

Digging for Gold: Cajun and Creole Children's Songs and Lullabies

by Jane Vidrine

Getting to the earliest sources of traditional Cajun and Creole songs is a veritable mutual obsession for Ann Savoy and me. We are friends and bandmates in the [Magnolia Sisters](#), the premier all-women's Cajun band from South Louisiana. A song collector, musician, author, and folklorist, Ann had just published Volume 1 of her book *Cajun Music: A Reflection of a People* (Savoy 1984) when she and I, a folklorist and musician, started playing music together. We were both mothers of young children and found common ground and friendship in sharing music while our children played around us. We also were dedicated French speakers seeking to learn more about Louisiana French. Our story goes that our duo was harmonizing on a Cajun song at a party in the early 1990s when the [Arhoolie Records](#) creator Chris Strachwitz overheard us and said, "You should make a record!" Seven albums, countless concerts and tours, and two Grammy nominations later, we are still playing and creating together along with our other musical sisters, Lisa Trahan and Anya Burgess.

Louisiana French music has been the regional social music of South Louisiana since long before the advent of commercial recordings in the 1920s. Yet, as late as the 1980s, it was rare to see a woman perform in a Louisiana dancehall or festival, even if she were on stage with her husband

or other family members. Several notable women who did perform and record were Cléoma Breaux Falcon, who made the first Cajun recording “Allons à Lafayette” with her husband Joe Falcon in 1928; Eva Touchet, who performed with her male family members; and Sheryl Cormier, powerful accordionist and the first woman Cajun band leader. When the Magnolia Sisters came on the music scene, Ann had been playing, recording, and touring for a decade with her husband, a master accordionist and Cajun accordion maker, Marc Savoy. Still, an all-women’s Cajun band was virtually unheard of. This presented certain challenges related to adapting the music to a woman’s voice and sensibility. Many traditional Cajun songs are about jilted love affairs that cast the woman as the antagonist, so choosing repertoire often meant rewriting or gender switching lyrics to make sense from a woman’s stance. Plus, many Cajun standards are awkward for women’s voices because of the range limitations of commonly used C diatonic button accordions.

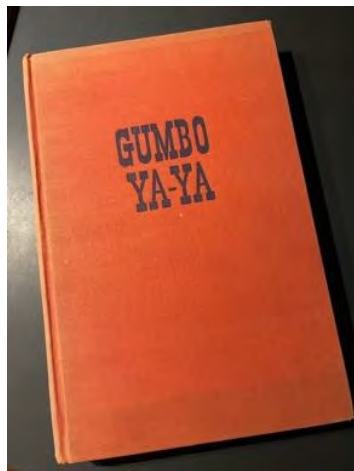
The focus of Ann's and my musical friendship has always been about finding and learning the parts of the Cajun repertoire that nobody else was doing but that somehow spoke to us. We gravitated to songs that were reflections of home, women, and real life. Songs and ballads with beautiful, haunting melodies pulled at our heartstrings. We looked to the past for our models and repertoire, captivated by the earliest Cajun recordings made in the 1920s and 30s by Cléoma Breaux Falcon, singing and playing guitar with her brothers and her husband, Joe. Some of these early recordings had been re-released by Chris Strachwitz on [Arhoolie Records](#). Ann had a collection of 78s, books, and theses on Louisiana folk songs as well as tapes from all over the Francophone world that other music collectors gave her when she was doing her book project. Those resources that others had not explored were gold mines waiting to be shared.

Lapin Lapin: Chansons Cajuns & Créoles pour les Enfants

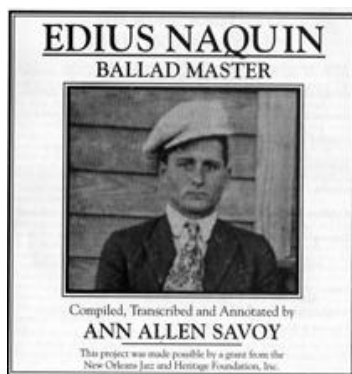
Louisiana French children’s songs are missing from late 20th-century commercial recordings, except for a few that were incorporated into the Cajun dance band repertoire by artists such as Happy Fats (“Little Fat Man”) and Nathan Abshire (“Les Maringoins Ont Tous Mangé Ma Belle,” “The Mosquitoes Ate Up My Sweetheart”). Plus, by the 1970s, the amount of French language spoken in Cajun and Creole homes had declined to the point that most children in the region were no longer exposed to these songs. When asked, some older French speakers might remember parts of one or two songs such as “Saute Crapaud,” a ditty about a jumping frog, but basically the tradition was lost to the archives.

So why did we launch a project to make a CD of Louisiana French Children’s songs? Like any passion project, the reasons were personal. Both Ann and I had grown up outside Louisiana singing the catalog of American children’s songs in school and at home. Songs like “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” and “Polly Wolly Doodle” were a natural part of our childhoods. They helped us learn the English language. But our children missed out on the Louisiana French counterpart to American traditional children’s songs. At the time of this project, my children were attending grade school in a French Immersion setting taught by teachers from Francophone countries who did not know Louisiana music and certainly had no access to Louisiana French children’s songs. The students were learning French songs, but not Louisiana French songs. I wanted to learn the songs so I could teach them to my children’s classes. As we started to research children’s song, we found language, poetry, and vocabulary that offered glimpses into life in French Louisiana from a time when French language was spoken in the home, in the fields, in businesses, and on the streets of every rural town in South Louisiana.

Children’s songs are rooted in teaching language. Ann and I felt strongly that recording and publishing these rare Louisiana children’s songs might contribute to the ongoing effort to revive French language in Louisiana. The task led us to the archives available to us, notably the [John and Alan Lomax 1930s field recordings at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress](#) and important works in the [Center for Louisiana Studies archive by Irene Thérèse Whitfield, Catherine Blanchet, Corinne Saucier, and Elizabeth Brandon](#), as well as books from the early mid-1900s that included songs for children. Upon compiling a list of more than 200 songs, danses rondes, ditties, and variants from recorded and written resources, we realized the huge scope of the project and decided to apply for a grant from the Louisiana Division of the Arts to transcribe, catalog, select, and arrange songs, then publish a CD with a booklet containing lyrics, translations, and background notes. *Lapin Lapin (Rabbit Rabbit)* was placed in every library and French classroom in the state; lesson plans and related articles plus workshops for teachers promoted use of the songs in French classes (Magnolia Sisters 2006).

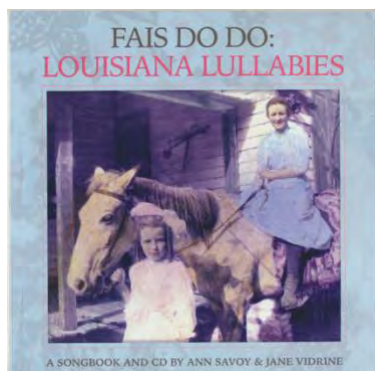


The *Lapin Lapin* CD contains 16 songs. Most of the originals were either sung a capella, as collected by the Lomaxes, or were transcribed in books such as Lyle Saxon’s *Gumbo Ya Ya* (Saxon 2022, 1945). The challenge was to arrange the songs to give the young listener a sense of the historical period without being stodgy while conveying the mood and implied meaning of the text. One song, “Misi Banjo,” is a 19th-century New Orleans Creole ditty found in an old folk song collection as well as a fragment sung by an elderly solo singer in a nursing home recorded by John and Alan Lomax. Adding a banjo and a calypso beat made the song come alive again. Another, “Compère Lapin,” brings to mind the many Louisiana trickster rabbit tales passed down in Cajun and Creole French tradition. “Compère Lapin” is a perfect companion to the author Sharon Arms Doucet’s beautifully illustrated *Why Lapin’s Ears Are Long* (Doucet 1997) referenced in our lesson plan for the song. French Canadian roots of Cajun culture are explored in “Laissez Moi S’en Aller” and “La Caille Et La Perdrix” (French version of “Frog Went A-Courtin”) from recordings of the Cajun ballad singer Caesar Vincent.² The piano accompaniment lends the song its Canadian flavor. “Cribisse Cribisse” (“Crawfish Crawfish”) is a Creole version of “You Get a Line and I’ll Get a Pole” from an old song collection. Old-time stringband accompaniment with playful fiddle and mandolin is the perfect sound for this one.



While it was inventive to make stylized treatments to bring out the mood or reflect the cultural origin of a song, sometimes getting as close to an original recording as possible is called for, as with “[J’ai Passé au Long du Bois](#)” (“I Passed Along the Woods”), a song Ann collected from the prolific Cajun ballad singer [Edius Naquin](#) of Eunice, LA. With only stark fiddles and vocals, it tells of the animals in the woods that sound different and scare us when it’s dark outside. Although not as comprehensive as the huge list of identified songs, *Lapin Lapin* is representative of the types of songs once sung by children in South Louisiana French-speaking families. Yet, there

was an entire category unrepresented by the *Lapin Lapin* project—lullabies.



Fais Do Do: Louisiana Lullabies

More than a decade after *Lapin Lapin*, Ann and I released *Fais Do Do: Louisiana Lullabies* (Magnolia Sisters 2019). This is a book and CD combo with 16 collected lullabies. Original source recordings are adapted and arranged simply yet beautifully with acapella and harmony singing and accompaniments on guitar, fiddle, cello, and piano. I transcribed the music and both of us transcribed the lyrics. Ann designed the book with selected photographic gems from her trove of historical photographs, which she and her daughter Gabrielle hand-colored.

“Je M’endors” is a beautiful song from a 1934 recording made in Louisiana by John and Alan Lomax. Rather than telling the original story about the bullies in Baton Rouge with iron knuckles, Ann composed new lyrics to reflect a child waiting for her parents to bring her home. As with *Lapin Lapin*, old recordings inspired the lullaby project, including collected recordings from the Lomaxes, Irene Thérèse Whitfield, Ann Savoy, and others.

The lyrics to “[Petits Sans Papa, Petits Sans Maman](#)” (“Little Ones with No Papa or Mama”) were found in a hundred-year-old article about Creole songs. They are so rich and full of unusual vocabulary and the story is fascinating. Since there was no tune with these lyrics, we used two traditional Creole melodies to create this song.

Petits sans papa, petits sans mamans (2x)
Qui ça ‘vous autres fait pour gagniez
‘d’l’argent? (3x)
Petits sans papa, dis moi, donc.

Little ones without fathers, little ones
without mothers (2x)
What do you do to make money? (3x)
Little ones without fathers, please tell me.

Nous couri l’autr’ bord pour chercher pat’ d’chats.
Nour tournien au bayou pour pêcher patassas.
Avec nous la cage nous trappé zozos.
Nous couri dans l’bois ramasser cancos.


We run to the other bank to gather catpaws.
We go around the bayou to fish for perch.
With our cage we catch birds.
We run in the woods and gather berries.

Nous couris dans l’bois fouiller latanier.
Nous vend sa racine pour fourbir l’plancher.
Pour faire de thé nous fouillé sassafras.
Pour faire de l’encre nous porté grain sougras.

We run in the woods to gather dwarf palmetto.
We sell the roots for scrubbing the floors.
To make tea we gather sassafras.
To make ink we bring pokeberries

“Fais Do Do Cola Colinette” is a version of a classic European French lullaby in which the mama offers her babies custard. In this characteristically Louisiana version, the mama offers gumbo and cake. Although the purpose of lullabies is to put babies to sleep, some of the lyrics are compelling and full of imagery, offering a view into the private life and thoughts of the singer. They are personal and sometimes sad. They contain advice to the growing child and reveal mothers’ concerns and worries.

Louisiana French lullabies and children's songs were almost lost to history; this project is an effort to help them make a comeback or at least be a relaxing soundtrack at the end of a long day for babies and adults alike. Producing these two collections of Louisiana French children's songs and digging deep into archival remnants of this tradition were personally gratifying to be sure. Combing through reams of paper, books, and cassette recordings was both tedious and exciting. Collaborating on music notation and arrangements, translation and transcription of Louisiana French language, writing and designing *Lapin Lapin* and *Fais Do Do: Louisiana Lullabies* were all part of our creative process. We never expected to change the world or make a ton of money with the products of our work. Rather, we wanted to honor those old voices and have them heard again. The experience of creating something new and useful from something nearly forgotten is palpable. Finding gems like this and bringing them back to life is like mining for gold and hitting pay dirt.

Jane Vidrine is a Cajun musician, folklorist, cultural activist, and music educator. She is Lead Consultant for Louisiana Heritage Connections, *Lâche Pas*, a groundbreaking elective curriculum development project focused on teaching Cajun and Creole music, traditions, and language in Vermilion Parish Schools in Southwest Louisiana. As a music educator, she created the Guitar and Ukulele Program for Lafayette Parish Public Schools. Her efforts spawned high school and elementary guitar programs with many graduates earning music college scholarships and becoming professional musicians, arts administrators, teachers, and luthiers. She holds a BA in Music from Washington University and an MEd from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. She performs with two-time Grammy nominated Cajun band, the Magnolia Sisters.  ORCID 0009-0006-1357-4574

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- Doucet, Sharon Arms. 1997. *Why Lapin's Ears Are Long and Other Tales from the Louisiana Bayou*. David Castrow, illus. London: Orchard Books.
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- Saxon, Lyle. 2022 and 1945. *Gumbo Ya-Ya*. Anniversary Edition. Pelican Rapids, MN: Pelican Press.

URLs

- Magnolia Sisters <https://magnoliasisters.com>
- Arhoolie Foundation <https://arhoolie.org>
- Arhoolie/Folkways <https://folkways.si.edu/arhoolie>
- American Folklife Center Lomax Collections <https://www.loc.gov/folklife/lomax>
- Center for Louisiana Studies Collections <https://louisianastudies.louisiana.edu/research/collections>
- J'ai Passé au Long du Bois by Edius Naquin <https://folksources.org/resources/items/show/74>
- Edius Naquin Ballad Master CD/Booklet https://www.annsavoy.com/shop_copy.html
- Petits Sans Mamans, Petits Sans Papa <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEAxnutaXhg>

Endnotes

1. This is the Magnolia Sisters' (Ann Savoy and Jane Vidrine) version of Edius Naquin's J'ai Passé au Long du Bois, from *Lapin Lapin*. We chose to record as close to the Naquin original as possible. [Hear it here.](#)
2. See the *64 Parishes* article by Ben Sandmel about Barry Ancelet's CD project on Caesar Vincent. Our project pre-dated this one, but it was very significant and worth reading for those interested in further investigation: <https://64parishes.org/innovative-new-interpretations-of-centuries-old-music>.

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