



TIES THAT BIND

Kindred spirits preserve traditional music

By James Savage

CATHERINE GUIDRY

LeeAnn Law stepped to the microphone and pulled a bow across her fiddle's strings. Until that moment, about a hundred people had been milling around the Blue Moon Saloon & Guest House's stage and patio in downtown Lafayette. It was a Wednesday night in April and they were awaiting the start of Ragin' Roots Night, a showcase of the student ensembles affiliated with the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Traditional Music program.

As the sun tucked itself into the horizon beyond downtown and the neon of the nearby Borden's Ice Cream Shoppe flickered to life, many members of the crowd looked up at the sound the UL Lafayette student laid down.

The remaining members of the Angelle Aces joined in. Ailee Pardi and Gracie Babineaux's dual fiddles enriched the overture. Guitarists Devin Sonnier and Roddie Romero flanked the trio. Sonnier is also a UL Lafayette student. Romero, however, is a veteran musician and the group's then-instructor. He's a three-time Grammy nominee, but on this night, he stood in profile, slightly out of the spotlight. It was time for his apprentices to shine.

Blue Moon is an unusual concert venue for the student ensembles. They are more likely to perform under a canopy of live oak branches behind Edith Garland Dupré Library, at Homecoming festivities, or on stage at the University's Angelle Hall.

But this concert wasn't only about demonstrating the performance skills they'd honed in those on-campus spots. It was about showing the community that its musical heritage was in capable hands.

The Aces began "La Reel de Joie," a tune with a long lineage in the Cajun music songbook. Dancers chose partners and soon boots, sandals and sneakers began to glide along the worn wooden floor. Two other student ensembles, the Zydeco Ragin' Steppers and the Ragin' Blues Band, rounded out the musical bill of fare that night.

An impressive thread of grassroots philanthropy ties these student performances to a concert two decades ago. The cradle of UL Lafayette's Traditional Music program is less than a mile away, at Grant Street Dancehall. Twenty years ago, that music and dancing venue provided a space for celebration and healing.

Dr. Tommy Comeaux, a Lafayette pathologist and musician who played with bands such as Coteau, BeauSoleil and the Basin Brothers, had died seven weeks earlier, on Nov. 8, 1997. He was cycling near Broussard, Louisiana, when a vehicle struck and killed him. He was 45.

Comeaux's mastery of the dobro, mandolin, guitar, organ,

bass and pedal steel guitar made him one of the region's most-sought-after musicians and earned him four Grammy nominations. But off stage, his generous nature and modest demeanor were equally magnetic. "When you met him, you liked him – and you wanted to meet him again. You wanted him to be your best friend," said Coteau's Gary Newman.

"He was a treasure. Tommy Comeaux was a treasure we all had. When you lose something as valuable as his friendship was to all of us, and his brotherhood, and his generosity, and his goodness, it strikes you hard. But when that happened, we all said, 'We have to do something. We have to do something to keep his spirit alive.'"

As the shock of Comeaux's death lessened, his friends began to discuss how to memorialize him permanently. It had to be something that would last forever, that would outlive them.

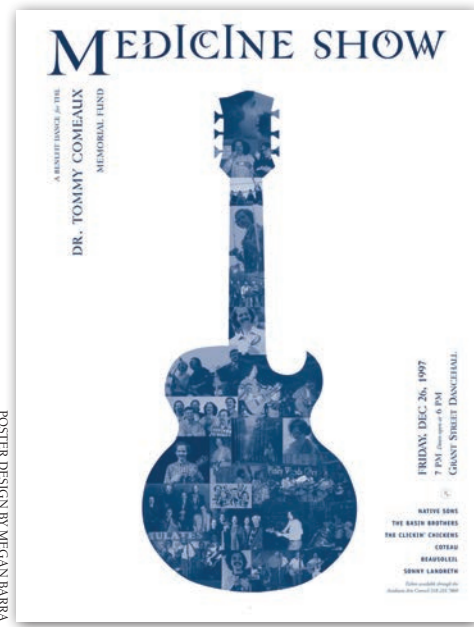
An eclectic committee convened in late November at the Acadiana Arts Council building in downtown Lafayette. The roster of musicians, physicians, lawyers and artists reflected the disparate worlds Comeaux had navigated with ease.

Lafayette chef Patrick Mould was among them. He met Comeaux in the 1980s after a BeauSoleil concert at Mulate's, the storied restaurant in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana.

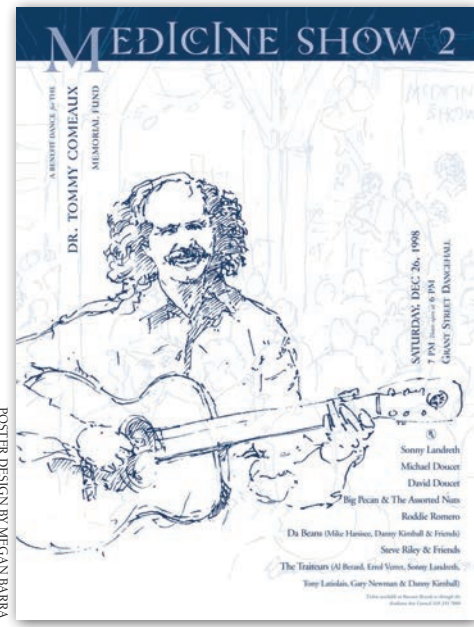
"After he died, we were all trying to figure out what we needed to do, and in what area, music or medicine. All the medical guys kept saying, do music. All the artistic types were saying, do something in medicine," Mould said. "Ultimately, music won out."

The group approached the UL Lafayette Foundation about what it would take to endow a chair in traditional music. The answer: \$600,000, which would then be matched by \$400,000 in state funds to create a \$1 million endowment.

The Comeauxtians, as members called the group, wasted no time. The first Medicine Show took place about a month later, on the day after Christmas 1997 at Grant Street. Newman and Coteau were on stage that night, as were bands and artists with whom Comeaux had collaborated over a 30-year period – the French music mainstay BeauSoleil, the bluegrass-broiled Clickin' Chickens, the Creole-infused Basin Brothers, and blues guitar virtuoso Sonny Landreth.



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The group could not know it then, but it would take 10 more years of Medicine Shows and other fundraisers to reach its goal.

BeauSoleil played in Boston in 1989. On stage with the venerable French band that night at Harvard University's Sanders Theatre was Comeaux. In the audience was Mark F. DeWitt, a graduate student at the New England Conservatory of Music.

Although they never met, today DeWitt is the inaugural holder of the Dr. Tommy Comeaux Chair in Traditional Music.

Commemorative posters from most of the Medicine Shows hang in DeWitt's Angelle Hall office, including one from the second fundraiser in 1998. It features an ink drawing of the program's namesake. Autographs from the musicians who played that night surround the illustration.

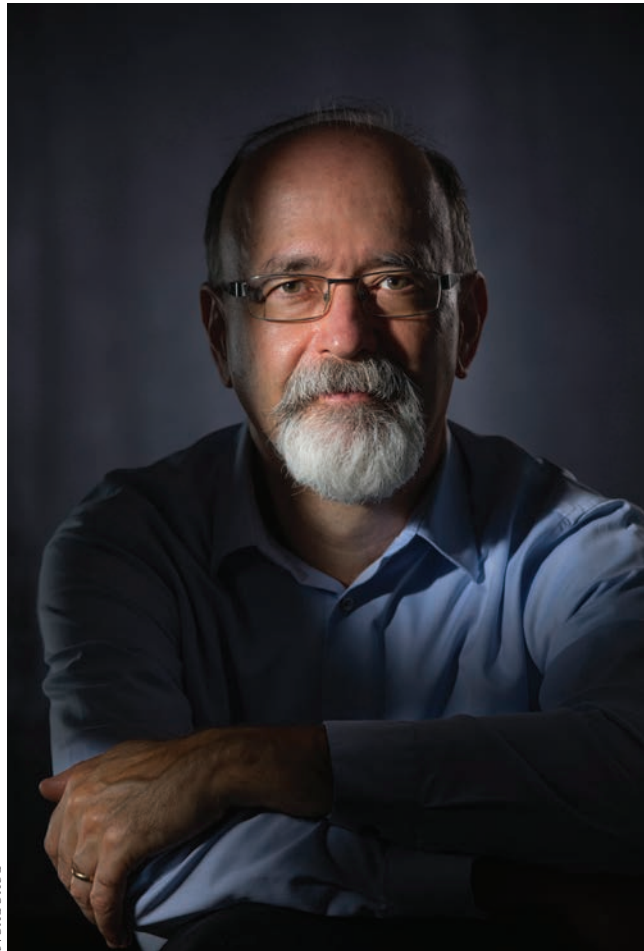
Age has faded it slightly, but the poster is a vibrant reminder: a grassroots, community effort made the Traditional Music program possible and sustains it. That's fitting, since the Cajun, zydeco, blues and bluegrass it preserves are communal musical genres, passed down from master musicians to apprentices in a patient dance of demonstration and imitation that took place on front porches, at house parties and in dancehalls for generations.

The Traditional Music program brought the front porch to campus.

Regional musicians form the core of the program's faculty and provide instruction on stage and in the classroom, infusing contemporary musical education with an abiding teaching method based on oral tradition.

"Community is at the center of what we are doing," DeWitt said. "This has always been community-based music. People have always learned by ear. They have always learned organically. This music bubbled up from the community."

UL Lafayette is among more than two dozen North American colleges and universities with traditional music curriculums. Texas State University in San Marcos features a mariachi ensemble as part of its Latin Music Studies program, for example. Students at Chicago's Columbia College participate in blues and gospel ensembles, while schools in Kentucky, North Carolina and Tennessee feature



Dr. Mark F. DeWitt

bluegrass, country and old-time musical groups. Most programs include a degree option.

In 2010, the Louisiana Board of Regents approved a bachelor of arts degree concentration in traditional music. Before, UL Lafayette only awarded bachelor of music degrees, which emphasize, much like a conservatory would, musical structure, theory and performance technique.

Traditional music students take those courses, too, but not as many. Their prior musical instruction usually has not been as intensive as other music majors; for instance, their notation reading might not be as strong. The majority of traditional music classes place music within a wider cultural context. Courses are more closely aligned with the liberal arts: communication, anthropology, behavioral sciences, history and folklore.

The program builds a cross-campus connection between the School of Music and other disciplines. Students enrolled in other concentrations can pursue a minor in traditional music or audition for one of the performance ensembles under the program's umbrella.

Five music ensembles have emerged as its public face: the Angelle Aces; Zydeco Ragin' Steppers; Ragin' Blues Band; McKinley Street Merry-makers, a second Cajun group that started in the Fall 2017 semester; and Vermilion Express, a bluegrass band.

"Many people see the ensembles and think they *are* the Traditional Music program," said Dr. Jonathan Kulp, director of the School of Music and Performing Arts. "But there's also coursework where students learn the history of this music and write research papers. They dig in archives and listen to recordings and study them. They're getting a much richer understanding of the cultures that support the music as a result. The ensembles are the applied part of it."



Members of the bluegrass ensemble Vermilion Express are, from left, Celebrindal Roberts, Lakeyn Schultz, Alex Goodrich and Benjamin Richey.



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In the past, universities and colleges didn't define traditional music as Cajun, zydeco, bluegrass or the blues. The term meant western, or classical, art music taught in a conservatory style.

At its most basic level, the distinction between traditional music – the kind that DeWitt teaches – and the Beethoven or Mozart customarily taught in music schools, is the difference between the ear and the eye. Unlike classical music, roots music such as Cajun and zydeco is rarely written down. Students studying it can't rely on sheet music readings as classical musicians might.

As a result, roots music is more unrestrained and improvisational. Student Celebrindal Roberts plays mandolin in the bluegrass band Vermilion Express. She's also a classically trained violinist and puts those instrumental skills to use as the band's occasional fiddle player.

In classical music, "You're told how to interpret a composer's markings," she said. "You're told how to watch a conductor. You're told what you are supposed to do."

"In bluegrass, it's like: Here are some guidelines. Now, be better and do something with it. Emotionally, it's exciting. It's paralyzing. It's awesome. It feels empowering when you can do it, more empowering, I think, than playing a perfect line of a Shostakovich piece."

Unlike classical, roots music depends on aural transmission alone. Students learn to play and sing "by ear" through instruction, imitation and critique, which impart technical



Megan Brown, guitarist for the band T'Monde, was among students in the Traditional Music program's first ensemble course in 2010.

ability but also invite innovation.

"Did you play telephone when you were a kid?" DeWitt asked in a recent interview. "A kid would whisper a sentence to the next one until it went through the whole class and came out the other end."

"Well, think about humming a tune to somebody. And then you have that person hum it to the next one and so forth. What will that sound like at the end?"

"What you are going to end up with is something that might have sounded like the first one, but it's not going to be the same. As long as it's not written down, there's a living quality to the tradition. It's always changing and growing. Members of the same family don't always look alike, do they? But they're all family."

The Archives of Cajun and Creole Folklore is the family's musical scrapbook.

Its holdings are the cornerstone of the Center for Louisiana Studies' archival collection and contain 74,000 historical images and 17,000 video files. Its 44,000 audio files contain oral histories and musical performances. They give the past a voice, and that was the allure for Megan Brown.

Brown was majoring in French at the University when she first examined the repository's musical holdings for a class assignment. Today, she uses songs culled from the archives on her radio show, "Encore," broadcast from UL Lafayette's KRVS, Radio Acadie – an NPR affiliate.

She's also the guitarist for local band T'Monde and teaches a traditional music course in singing Cajun and Creole French ballads. She was among the students who took the program's first music ensemble course in 2010.

The archival recordings she uses on her radio show, and plays for her students as an instructor, connect listeners to an historical moment when music disseminated through face-to-face interactions between musicians and initiates. The Traditional Music program is "a different setting" that recreates those cultural and musical exchanges, she said.

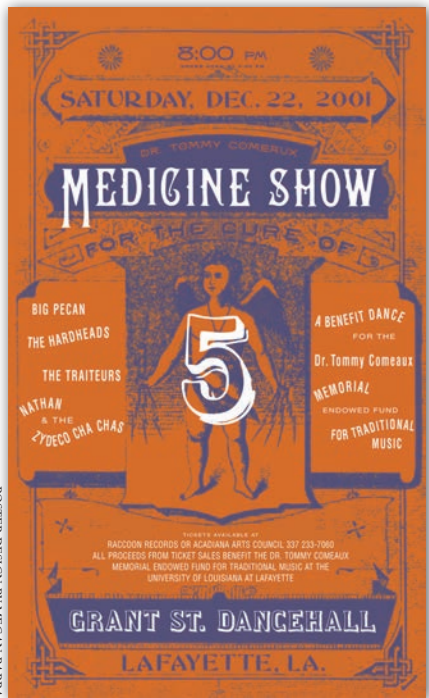
"The way people used to learn Cajun music, they would just show up on people's porches and knock. 'Hey, I heard you play fiddle. Can I listen to you?'"

"You can't just knock on someone's door," today, Brown continued. Traditional music students "get to learn from people who they might not otherwise have a connection to."

One of those instructors is Nathan Williams Jr., leader of his own band, Lil' Nate and the Zydeco Big Timers. He conveys his intensity when he instructs the Zydeco Ragin' Steppers ensemble.

"When you get on stage, do it 100 percent, man. Do it as if it's your last performance," Williams tells the students.

Most students in the ensemble groups won't go on to work as musicians, but many envision careers as music teachers,



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CATHERINE GUDRY

BeauSoleil founder Michael Doucet, right, and then-student Forest Huval during a 2012 jam session

behind-the-scenes in music production or business, or in cultural tourism. Their performances give them additional professional heft in a line of work where time on the stage and connections to a network of other musicians are currency.

Over the past seven years, the Traditional Music program has recruited a veritable Who's Who of regional performers as its ensemble coaches and classroom instructors. They're adjuncts, which means they aren't full-time faculty. That enables them to continue to perform in addition to their work with the program.

The first three instructors DeWitt hired were Grammy-winning accordionist Wilson Savoy of the Pine Leaf Boys; David Greely, a Cajun fiddle player and founding member of Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys; and the late Al Berard, a founder of the Basin Brothers, with whom Tommy Comeaux once performed.

The Fall 2017 faculty roster is equally impressive. Kristi Guillory is a Grammy-nominated member of Bonsoir, Catin. She replaced Roddie Romero, a triple Grammy nominee, as the Angelle Aces' instructor. Joining Romero at this year's Grammys was



DOUG DRIGAS

Nathan Williams Jr. performs during 2016 Homecoming activities.



DAVID SIMPSON

The Pine Leaf Boys' Wilson Savoy was among the Traditional Music program's first instructors in 2010.



DAVID SIMPSON

Yvette Landry was among artists-in-residence in 2012 who taught songwriting.



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DAVID SIMPSON

Bonsoir, Catin's Kristi Guillory instructs the Angelle Aces, a Cajun music band.



DAVID SIMPSON

Accordianist Corey Ledet instructs the Ragin' Blues ensemble.



DAVID SIMPSON

Triple Grammy nominee Roddie Romero coached the Angelle Aces.



DAVID SIMPSON

Sam Broussard lends his talents to songwriting courses.



DAVID SIMPSON

The late Al Berard, founder of the Basin Brothers, taught some of the program's first courses in 2010.



DAVID SIMPSON

The late David Egan offered songwriting insights as a 2012 artist-in-residence.



DAVID SIMPSON

Former instructor David Greely is a founding member of Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys.

Sam Broussard, who was nominated for a music and poetry CD he co-wrote with retired UL Lafayette folklorist Dr. Barry Ancelet. Broussard teaches songwriting in the spring semester.

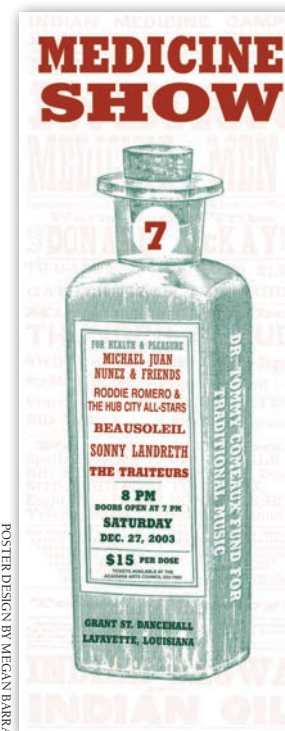
Zydeco accordionist Corey Ledet is the instructor for the Ragin' Blues Band. He's a Grammy nominee, too.

In addition to their classroom and ensemble instructors, students gain access to musical talent through one-on-one master classes in instrumentation and appearances by guest musicians.

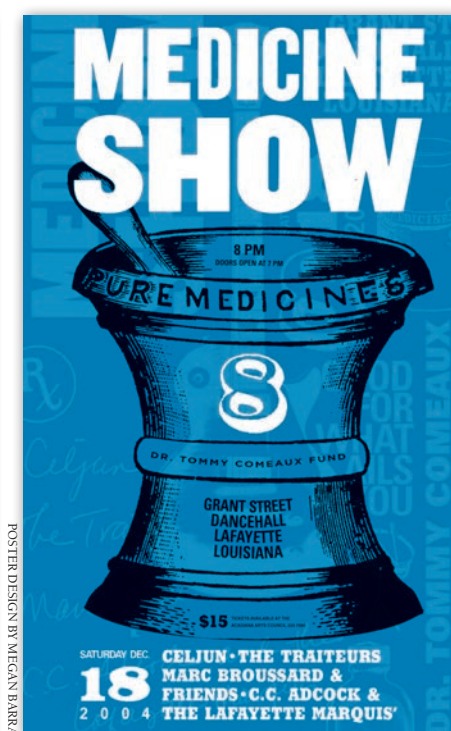
The program invites at least one artist or band for an annual residency. Past artists-in-residence have included jazz trumpeter Irvin Mayfield; folklorist and public radio host Nick Spitzer; and songwriters Yvette Landry and the late David Egan.

The first, in 2010-2011, was Michael Doucet and BeauSoleil. The band's residency included a concert performance with the University's Symphony Orchestra. It also visited classes and coached ensembles during a week-long campus stay. Doucet returned solo for a week of class appearances, as well.

Doucet, like all the performers who are affiliated with the Traditional Music program, imparts a musical heredity to students. He studied fiddle with such masters as the late Varise Conner, Canray Fontenot and Dennis McGee. Kevin Wimmer, a fiddle player with Steve Riley, who previously taught in the



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DAVID SIMPSON

Kevin Wimmer's musical pedigree includes tutelage from the late Dewey Balfa.

program, honed his craft with Dewey Balfa. Savoy's mother and father, Ann and Marc, are musicians and cultural ambassadors who performed with McGee, Balfa and the late D.L. Menard, also a Grammy Award winner.

Pedigrees are important in academic and musical circles, Dr. Jonathan Kulp said. "Who you studied with is a big part of who you are. It gives an *a priori*



DOUG DUGAS

Nationally syndicated radio host Nick Spitzer was an artist-in-residence.

legitimacy to your work."

Nathan Williams Jr. learned from Nathan Williams Sr., who played with Stanley Dural, better known as Buckwheat Zydeco. Dural once backed Clifton Chenier, the most-influential zydeco artist of the 20th century who's considered the "king" of the musical genre.

"We have the great-grandson of Clifton teaching here – musically, not



GETTY IMAGES/EVERETT ROBERTS

The Irvin Mayfield Quintet was 2015's artist-in-residence in a program sponsored with the Ernest J. Gaines Center.

genetically," DeWitt observed.

Williams uncle, Sid Williams, runs El Sido's Zydeco and Blues Club in Lafayette. As an upcoming musician, the younger Williams rubbed shoulders with veteran players such as Alton Rubin, better known as Rockin' Dopsie, and Beau Jocques, the stage name of Andrus J. Espre.

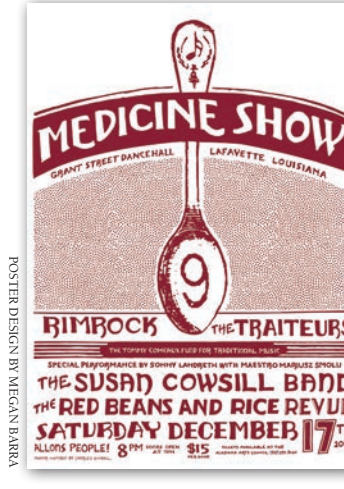
Williams watched and imitated their

stage personas – how they interacted with audiences, their confidence and charisma. He brings those lessons into his classroom. "Knowing where those guys came from, then passing it on to me, I feel confident what these students are taking from me is somewhat authentic," Williams said.

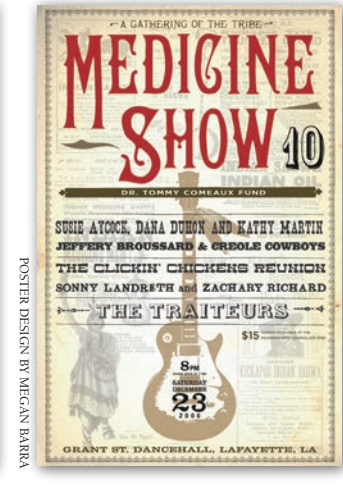
Seated around a patio table behind Blue Moon Saloon before their mid-April concert, the Ragin' Steppers recited a list of Lil' Nate's on-stage no-nos – standing stiffly or slouching, noodling on their instruments between songs, not smiling, not looking at the audience, looking at cellphones, not keeping tempo, and failing to inject into performances what he calls, "a pep in the step."

Williams delivers criticism directly, said Jesse DelGizzi, a graduate student who plays electric bass in the band. "He's very to the point." DelGizzi's voice drops in imitation. "All right, cool. That was the worst guitar solo I ever heard.' That's a word-for-word quote.

"But, there are few people who are as talented and as successful as Nate is, so to have someone of that stature with us at



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every rehearsal, telling us what's good and what's not ..."

Later that evening, Williams stood near Blue Moon's control panel. His eyes rarely left the stage as his students performed. He occasionally threw one finger in the air. It's unclear whether it was a criticism or an encouragement to keep doing what they were doing: adding a zydeco pep to some surprising tunes – the swamp pop standard "Mathilda" and Fats Domino's "My Girl Josephine."

Vocalist Marie-Laure Boudreau announced the evening's last song, Chris Ardoin's "Push It," and at the first intonation of her accordion, Williams and a partner found a spot on the still-crowded dance floor. His work for the evening was done.

The song's last notes brought cheers from the audience, and band member Kylie Veazey removed her *frottoir*, or washboard. She stepped down from the stage and approached Williams. "I saw you dancing," she said. "I guess that means I got an A."

Williams only smiled.



DOUG DUGAS

From left, Devin Sonnier, LeeAnn Law, Ailee Pardi and Gracie Babineaux perform as the Angelle Aces earlier this year with then-instructor Roddie Romero.



DOUG DUGAS

The Zydeco Ragin' Steppers perform during 2017's Festival International de Louisiane. Members are, from left, Jeremy Domangue, Jesse DelGizzi, Kylie Veazey, Marie-Laure Boudreau, Fabian Bernard and instructor Nathan Williams Jr.

‘THE PROGRAM IS TOMMY’

Many of Tommy Comeaux’s closest friends remember little about the days following the cycling accident that took his life two decades ago. It’s as if the telephone calls relaying the tragedy that clear day in November 1997 suspended time. They can recount who delivered the news, but much of what occurred subsequently was lost in a fog of shock and grief.

They recall that as the fog lifted, a quest for healing began.

“There was a collective response among Tommy’s friends to continue to keep his spirit present by creating something that would touch people’s lives as he did,” said Megan Barra, a Lafayette graphic artist. She met Comeaux in the early 1980s when he was a member of BeauSoleil.

“Tommy was interested in playing a wide range of American music. The mission of the committee was to establish a program that would teach the music he loved to generations of musicians to come.”

“The committee” is a formal reference to an informal group who quickly dubbed themselves the Comeauxtians, an apt label that denoted sustained movement toward an ambitious goal: a \$1 million endowed chair in traditional music at UL Lafayette.

Then as now, the University was home to an established School of Music and Performing Arts. It regularly offered courses in regional music history. So, it provided an ideal spot. UL Lafayette houses cultural resources in the Center for Louisiana Studies’ Archives of Cajun and Creole Folklore, and Special Collections’ Cajun and Creole Music Collection. Both enable students to harvest sounds from the area’s musical past and conduct academic research about its history.

“This is where it needed to be done,” said Gary Newman, who had played with Comeaux in Coteau, Clickin’ Chickens and Native Sons. “Although Tommy did not attend the University, Lafayette is the center of traditional music in South Louisiana.

“This is a special place that we all love. And Tommy loved it, too.”

The Comeauxtians were an assortment of physicians, lawyers, clothiers, photographers, politicians, musicians and artists that reflected the diverse circle of friends Comeaux had acquired during his 45-year life.

Author Todd Mouton said membership fluctuated throughout the years, but a stalwart core remained. “We didn’t have any rules, and we didn’t take any votes. We were a bizarre cross-section of people who probably would never have been together except for Tommy Comeaux. It was about Tommy.”

The Comeauxtians set their inaugural fundraiser, a concert, for the day after Christmas 1997, seven weeks after Comeaux’s death. They called it Medicine Show.

Like the Comeauxtians moniker, the concert’s branding was evocative. In the late 19th century, before federal regulation of medicine, peddlers traveled to corners of the country, selling elixirs that promised to cure a variety of ailments.

The Comeauxtians’ Medicine Show had a similar curative premise, but its power was genuine. “It was a healing,” Newman said. “Tommy was a healer in a lot of different ways.”

The group extended that theme with the formation of The Traiteurs. The Cajun jam band took its name from traditional faith healers who use herbs, prayers and folk remedies to tend to patients in remote sections of South Louisiana. Traiteurs refuse payment for services.

Like their namesakes, The Traiteurs deposited concert proceeds into the fund.

Every bit helped. To create the endowed chair, the Comeauxtians first had to raise \$600,000, which would be matched by \$400,000 from the Louisiana Board of Regents Support Fund. The UL Lafayette Foundation would administer the \$1 million endowment. The principal would never be touched; earned income would help pay for instructors and professors, artist residencies, and program development.

“They didn’t let up,” said Dr. Walter Comeaux, Tommy Comeaux’s father. “This is a miracle program. Not one of us – me included – ever thought it would materialize. Every year, they came back. They made it happen.”

Although the group reached its fundraising mark in 2007, just before the 11th Medicine Show, they buttressed the endowment fund further with four subsequent concerts.

All together, there were 40 fundraisers, and many individual donations. Three CDs collections were created from Medicine Show performances and sold. Barra designed commemorative concert posters that became prized décor around town.

A ticket for the inaugural Medicine Show was \$15. A crowd of 700 packed into Grant Street Dancehall in downtown Lafayette. The show featured six acts. It was seven hours long. Few people left early.

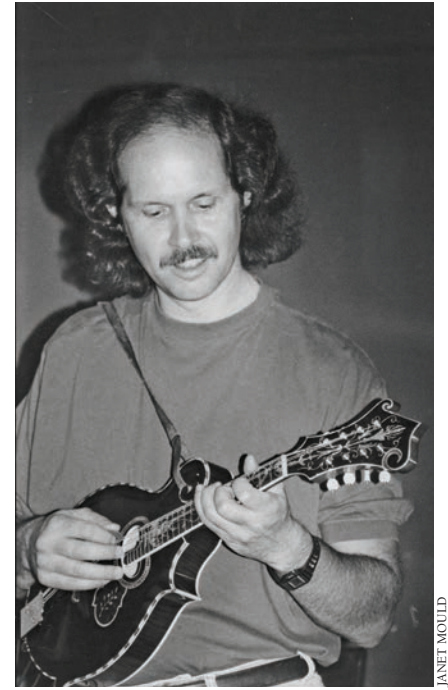
The Native Sons opened the show with an original tribute, “Quiet Man.” Band members Danny Kimball and Mike Hanisee wrote the musical eulogy. Comeaux had performed with Native Sons the night before his death. “He was a quiet man,” Hanisee remarked at the song’s conclusion, “but he left one hell of a footprint.”

Twenty years later, Hanisee reflected on his off-the-cuff remark. “Tommy was a doctor – a good doctor. He was a musician – a good musician. He was a humanitarian – an outstanding humanitarian. He was a lover of life, a force. Anytime he walked in a room, you felt him. That’s what I meant by that.”

By day, Comeaux was head of the Pathology Department at Our Lady of Lourdes Regional Medical Center. Pathologists analyze



The Clickin’ Chickens, from left: Phil Schneider, Carl Brown, Steve Schneider, Tommy Comeaux, Ben Shank, and Gary Newman



Tommy Comeaux playing mandolin

blood and tissue samples for abnormalities. Comeaux saw irregularities with an uncommon precision. When a former med school professor developed cancer, he sent the pathology reports to Comeaux to examine. Comeaux’s father, a general surgeon, sometimes asked his son to look at patients’ test results.

Today, musician friends remember Comeaux’s regular offers of free medical care, but there were more-private acts of compassion as well. In the 1980s, when the AIDS epidemic began in United States, Lourdes purchased a home near the hospital for the care of patients with the disease. At the time, the causes of AIDS and how it spread remained supposition. Hospital physicians were asked to volunteer to help make the patients comfortable; some declined. Comeaux ministered to the patients without hesitation.

“Medicine was never beautiful,” Walter Comeaux said. “You do a lot of great things for people, but you also see a lot of bad things. You’ve got to learn to live with that.”

Tommy Comeaux found solace in music, friends said.

Walter and Dorinne Comeaux gave their son his first guitar when he was 8.

While a student at Cathedral Elementary School, now Cathedral-Carmel School, in Lafayette, Comeaux met Michael Doucet, who was a year older. By age 12, the two budding musicians were playing music together in the attic of the Comeaux family home on Beverly Drive.

Doucet and Comeaux’s collaborations continued as members of Coteau and BeauSoleil. Both bands were integral in the 1970s Acadian renaissance, a period of renewed pride in the region’s French heritage.

Another regular collaborator was slide guitarist Sonny Landreth. They were classmates at Lafayette High School who jammed together as teenagers in a band called The Null Set.

The night before Comeaux died, he stopped at Landreth’s house on his way to a double-bill, benefit concert with Clickin’ Chickens and Native Sons. Comeaux sat down and began noodling with a guitar Landreth had left leaning against the couch. “It was one I really liked, but was torn about keeping because it rattled so much,” Landreth

remembered. “It didn’t bother him at all. He said, ‘Cool! Sounds like a built in fuzz!’ That was the last time I saw him and the last time I heard him play.” Landreth kept the guitar.

In 2007, at Medicine Show 11, the Comeauxtians announced they had surpassed the \$600,000 goal.

The following year, at the UL Lafayette Foundation’s donor appreciation banquet, the group received a symbol of their dogged commitment: a rocking chair. Comeaux’s rocking chair, encased in Plexiglas, sits in the lobby of Angelle Hall. A replica is in the office of Dr. Mark F. DeWitt, the Comeaux chair’s inaugural holder.

It appeared on stage at Medicine Show 12, held Dec. 26, 2008.

Dr. Joseph Savoie, the University’s president, stood near the chair as he paid tribute to the Comeauxtians. “You all did it. Now, you can say a lot about Tommy Comeaux – a humanitarian, a healer, a musician, an artist. But what better can you say about a man than who his friends are? His friends have stayed with his memory for 11 years and they’ve endowed a fund so his memory will live forever.”

Today, there’s a sense of satisfaction among the Comeauxtians. But there’s also an impulse to keep working. Barra is designing a coffee table book that will feature more than 100 classic guitars, mandolins, dobros and basses Comeaux owned.

After Comeaux’s death, and per his wishes, his estate sold the 250-piece collection that included some of the prized names in American instrument manufacturing. Proceeds from the book’s sales will go into the endowment.

Other Comeauxtians continue to give as well. Landreth has visited classes and has played occasionally with the Ragin’ Blues Band. Doucet and BeauSoleil were the program’s first artists-in-residence. Comeauxtian Len Springer instructs Vermilion Express, the bluegrass band.

“To think we did it – a bunch of artists, hippies, musicians got together and said, ‘We are going to raise a million dollars, no matter how long it takes us to do it.’ And we did it,” Newman said.

“The Comeauxtians loved Tommy. He’s not here. But the program is Tommy. It’s what he would want.”