



## Resource Guide for Educators and Students Grades 4–12

What is traditional music? It's music that's passed on from one person to another, music that arises from one or more cultures, from their history and geography. It's music that can tell a story or evoke emotions ranging from celebratory joy to quiet reflection. Traditional music is usually played live in community settings such as dances, people's houses and small halls.

In each 30-minute episode of Carry On™, musical explorer and TikTok sensation Hal Walker interviews a musician who plays traditional music. Episodes air live, allowing students to pose questions. Programs are then archived so you can listen to them any time from your classroom or home. Visit Carry On's [YouTube channel](#) for live shows and archived episodes.

### [Episode 8, The Riley Family Band](#)

**Steve Riley** is a master accordion player from Mamou, Louisiana. He started his musical career at age 7 and honed his musical craft as a teenager playing with the legendary Cajun musician Dewey Balfa. Steve is passing the tradition of Cajun music to his sons Burke (10) and Dolsy (7), who play with him on our episode from their home in Lafayette, Louisiana.

"Cajun" is a term that refers to people who settled in Louisiana and their culture. The term comes from a mispronunciation of *Acadien* (pronounced "Ah-cah-dee-YEAHn"), the French word for people from Acadia in eastern Canada. Starting in 1755, the British forced French-speaking Acadians to leave their homes in Canada's Maritime provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. Many wound up in Louisiana, where they settled in the bayous and swamps of the region. The mixture of French with other cultures in Louisiana—African, Creole (Afro-Caribbean or Haitian), Spanish, German, Irish and American Indian—have contributed to the unique culture and music of Cajun country.

Cajun culture has come under attack at various times in the 250 years since Acadians settled in southwest Louisiana and east Texas. In 1921, teaching French in public schools was outlawed in Louisiana, and schoolchildren were not allowed to speak it; if they did, they were punished. Steve's teacher and mentor Dewey Balfa was influential in preserving Cajun culture and music during the 1960s, when it was at a low point. Today, Louisiana's [Council for the Development of French in Louisiana](#) works to support the state's French-speaking communities.

Like Dewey, Steve helps pass on the tradition of Cajun music. He runs summer music camps for school-age children, gives school presentations on Cajun music and teaches. He's also performed with his band—Steve Riley & The Mamou Playboys—for 30+ years. They play dance halls, festivals and concert tours. Characteristics of Cajun music include the following:

- Use of the diatonic accordion. This instrument, brought to Louisiana by German immigrants, is a defining sound of Cajun music, which can be heard over other instruments and crowds who gather to dance. A diatonic accordion is tuned to a 7-note diatonic major scale (5 whole notes and 2 half-notes), usually in the key of C or D.
- Other instruments in a Cajun band are fiddle (tuned like a violin or one whole step below), guitar, bass and drums; steel guitar and triangle are sometimes used as well. Some instruments are amplified electronically.
- "Two-steps" are quicker tunes in 2/4 time, named for the "two-step" that dancers use. The music has a strong downbeat but also an emphasis on the upbeat (the weaker beat—beat two), which creates a "lift" to the music. Waltzes are usually slower, in 3/4 time, with emphasis on the downbeat (first beat). But you can still hear an upward lilt on the weaker beats (beats two and three); listen to the waltz from our episode, "[J'ai passé devant ta porte.](#)"
- Older Cajun music, heard less often today, includes a cappella ballads. These are "story songs" with no accompaniment; they were usually sung by women. Older forms also include tunes based on European dance and fiddle tunes like jigs, reels and mazurkas.
- In the past 250 years, Cajun music has absorbed elements from other Louisiana cultural groups (see above), and from country music, Western swing and rock and roll.
- Cajun music generally has a happy sound, especially in two-step tunes, but lyrics of traditional songs (sung in French) often touch on hard times of the past.
- Along with tradition, innovation is part of Cajun music. Steve and his band perform songs they write in addition to older traditional songs.

## Vocabulary

**Accordion** – A free-reed instrument. Pushing and pulling on cardboard bellows [forces air across steel reeds](#) attached at one end, vibrating the free end to produce sound. Pressing buttons or keys opens air holes for the desired notes. The piano accordion has a keyboard for melody notes and buttons for chords; the button accordion (like Steve plays) has buttons for both melody and chords.

**Juré** – Considered one of the roots of zydeco music, *juré* is a song in the older African American / Afro-Caribbean tradition. It's sung in French, accompanied by hand claps or foot stomps to keep the rhythm. Used to "testify" about personal or community concerns, the juré has similarities to "field hollers" used during slavery for workers to call to one another.

**Rhythm** – The time element of music and dance. Different elements of rhythm are the beat (the repeated emphasis you hear; what you can tap your foot to), patterns of sound, duration of sound, tempo (speed) and meter (or time signature).

**Time signature** (or meter) – The division of music into patterns of repeated rhythm, or beats. A 2/4 meter indicates two beats repeated over and over in units called measures, or bars. The bottom number (4) means that the quarter note gets one beat. You can usually identify the meter by tapping along and noticing how often the strong beats occur.

**Zydeco** – A style of music with roots in Louisiana's Black Afro-Caribbean cultures. Zydeco uses an accordion and fiddle (like Cajun music). But the accordion is often a keyboard type and washboard is added to drums, bass and guitar for rhythm. Over the years, zydeco has incorporated elements of rhythm and blues, rock and roll and hip hop.

## Activities and Questions for Students

**Before you watch the episode**—Locate the following places on [Google Maps](#) or a printed map.

Continents: Europe, Africa, North America (including the Caribbean region).

Countries: France, Spain, Germany, Canada, Haiti and the US.

States/Provinces: Louisiana and Texas (US states). Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island (Canadian provinces).

Cities: Mamou, Lafayette and New Orleans, Louisiana.

**After you watch the episode**—Complete assigned activities and questions from this list, which progresses from simpler to more complex.

1. The first song Steve and his sons play is about Turtle Bayou. What's a bayou? The dictionary is your friend!
2. The Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island are called Maritime provinces. Why? (Hint: You'll need [a dictionary](#) and [Google Maps](#).)
3. How would you describe this music to someone who hasn't heard it? What adjectives would you use?
4. Steve uses a washboard to play rhythm on the song "[Zydeco sont pas salé](#)." A washboard is something people used to use to wash their clothes, something everyone would have. What things around your house would make good rhythm instruments?
5. Steve says, "[Cajun] is like any old traditional music. People sing about the hard times to make themselves feel better about what they were going through." What do you or your family do to help get through hard times? Play music, dance, something else?
6. Steve grew up listening to Cajun music and plays a number of instruments. Do you—or does someone you know—play more than one instrument? Are they related, like two stringed instruments? Or are they really different, like a stringed instrument (violin) and a wind instrument (flute)? In your opinion, what are the challenges of learning instruments that aren't similar?
7. Steve says his sons were able to play rhythm from an early age. Dolsy is playing the triangle [on the first song](#). Find something that can substitute for the triangle and tap along. (You can use a pencil on your desk.) On a scale of 1 to 10, how easy or hard is it to keep up with the beat? (10 is very easy, 1 is very hard, 5 is in between.) Now tap on the upbeats—the weaker beats in between the strong beats. One **AND** Two **AND** | One **AND**

Two **AND** | One **AND** Two **AND**. On a scale of 1 to 10, how easy or hard is it to play on the upbeat all the time?

8. Steve mentions Mardi Gras celebrations. Do a little Internet research—what is Mardi Gras? What does that French term mean?
9. You are a reporter for your school's newspaper. Write and illustrate a review of The Riley Family Band, the members of the band, what they talked about, and the music you heard. Describe the music, your favorite things about it, and what more you wish you could see or know about. Be sure to give your article a descriptive title!
10. What's the musical technique used at the end of "La Danse de Mardi Gras" that lets you know the end of the piece is coming? [Click HERE](#) to start near the end.
11. Do a little Internet research about the varieties of French spoken both in the US and Canada. How many varieties can you find? Where are they spoken?
12. French Cajun culture and language have been under attack at certain points in history. Cultural oppression involves suppression or efforts to erase a culture, like what happened in the 1920s with French Cajun culture. Do some Internet research and find another example from elsewhere in the world, where attempts have been made to suppress or erase a culture. What happened, where, and to what culture?
13. Cajun culture has been compared to gumbo. Why? To help, [take a look at this article](#) on Louisiana's food traditions. (Hint: read the second paragraph.)
14. Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys have been nominated for several GRAMMY awards in folk music. Steve and two friends—representing three generations of Cajun musicians—won a GRAMMY for Best Regional Roots Music album. Read this description of [folk and roots music](#). If you are short on time, read just the first four paragraphs. What is the difference they describe between "folk" and "roots" music? Do you agree with it?
15. Analyze the musical structure of "Queue de Tortue," the first song on the episode. What time signature do you think it has? It's sung in verses alternating with instrumental interludes. How many measures, or bars, does each section have? "Map" the song using the letter "A" for each verse section and "B" for each instrumental section. What pattern do you get?

## Additional Resources

### Steve Riley

[Website](#) for Steve Riley & the Mamou Playboys.

[Facebook page](#) for Steve Riley – During the pandemic, The Riley Family Band has been giving Facebook Live concerts, and Steve has been teaching online.

[Tiny Desk Concert](#) (video) – Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys on the NPR Music series.

[KRVS \(radio station video\)](#) – Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys performing "Malcolm's Reel," an original piece written by band member Kevin Wimmer. It has elements of a traditional reel—a quick dance tune in 4/4 time—with modern touches.

[The Band Courtboullion](#) (YouTube) – A song from the band that Steve Riley, Wayne Toups and Wilson Savoy formed to create an album that won a GRAMMY award (see Question 14 above). This song has only three performers; fiddle and accordion take turns playing the melody while the other two instruments provide the rhythm.

### Episode Songs

"[Queue de Tortue](#)" ("Turtle Tail") – Try locating Turtle Bayou on Google Maps.

"[La Danse de Mardi Gras](#)" ("The Dance of Mardi Gras").

"[Zydeco sont pas salé](#)" ("Snap Beans Not Salty").

"[J'ai passé devant ta porte](#)" ("I Passed in Front of Your Door").

### Cajun Traditions

[KRVS "Radio Acadie"](#) plays Cajun, zydeco, blues, jazz, swamp pop, swamp rock and other Louisiana music; the station also invites musicians to play live and talk about their work.

[Dewey Balfa](#) (YouTube) – Steve's mentor Dewey Balfa explaining and demonstrating how children would prove they were ready to learn a musical instrument like the fiddle.

[Folkstreams](#) (documentary) – Les Blues de Balfa (1983). "A portrait of Southwestern Louisiana's Balfa Brothers, ambassadors of traditional Cajun music to the world."

[Cajun Music](#) (article) – Part of a Tulane University project on musical cultures of the Gulf Coast, this article discusses the history of Cajun music.

[64 Parishes](#) – A project of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities that partners with "writers, artists and communities to tell stories that explore our past and reflect our present." [This article](#) discusses the history of French language and culture in Louisiana.

[Festivals Acadiens et Creoles](#) – Website of the festival "bringing together the music, culture and traditions of Acadiana since 1974." During the pandemic, it streamed live.

[Cajun dictionary](#) (website) – Short dictionary with some fun Cajun terms.

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