

DVD: Maroon: On the Trail of Creoles in North America (2005) --- 2-Disc Set

Review Rating: Very Good

Label/Studio: Music Video Distribution / VSC / NFB

Catalog #: NFB4426

Region: 1 (NTSC)

Released: July 18, 2006

Genre: Music Documentary

Synopsis: Detailed look at the history of Creoles in Louisiana, and their influential music.

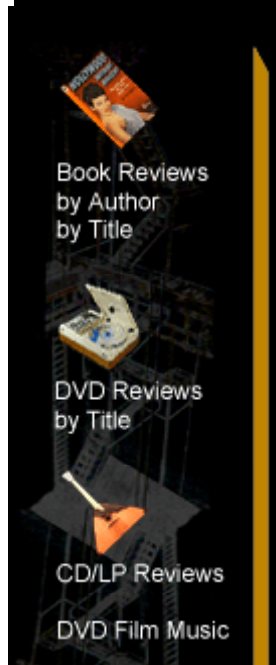
Directed by: André Gladu

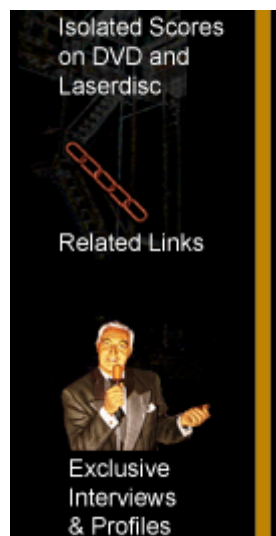
Screenplay by: André Gladu



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Music by: various
Produced by: Colette Loumede
Cast: various

Film Length: 85 mins

Process/Ratio: 1.85:1

Colour

Anamorphic DVD: Yes

Languages: Dolby Stereo with French and some English dialogue

Subtitles: _ Optional English over forced French subtitles

Special Features :

2 Deleted Scenes: New Orleans Mardi Gras Black Indians (4:56) + Earl Barthe, Master Plasterer (4:52) / Bonus Documentaries: **Zarico** (1984) (57:37) + **Liberty Street Blues** (1988) (77:03) in English with forced English Subtitles over some French dialogue

Comments :

Andre Gladu's Creole triptych, made for the NFB (National Film Board of Canada) spanning a twenty year period, is rather poignant after the awful flood that devastated major portions of New Orleans in 2005. Filmed before Lake Ponchartrain busted through the levies and irreparably damaged historical locales and devastated entire communities, the three stellar documentaries on this excellent 2-disc set form a sprawling narrative deliberately designed to preserve the sights, sounds, and faces of Louisiana's French ancestors and founders who, as Gladu repeatedly points out, have been neglected by historians, musicologists, and fans of jazz and blues.

Gladu first became fascinated by Creoles when he heard Zarico music playing on the radio in his native Quebec. He was taken by the proud words and powerful rhythms of a music that wore its rustic French roots with absolute pride. In familiarizing himself with the Zarico - its name derived from the French words for beans, "les haricots" - Gladu wanted to know more of the culture that formed a vital link among the French communities within the North American sphere.

The first doc, **Maroon**, is named after the term applied to the free slaves and blacks that, on a simplistic level, came to Louisiana from liberated Haiti or France. Maroons weren't regarded as black; they were no longer slaves, many were educated and were an economic force - something white landowners didn't quite like when local slaves were still bought and sold, and forced to work awful hours on plantations. Maroons also shared a mixed heritage of African, French, Spanish, Russian, Italian and American Indian ancestry, and self-christened Creole, the powerful class gave

white landowners fear that a rebellion was possible without any intervention.

In a proactive move, the Black Law was passed, which allowed all blacks to gather, sell, socialize, dance, and rediscover their respective roots through music during set times, once a week - an attempt to feign benevolence when slavery was still very much in practice. The economic benefits extended the 'free cultural zone', and Creoles enjoyed a special status above local slaves until the laws were retrograded by jealous, powerful whites, and reduced Creoles as equals to the local blacks - thereby establishing a solid policy of segregation.

The forced assimilation also resulted in a collision that diluted aspects of Creole culture, but led to the creation of blues, and later jazz. Zarico music, however, remained a distinct ladder to the Creole identity - and that's where the titular doc on this DVD set takes off.

Gladu's quest - to verify that a kind of Pan-Francophonie exists throughout North America - is also a means to validate his own French identity within historically British-influenced Canada, and the fear that French culture - whether Quebecois, Acadian, or from former French colonies throughout the world - will thin and wither as each generation moves away, assimilates, and succumbs to irresistible big city influences.

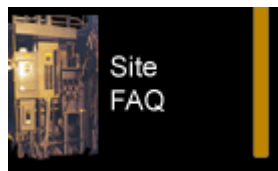
In **Maroon**, we learn of the extraordinary events and people that evolved and became Creole, and the struggle to keep their music and French language alive throughout Louisiana. In the DVD's second doc, **Zarico**, Gladu takes us to a tight, rural community that tries to retain their traditions, and local musicians show how Zarico is tied to blues and jazz.

And in **Liberty Street Blues**, we're in New Orleans during Mardi Gras, and are treated to the jazz music that's integral to the parades, the social gatherings, and the local turf battles between designated 'black Indian chiefs' who fight with music and dance in a weird mélange of influences from native Indian, African, and Asian cultures.

There's surprising little informational overlap between the docs, and one gets a sense that each stemmed from a facet of Louisiana 's culture that Gladu felt he missed; we're always in on the discovery process, and Gladu's technique is to interweave two or three particular narratives that further a point, or illustrate a discussion through music.

The best example of this occurs in **Liberty Street Blues**, which has an amazing sequence that intercuts a Dixieland in-house jam session with separate musician interviews. Each performer gives his/her take on craft, cultural roots, and how specific stylistic elements are unique to jazz. The scene-stealers are a pair of seniors that respectively play bass and piano (the grandma is a killer pianist), while the clarinetist - who also teaches college - breaks down the components of several songs to explain how jazz differs from all other kinds of music. It's a great moment in which editing edifies viewers - novices and jazz fans alike - and the music is so damn good.

Some potent issues become readily apparent as we traverse through each doc. One serious example




of sad irony resides in **Zarico**, where the titular music in 1984 had become a kind of poor man's music, and like the old Black Law, musicians could only find air time on a local radio show for an hour a week.

One interview subject in **Zarico** makes it clear how Creoles are a nation comprised of the diverse people that makeup the marginalized state of Louisiana, and are not an ethnic minority; the distinction parallels the experiences of Quebecois and First Nations who, like the Creole, were told to eschew their language and music, regard them with shame, and assimilate into the domineering English culture. Perhaps the strongest contrast among generations resides in **Zarico**, where Creoles who grew up in the fifties recall those forced moments of shame; and in a related sequence, an elder musician laments having to look for a young musician out of state, but beams with pride at the brilliant fiddler he found from Texas, who wants to play nothing but Zarico music.

The DVD's extras are the two older docs - **Zarico** and **Liberty Street Blues** - plus two deleted scenes that clearly didn't fit the focus of **Maroon**, but should be watched because of their thematic ties to **Liberty Street Blues**.

A really well-assembled release, and hopefully the beginning of the NFB's resurgence on DVD after decades of first-class productions.

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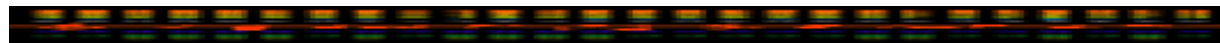


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