

# Clifton Chenier

Accordionist and Zydeco musician widely considered the ‘King of Zydeco,’ (b Opelousas, Louisiana, June 25, 1925, d Lafayette, Louisiana, December 12, 1987). His father, Joseph Chenier, was a black Creole sharecropper who was an amateur accordion player. Clifton’s uncle, Maurice ‘Big’ Chenier, was a guitarist, fiddler, and dance club owner. It was from his father that Clifton Chenier first learned the accordion, and though he grew up playing the single-row push-button diatonic accordion, it was the large piano-key chromatic model for which he would become famous. Besides his own father, Chenier’s earliest influence was accordion player Am’ d’ Ardoin, the first known black Creole to have recorded. Chenier also found inspiration in the blues of Muddy Waters, Peetie Wheatstraw, and Lightnin’ Hopkins, as well as the R&B of Fats Domino and Professor Longhair.

Chenier grew up working in the rice and sugar fields of Louisiana but moved to Port Arthur, Texas, in 1947, with the influx of black Creoles to the Houston area. In the daytime, he worked for local oil companies while playing music at night with his brother Cleveland in a group called the Red Hot Sizzling Band. The Chenier brothers performed throughout the Gulf Coast Louisiana and Texas, from the late 1940s to the early 1950s. In 1954, Clifton Chenier was discovered by talent scout J.R. Fulbright and signed to Elko Records. By 1955, he and his new band, the Zydeco Ramblers, had moved to Specialty Records. In 1956, Chenier left his day job in order to devote all of his time to music. area, in both

During the 1960s, Chenier and his wife Margaret relocated to Houston, where he lived and played in the black Creole area known as Frenchtown. In Frenchtown traditional Creole music was changing dramatically as it evolved from the older ‘la la’ style to modern Zydeco, and Chenier contributed significantly to this progression. One of the most notable innovations introduced by Chenier and his brother, Cleveland, was the *frottoir*, a washboard that could be worn as a vest. The frottoir, or rub board, which was played with spoons or thimbles, added an important new dimension to the percussive sound of Creole music.

As he moved increasingly away from the older la-la style, Chenier began to blend French and Cajun two-steps and waltzes from Southwest Louisiana with New Orleans R&B, Texas Blues, and big band jazz to create the modern sound of Zydeco. In the early 1960s, the president of San Francisco-based Arhoolie Records, Chris Strachwitz, discovered Chenier in Frenchtown while on a field trip working to record and preserve regional music styles. Strachwitz signed Chenier to a recording contract in 1963 and released his first album, *Louisiana Blues and Zydeco*, in 1964. Another important milestone in Chenier’s career came in 1964 at the Gold Star Studio in Houston, where he recorded the classic creole song “Zydeco Sont Pas Sal’,” marking one of the first times the term ‘Zydeco’ was used in a recording.

In 1973 Chenier was featured in the documentary film *Hot Pepper*, and in 1976, he formed his final group, the Red Hot Louisiana Band. Chenier and the Red Hot Louisiana Band appeared on the PBS program *Austin City Limits* in 1976 and 1979 and toured with singer Etta James. In large part because of Chenier's widespread popularity, Zydeco began to emerge from its home base in Texas and Louisiana to the world stage by the early 1980s. In 1983 Chenier became the first black Creole artist to be presented a Grammy for his album, *I'm Here*. The following year, he performed at the White House.

Chenier was beset with health ailments later in life. He had one foot amputated due to complications from diabetes, and he frequently required kidney dialysis. Despite these and other problems, he continued to play whenever he could until his death on December 12, 1987. Chenier is buried in Loureauxville, Louisiana, and is survived by his son C.J. Chenier. Upon Clifton's death, C.J. Chenier took over leadership of the Red Hot Louisiana Band and has continued to tour and release albums, thereby carrying on the Zydeco traditions of his father. Chenier had a major influence on many other Zydeco performers, including Buckwheat Zydeco, Rockin' Sydney, and Queen Ida. Chenier also was the one most responsible for melding together Texas and Louisiana musical traditions to help carry modern Zydeco to worldwide audiences.

*Aimee Jameson*