Sola Violins, where the phone rings, customers browse, and locals stop by to chat about music or just to say hello, the two know that they could never find the time or long stretches of sustained attention necessary to build their own instruments while working in the shop. "Violin making can be lonely," Burgess says. "Our mission here is making access to music easier. The shop allows us to do that."

Both perform with instruments that they made, Burgess with the violin she built in that university course, Segura with the one that he made under her tutelage. "It's become an extension of me," he says, opening a case to look at his first creation. After a few moments, he turns from it to pick up his thirteenth violin, an instrument waiting for its Canadian owner to collect. Then, closing his eyes, he plays, swaying gently to music that he creates and makes possible for others.

In "The Cajuns: From Acadia to Louisiana," William Faulkner Rushton writes of the rise of another quintessential instrument for local music: "Out of the milieu of violins and spoons eventually evolved the use of the 'tit fer, or triangle, as a clear, light, bell-like rhythm section." The sound, not as dominant as drums, soon became ubiquitous in music made throughout Acadiana.

"Early 'tit fers date to the late 1800s and early 1900s and bear little resemblance to the triangles made today," says blacksmith Jay Steiner as he lights the coal forge in his shop at Vermillionville. "They were made from scrap steel salvaged from old hay rakes. The loops were about a yard long. Divide by three, and that's the perfect amount for a 'tit fer."

Steiner stokes the fire. Sparks surround his face. "Those early instruments were not struck with iron rods," he says. "They were triangles with metal loops and shaken like tambourines." The instrument evolved to what we now know when music moved into dance halls and instruments needed to become louder because of the venue size.

"I picked this up as I went along," Steiner says, noting that he had no mentor, only curiosity and appreciation for the history of the instrument. "I call it learning by burning." There are, he believes, a few other 'tit fer makers in the area. Unlike him, he says, they use modern equipment and gas, rather than coal, to forge the steel. Among the musicians and bands who use his 'tit fers, Steiner cites Louis Michot, Chris Stafford and Wilson Savoy. He's also made the house triangle at the Blue Moon Saloon, and you can leave the gift shop at Vermillionville with a T-shirt that features a replica of one of his earliest instruments.

Outside the forge, a crowd gathers to watch Steiner work. When the flame dies, he selects several 'tit fers from his bag and steps onto the porch to greet visitors from Canada, France and California. Steiner shifts between French and English, leading the visitors through the

history of the instrument and its role in Louisiana music. Then he starts to play. A wide-eyed 11-year-old girl from San Diego moves closer. Steiner stops and reaches into his bag for a smaller instrument. Passing it to her, he offers a brief instruction, and soon, smiling, she begins to create her own sound.

"God gave me a blacksmith's hands," he says. "I've got rhythm in my head, but I can't translate it elsewhere." With the young first-timer accompanying him, Steiner resumes playing, proving himself wrong.

Here's a vision with accompanying soundtrack: Steiner, dressed like an 1870s blacksmith, moves across the floorboards outside the forge, the leather soles of his boots stirring dust, iron striking iron as he dances to the rhythm of an instrument that he made with his own hands, an instrument whose lineage reaches back to a hay rake that grazed the land from which this music sprung, this land that continues to cultivate and nourish it.

Take what is available and use it. Modify what you inherit. Place these instruments in someone's hands and teach them to play. In the process, listen as a local soundscape emerges. Watch a culture endure. ■

