

Sarah Savoy

It wasn't certain that Sarah Savoy would get the Cajun bug but, as **Elizabeth Kinder** finds out, she's got it now.

Cajun music makes you dream of beer, gumbo and balmy Louisiana nights; of wild parties and dancing under the stars. At least it does if you're not in fact revelling by the bayou, but sitting in the staid confines of the National Theatre foyer as Sarah Savoy & The Francadians belt out a rousing set of Cajun songs, all sparkling in their fresh delivery and mixed up with a dollop of country and some dirty rock 'n' roll.

Her voice is as clear and strong and gut-wrenching as Patsy Cline's. Tall and good-looking, Savoy's a vision of '50s style loveliness with fringed hair swept up at the back into a pony tail, high-heeled court shoes and a full-skirted, knee-length dress.

She plays both guitar and washboard and, with an engaging line in humorous chat, she wins over the audience with her easy Southern charm. It's such that passers-by are drawn in to the warm circle: then – quite unbelievably given the surroundings – they start to dance. Some perform a practised two-step whilst others attempt moves that really should only take place in private or perhaps in one of the experimental productions occasionally put on upstairs.

If in your head you've been sounding her surname like the hotel, this is wrong. "It's pronounced Sav-wah," Sarah told me earlier, as she sat in the foyer café, cuddling her four-month-old daughter, who slept whilst mum gently patted her nappied bum. "My dad was in the National Guard and they changed the French spelling. Savoie was too French for them."

Dad is Marc Savoy, the master Cajun musician and accordeon maker; mum is Ann Savoy, the acclaimed Cajun guitarist (also recently touring the UK as a Magnolia Sister), archivist and author of *Cajun Music: A Reflection Of A People*. Brother Joel plays Cajun fiddle, produces music and has a recording studio where his sister and her band recorded their latest album – the very fine *C'ez Savoy*; whilst her other brother Wilson is the accordeon player in Cajun stars The Pine Leaf Boys (see *FR307/8* and *FR32* CD). You might argue that Cajun music is in her blood, but she doesn't agree it was inevitable she'd end up singing it.

"I rejected it. It was the eighties, I was listening to Madonna when I was a teenager. Cajun just wasn't cool. Then I got into the punk thing. The reason I picked up the guitar was because I really wanted to play punk."

It was some rebellion, given that her childhood was filled with Cajun music, its biggest stars frequent guests and family friends. "Dewey Balfa taught me how to two-step when I was just a little older than her [she nods to her daughter], by

putting my feet on his, holding my hands and dancing across the room." Saturdays would be spent in her father's shop, where she had her first job when she was old enough and where jam sessions always took place. And it was there, during her punk phase, that she realised its connection with Cajun music.

"One Saturday morning at my dad's store people were playing Cajun music, picking chords out on the guitar and I thought, 'That's the same as punk! Well I can do that!' and I just started playing. I can't remember what the song was, but something just called me to it. My dad was playing accordeon and he was like 'You're playing Cajun music!' and all of a sudden I realised I knew most of the words to the songs too because I'd been hearing them all my life. It was like I'd learnt them by osmosis!"

It was her brother Wilson who set her off in the family footsteps. "I was studying at the university in Lafayette. He'd come to my house and just play the accordeon and I'd pick up my guitar and play along and we'd sing harmonies together, harmonies we'd heard my mum and dad sing when we were growing up. Then we started going to the Cajun music jam session in Lafayette every Wednesday night, it was mostly people in their twenties hanging out playing Cajun music and it just seemed cool again. But it was as a way to bond with my brother that it was really important to me. Wilson's really the one to thank for what I'm doing today."

Regarding the music she said, "I wanted to keep it traditional but give it a white trashy raunchiness, a little more rock 'n' roll. People do Cajun rock 'n' roll in Louisiana with electric guitars and saxophone. That's not my style. I want to keep it rootsy and along with the rock 'n' roll give a rockabilly or country flavour to the old Cajun songs. Texas isn't that far from Louisiana; Jerry Lee Lewis is from Louisiana, Elvis got his start playing the Hayride."

The white trash raunchiness is not just confined to the music. "My mum plays this really nice jazzy Cajun style, but the lyrics are

all 'Dear beautiful little wife, you've gone and left me', or 'Oh my big strong man, you've gone and left me what do I do now?'! Well forget that! We do songs like 'You didn't let me drink my beer in bed and smoke my cigarettes [something it seems she's quite keen on] so I'm really happy since I left you!'"

They also perform the Hank Williams classics *Lost Highway*, *Your Cheatin' Heart* and *Mind Your Own Business* in Cajun French. Savoy, a talented linguist, enjoys singing in two different languages and as well as French and English speaks fluent German and (having lived in Moscow for five years after "falling in love with Dostoevsky"), Russian too.

The band – in which her husband plays double bass – is based in Paris, where she now resides though she hopes one day to go back and live in Louisiana: "Everything there is a party, you cannot have a night in Louisiana without food and music. No matter who you are or where you go, there's always gonna be somebody cooking a sauce and somebody playing something and people joking about." In fact you might find it's Savoy doing all these things: a talented cook, Savoy likes to combine cooking demonstrations with gigs. "It's like I'm inviting people into my home."

Isn't it tricky managing all this and looking after her baby too? "No. She's a blast as a baby. My parents never quit playing music just because they had kids. I think she'll enjoy my life a lot."


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