

Keeping Cajun Music Alive — "Yes, siree, I guarontee ya":

A conversation with Pe-Te Johnson and Jason Theriot

Pe-Te Johnson was born in Grand Taso, near Eunice, Louisiana. His ancestors are direct descendants of the Acadians expelled from Nova Scotia in the mid-eighteenth century. His last name, Johnson, is the Anglo version of his Acadian sir name, Jeansonne. He served in the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War and was stationed in Chateauroux, France, for two and a half years, having served as an interpreter when the military opened a new base there in 1953. He did his first radio show at the V.A. hospital in Alexandria, Louisiana, in the early 1950s.

After completing his service, Pe-Te moved to Beaumont in 1959 and worked at Wyatt's Cafeteria until he transferred to Houston in 1961. Later, he became an inspector for the Arco Petrochemical Plant where he made more money selling barbeque sandwiches for lunch than his job paid. In 1979, he opened Pe-Te's Cajun BBQ House across from Ellington Field in Friendswood. The restaurant and dancehall remained a favorite of pilots, astronauts, cosmonauts, celebrities, Cajuns, and non-Cajuns alike until it closed in 2005.

Even though the restaurant kept him busy, Pe-Te accepted an offer to start a local Cajun music radio show at KTEK in 1981. Two years later the program moved to listener-supported KPFT, and this year he celebrated his thirtieth year as the host of "Pe-Te's Cajun Bandstand," which he does as a volunteer service. He has been arguably the most influential public figure in promoting Cajun and Zydeco music in the Houston region. The following excerpts are from a conversation between Jason Theriot and Pe-Te Johnson on May 30, 2009.

All photos courtesy of Pe-Te Johnson unless otherwise noted.



Pe-Te and Jennie married on January 31, 1964. She was his partner in love, in business, and in life for forty-nine years until she passed away earlier this year.

CAJUN IMMIGRATION TO TEXAS

PE-TE: I've got a first cousin, they moved over here in the late forties, in Katy, to harvest rice fields. They still live in Katy. He's in his eighties, eighty-nine, and he was in the service during World War II. ... I do remember some of the farmers that moved over to the Port Arthur, Beaumont area to harvest crops, rice mostly, and a lot of them with very little education, moved to Port Arthur and that particular area to work the plants and in the Beaumont area also. But very few of them you ever heard that ever came to the Hous-

ton area. It was mostly around the Port Arthur area and I can't remember all the other little towns.

JT: Where did most of these Cajuns migrate from?

PE-TE: From the Eunice area, some of them lived around Opelousas, Ville Platte, Basille, and Elton. There's a lot of them [moved] from Lake Charles to the plants in Beaumont and Port Arthur back then, because that's where they paid higher wages ... because back then, you was lucky to make fifty cents a day, to where if you went to work at the plants, you might make a dollar and a quarter an hour. So that was a lot of difference.

JT: Some of the things that make our people unique are our connections to the Roman Catholic faith, close kinship ties, marriage within the community, and our French language. Those things were hard to come by for the Cajuns who migrated over here to Texas. How do you think most of these families were able to cope with moving to a big city like Beaumont or Houston?

PE-TE: It was very hard on them, because I can remember several couples that got married and they moved out of town, out of state, and the women, especially the women, they couldn't cope with it. Within a month or less, they'd be back home again, and the next thing you know, there'd be divorces. They just couldn't cope with almost like a new world. If you moved out of, say, Eunice and you came to Houston, my God, that was something that they just couldn't understand, all the people and all the traffic and different bylaws and so on and so forth. They just couldn't cope with it. ... Now, if they were moving to, say, Port Arthur or where other Cajuns was, they would pick up with other families and friendships, and it was more comfortable.



Paula Baltera, who assists Pe-Te by listing the artists and songs played on the Cajun Bandstand, Pe-Te with “co-host” Shaggy, and J. B. Adams, who hosts the “Zydeco Pas Salé” program on KPFT, Sunday mornings from 3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m.

Photo by Debbie Z. Harwell.

But if they would move into an area where there wasn't any Cajuns, and a lot of them didn't have the education. Some of the husbands could barely read or write that would go to work in the plants or whatever. It was hard for him to go to a bank and want to make a loan or whatever because he didn't speak fluent English, it was broken English, and so he wouldn't be understanding all the new laws in a different community or state. So it made it rough on those people.

JT: How surprised were you when you moved to Beaumont in 1959 to find such a large population of French-speaking Cajuns there?

PE-TE: I was surprised. As a matter of fact, I worked for Wyatt's Cafeteria at the time, and when a lot of the customers would come in, I could pick up the dialect. ... I knew where they were from. So I just automatically started speaking in French or asked them a question or say something in French, and, boy, they'd get all excited. ... So it was quite a treat, to find a lot of Cajuns that did speak French, which you have a lot of them that was raised in Louisiana, from Eunice or whatever, and a lot of them never did speak any Cajun.

At the 2008 Bayou City Cajun Festival, Pe-Te presented Hunter Hayes with a baby accordion, knowing the country star had started playing accordion at age two. After playing “The Back Door” on the tiny instrument, Hayes then autographed it for KPFT to auction in a fundraiser.

They were taught, “Well, no, you don't want to speak that foreign language. You want to be high-class.”

JT: How did that compare to Houston, where few Cajuns lived, when you arrived in the 1970s?

PE-TE: I almost lost my French on account of that. I didn't have nobody to speak to. That was my biggest problem, when I went back home maybe once a month . . . I went for a long time before I could run into somebody that did speak French.

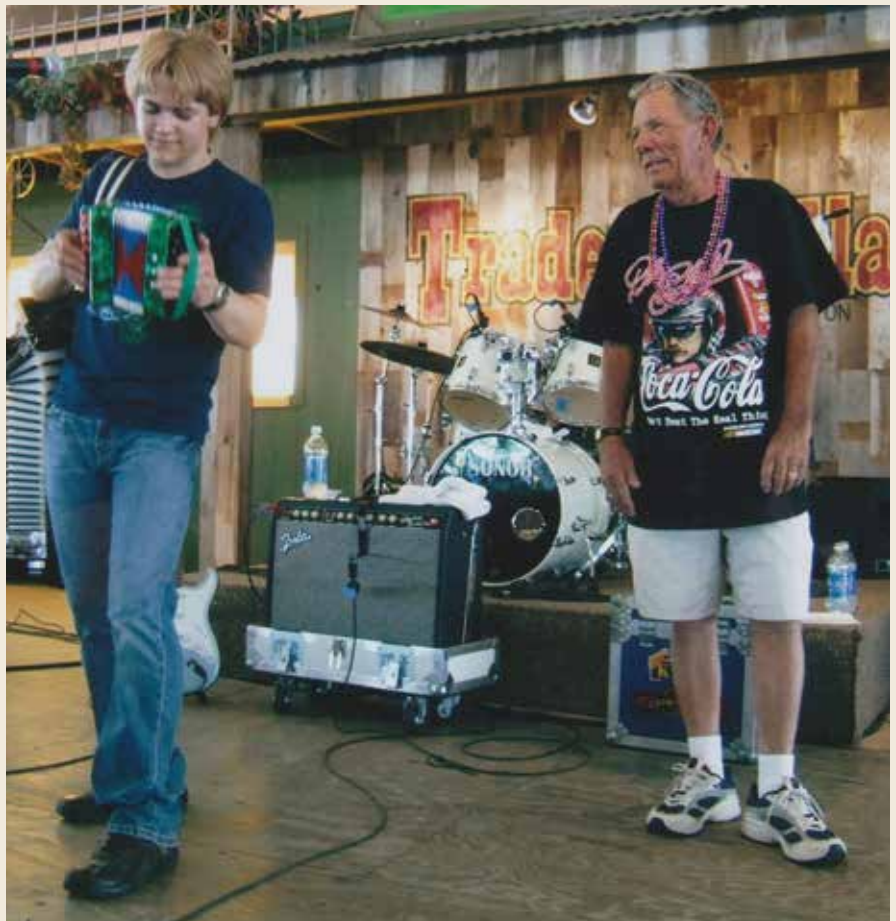
CAJUN DANCES AND MUSIC

Pe-Te brought the first “Cajun Dance” to the Houston area in 1980. Saturday night “Cajun Dances” were (and still are) a traditional form of cultural and ethnic expression, where local Cajun French musicians performed at homes or on front porches. These dances pre-dated the amplification of musical instruments.

PE-TE: I was the first one that had Cajun dances here in the Houston area. When I started the barbeque place, my dream was to have Cajun dances. So not even a year after we opened the barbeque place, we had our first Cajun dance [there] and I think we had about forty people. It was supposed to only hold about fifteen. [Laughs.] But I brought a band in all the way from Louisiana.

JT: Do you remember that first band?

PE-TE: Oh, yeah. Lesa Cormier and the Sundown Playboys, and they played at the barbeque place for, God, for seven, eight years, I guess. ... We used to have house dances when



I was a kid, and matter of fact, they'd have a house dance at one house one Saturday night, then next week or the two weeks later, they'd have another one at somebody else's house. Back then there was only one musician, a couple of musicians, and Amédé Ardoin, that played the accordion. I was only about two-and-a-half, three years old, and he played at my house. He was the only musician there. Back then they'd say, "Fais dodo," and they'd put the kids in the back room in the bed and everything, and you was supposed to stay in there and go to sleep. Man, that accordion music, it was in my blood. [Laughs.] And I'd drift out of there. Finally, after about the third time of getting a whoopin', they'd just leave me there and I'd just sit right there by his feet while he played.

Then later on, [they] had a fiddle player join him. Either Sady Courville or Dennis McGee would join him. But like I said, they'd move around. Then pretty soon a guitar player would come in. Different people would start, like Amédé Breaux or Joe Falcon; they would start putting bands together and everything. That's where all the dances would start, and pretty soon somebody opened a dance hall and then it went from there and pretty soon every town had a dance hall.

But all the music has changed so much. I remember when the Zydeco was first started because we had some black folks that lived down the road from us in the country and they'd invite us to go out there. The way it started . . . the Saturday, they would spend all day picking up the green beans, snap beans. Then the Sunday, they'd come over there in the afternoon, when it was cool, and they'd all bring their instruments and everything. While the women was out there snapping the green beans, they'd be playing their music. . . . I was just a little kid, but I'd go out there and break snap beans just for the heck of it and listen to the music. They had an old washtub turned over with a little rope tied to it to make some sound, and pots and pans they'd beat on, and it'd make some pretty good music. They had a few bottles of homemade brew and everybody would take a few little drinks. I was maybe eight or nine. I'd go over there and while they wasn't looking, I'd get me a little sip and everything.

JT: Was there ever any integration between the Zydeco musicians and the Cajun musicians at these house dances?

PE-TE: Oh, yes. Matter of fact, Amédé Ardoin, he was black and Dennis [McGee] was white. Poor Amédé, he was killed, I guess about a month after he had played at one of our house dances at home.



Every Saturday morning, Pe-Te gets up at 3:30 a.m. to make the drive in to the KPFT station in Montrose. At the controls with Shaggy by his side, he organizes his music, requests, and announcements for the three-hour program.

Photo by Debbie Z. Harwell.

Because back then there wasn't no air conditioning, they'd just open all the windows and try to let the fresh air come in. This was like in July, June, July, August, and it was so hot in there, you'd be wringing wet all the time. He'd be just a-sweating, sweat would just run in his face while he was trying to play. One of the white women would get up there with a handkerchief and try to wipe his brow because the sweat was running down his eyes and so on and so forth.

In the fifties and the early sixties, until, oh, say, probably the early seventies, Cajun music just about died altogether. Everybody started moving towards big bands like Bob Wills and started playing the country music, like Jimmy Newman went from Cajun to country. PeeWee Kershaw, when him and Rusty and Doug broke up, he was with Bob Wills for about four or five years, toured and played with him, second fiddle. Then probably in the middle of the seventies, Cajun music started to come back up again. You had Nathan Abshire and a bunch of the other big bands like Steve Riley and some of those.

JT: What do you think has been the influence of the record studios particularly here in Houston, the influence on Cajun



People came from across the region and across the world to eat, dance, and listen to music at Pe-Te's Cajun BBQ House on Galveston Road. Celebrity autographs, over 4,000 license plates, and 3,000 golf balls decorated the 7,000 square foot facility.



Cajun fan-favorite, PeeWee Kershaw.

music, like in 1946 with Harry Choates and 1947 with Iry LeJeune and Clifton Chenier? It's kind of ironic if you think about the song, "Jole Blon." The lyrics are about a woman who leaves a Cajun guy for somebody in Texas, and here you've got a man from Acadia Parish, Harry Choates, who moves to the Golden Triangle to work in the shipyards and plays the fiddle at night, and he's the first to record the popularized version of "Jole Blon" by a Houston record studio. What we think of as "Jole Blon" today is really a Texas version recorded here, played here.

PE-TE: Right. But I guess what I want to try to say is the melody is just something that just gets into your system and makes you move. I don't know what it is about fiddle music, I mean, or the accordion. It's just something, once that sound comes out, it just sticks to you and you just want to keep listening to it. ... Matter of fact, they've got two Louisiana national anthems. You've got "Jole Blon" and then "You Are My Sunshine." That's two. I guess I get just as many requests for "Jole Blon" as I do for "You are my Sunshine" on Saturday mornings. Very, very few recordings where they sing the "Jole Blon" in English. Now, some of them that will sing it bilingual; they'll sing it in French and then the next line they'll repeat it in English or French or whatever. I've even heard some of the Chicano bands do it in [Spanish], and it tickles me. But as soon as you hear the music, you know what it is. You know the words regardless—well, if you don't understand French, you can pick it up pretty fast.

JT: So, Pe-Te, you would agree with me that it's really the music that is kind of the main attraction?

PE-TE: It's not really the food that brings them in; it's the music. The crawfish and the étouffée and so on, they'll go for it, but you mention Steve Riley & the Mamou Playboys is



Pe-Te with record producer Huey P. Meaux and Jim Oliver, New Years Eve 1981.

going to be there or Geno Delafonse, you might as well get ready for a crowd, because you going to have a crowd.

CAJUN RADIO

Through his many contacts, Pe-Te found several advertisers to help launch the new Cajun program that he recommended air on Saturday morning, 7:00 to 11:00 a.m. When Pe-Te asked who would be the disc jockey, the manager said, "You are." Pe-Te contacted some friends in the radio business and they encouraged him to do it. One DJ from Beaumont said, "Man, we need some more Cajun music in Houston." A year later, the radio station sold to a religious station and Pe-Te needed a new home for his Cajun music. He met with Huey P. Meaux at KPFT 90.1 FM who introduced him to the station manager and they agreed to bring Pe-Te's show to KPFT on Saturday mornings, 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.

PE-TE: One Saturday morning trail riders was coming through, and one of the trail riders was the general manager for KTEK in Alvin. I had an eight-track player set up and I was playing Cajun music on it at the barbeque place. He come in and he got all excited about it and he wanted to know who was Cajun and so I told him. He says, "I ain't got time right now to talk to you but," he says, "can I call you next week?" I said, "Sure." So I gave him my card and he called me the following week and he asked me to come into the radio station.

It's my culture, so, you know, hey, that's part of me. And so many Cajuns still coming in and we get phone calls from all over the world. I even had a phone call from the Space Station, from the astronauts up there. So I enjoy it. I love it, put it that way. . . .

More Cajuns are moving in here in the Houston area. Pretty soon, if Houston don't watch out they'll be calling it *Ti Mamou* [Little Mamou] or *Ma Mamou* [my Mamou] . . . you got Cajun entertainment every weekend over here in the Houston area and periodically during the week.

JT: You see what you started?
[Laughs.]

PE-TE: But I've enjoyed every minute of it. Somebody asked me here last week, "Pe-Te, you're going on twenty-seven years. We thought you was going to quit whenever you done twenty-five." Every time I get up to a level, I said, "I think I'm going to try and make thirty now." [Laughs] . . .

JT: How would you like to be remembered as a radio host?

PE-TE: I'd like for them to remember me as I was and what I enjoyed doing to promote the Cajun heritage. If you want to do something for me, do it while I'm still alive, don't wait till I'm six feet under. Don't send me no flowers while I'm dead, in other words. [Laughs.]



In 2007, Jo-El Sonnier presented Pe-Te with an award for Outstanding Achievement for his contributions to Cajun music and culture.

Pe-Te's Cajun Bandstand still airs on Saturdays from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. on listener-sponsored KPFT 90.1 FM. You can listen to past broadcasts anytime at <http://archive.kpft.org/index.php>.

Jason Theriot is a native of south Louisiana and a historian of Cajun culture. A published author, he earned his Ph.D in history from the University of Houston and lives in Houston with his wife and two ("Texas Cajun") children.