

Harry Choates (1922–1951) as Cajun folk hero

Holly Everett

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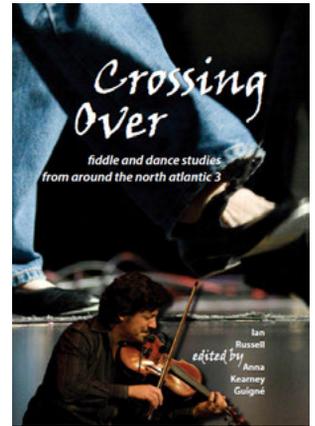
Crossing Over

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Harry Choates (1922–1951) as Cajun folk hero

HOLLY EVERETT

This paper connects with fiddling traditions around the North Atlantic in its consideration of the folkloric processes contributing to the reception and construction of the popular image of musician Harry Choates. Through teaching a course in occupational folklife over the past three years and examining the subject with students as a component of other folklore classes, as well as my own experience as a fiddler and pianist, I have developed a keen interest in the occupational folklife of musicians.¹ I am also intrigued by the contrasts between stereotypes of musicians of different genres and musicians' perceptions of themselves, both as public personalities and private individuals, and the role that folklore plays in each.² It is through the folklore about Harry Choates that I first became acquainted with him, as a fellow fiddler excitedly recounted the mysterious circumstances under which he died. As biographer Andrew Brown writes, 'since his tragic death [...] Harry Choates has never escaped the veneer of legend'.³

Choates was a talented multi-instrumentalist who performed in Louisiana and Texas in the 1930s, 1940s, and very early 1950s. Best known for his exciting, skilful fiddling, Choates brought Cajun music to wider audiences in both Texas and Louisiana with crossover recordings such as the wildly popular, soon-to-be anthemic 'Jole Blon' in 1946, which peaked at number four on the national Billboard charts (a tune recorded by a number of other artists and known by a variety of spellings).⁴ Brown observes that 'Choates truly was the definition of a musical outlaw decades before that term came into vogue'.⁵ I would suggest that he was not only an 'outlaw', but an outlaw hero, utilizing folklorist Michael Owen Jones's formula, (PC + CB) x SD (R + I + E) = HERO, which I'll discuss in greater detail later.⁶

As the 'most popular Cajun musician of his day',⁷ Harry Choates broadened the repertoire of that music with his 'Cajunization' of western swing, as well as country fiddle tune standards. By almost all accounts, he had a short and troubled life. Cajun music historian John Broven writes that although he made many recordings after 'Jole Blon', he was unable to reach his previous level of success and 'his life became a mess, a wild orgy of wine, women, and song'.⁸ Choates died in an Austin, Texas jail cell at the age of twenty-eight while awaiting trial for non-support of his wife

and children. As a result of his flamboyant stage persona and tragic death, Choates is often grouped with performers such as Janis Joplin.⁹ In this paper, I will examine some of the factors that come into play in the construction of Choates as a legendary musician and outlaw hero.

Harry Choates was born in 1922 in a number of places in Louisiana, depending on which account one is reading: Rayne, New Iberia, or just southwest of Abbeville in the rural community of Cow Island. Scholars have recently pinpointed Cow Island as his birthplace.¹⁰ Choates's mother, Edolia Rouen, thought to be a descendant of the Acadian people of eighteenth-century Nova Scotia, had been married for four years to Clarence Choate (the 's' was added later), of German ancestry. The family moved to Port Arthur, Texas, in 1929, attracted by the booming east Texas economy that followed the discovery of the Spindletop oilfield in 1901, which drew a considerable influx of Cajun families into the state.¹¹ This was not the first migration of Cajuns into the region, but it would be the one that 'forever changed the ethnic makeup of the area',¹² eventually resulting in the regional appellation, 'Cajun Lapland', identifying the area where Cajun country overlaps Texas.

While Choates eventually found short-term work in the petrochemical industry as an adult, his musical career began earlier. At the age of 12, he played the fiddle for tips in downtown Port Arthur.¹³ Although Brown reckons that Choates may have played with band leader and fiddler Leo Soileau as early as 1938, his first documented association with an established group was with Happy Fats and the Rayne-Bo Ramblers, beginning in 1939. Choates was not quite 17. Over the next decade, he would play with and lead a number of bands. In addition to his mastery of various fiddle styles, he was an accomplished jazz guitarist.

Although Choates died while only in his twenties, his early start and experience with a number of bands means that occupational narratives about Choates have been told by a wide range of musicians. For the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on stories that focus on four aspects of Choates's life: his alcoholism, his musical ability and showmanship, his 'pranksterism', and his death. As Choates's drinking tends to be a factor in many of the occupational narratives whether or not it is the focus of the story, it is here that I will begin.

Choates's alcoholism is frequently cited in the brief biographies that abound on the internet. However, during his lifetime the extent of his addiction was not always apparent, even to those with whom he worked. One of the last bands Choates played with regularly was Jesse James and All the Boys (a.k.a. 'the Boys', 'His Boys', and 'His Gang'). Peter Narváez and I interviewed one of James's early steel guitarists, James Grabowske at his home in Austin, Texas in 2008.¹⁴ Grabowske explained, 'I knew [Choates] drank a lot [...] but he never got obnoxious, was always happy [...] but I come to find out that he was just a dyed-in-the-wool alcoholic after all this time spent with him. And he did drink a lot, but he never would show it [...] And he wouldn't openly drink on the bandstand, which Jesse didn't allow'. Drummer Dowell Smith was also surprised by Choates's ability to perform while seriously intoxicated. As he told Brown, 'I played many a night with him and he'd be wildass drunk, but you'd

never know it. Talk about somebody that could carry their liquor.’¹⁵ The degree to which audiences in different areas were aware of Choates’s alcoholism is unclear. Moreover, drunkenness on stage was not unusual for musicians at the time, with bands such as Jesse James’s being one of the exceptions. As Smith recalled, ‘[M]ost everywhere you went, hell, 70 percent of the band was so drunk they didn’t know where they were’.¹⁶ Interestingly, statements like Smith’s are in direct contrast with Ryan André Brasseaux’s interpretation of bands of the era, and especially Cajun bands, as actively seeking to improve the public image of musicians.¹⁷

Choates’s alcoholism can, and has been, read in different ways in different contexts. For example, his alcohol-fuelled behaviour on-stage was sometimes understood to be part of his flamboyant showmanship. Jim Grabowske still speaks of Choates’s performances with awe. ‘What a great musician he was, what a showman he was!’ he exclaimed during the interview. Bandmate Ivy Gaspard told Brown about an incident that occurred one night in Port Arthur:

There was no bandstand, and at one end was the ladies’ restroom, with a swinging door to go in. Well, Harry was hung over pretty good before we started playing. He was sitting down, which he never did unless he was feeling that way. We started the dance off with an upbeat number like *In the Mood*. Well, during the song, Harry got to feeling good about the way the music was sounding, so he stood up to play [...] but he loses his balance, and staggers through the swinging doors into the ladies’ restroom. Of course, his fiddle is amplified, we can hear him in there. Soon afterward, here he comes back out, still fiddling – I don’t believe he knew how he even got in there, but he never missed a lick.¹⁸

On another occasion, a drunken Choates fell off the bandstand, landed on his feet, but again, never stopped playing. Gaspard observed that the audience ‘thought it was part of the act [and] gave him a big hand’.¹⁹ Regardless of his state of inebriation, by all accounts Choates’s musicianship remained at high level until a year or so before he died. By that time, his health had deteriorated such that it began to affect his stage presence, if not always his playing ability. As Gaspard noted, ‘He wasn’t the showman he had been’.²⁰

Choates was also a merciless prankster. For example, a fellow musician recounted an instance in which Choates ‘awoke a sleeping [bandmate] by putting a firecracker in his ear and lighting it, damaging his eardrum’.²¹ Those unlucky enough to share a room with Choates on the road might awake to find a rat in their bed.²² And, to use the vernacular, apparently Choates could dish it out, but he couldn’t take it – attempts to get revenge for Choates’s pranks were quickly met with anger and insults.

Yet, despite his erratic and often aggressive behaviour, Choates was generally well-liked by his colleagues and the public who came to hear him perform. In some circles, he was considered a hero, ‘The Fiddle King of Cajun Swing’, and later the ‘Godfather of Cajun Music’. As musician Carlton Guidry recalled, ‘In my Cajun

household, Choates was almost a god, even with his known drinking problem. My dad was one of his biggest fans, and for a teenage Cajun to be backing up my dad's favourite artist, playing his favourite song, "Jole Blon", well, it was beyond description.²³ Guidry was performing with a band in Jacinto City (near Houston) one night in 1950 when Choates asked to sit in. The 17-year-old Guidry witnessed Choates '[tear] the house down for well over an hour with his music and energy'.

How can Choates's popularity and status, as indicated by Guidry and others, be reconciled with the much less pleasant aspects of his personality and behaviour? As I first read accounts of Choates's antics, I wondered how someone who appeared to fulfil at least three quite negative stereotypes (alcoholic, dissolute musician, Cajun) could also be considered a heroic figure, beyond the admiration and affection that is often directed at a talented musician.

Folklorist Michael Owen Jones has offered a useful formula for the creation of a folk hero – $(PC + CB) \times SD (R + I + E) = \text{HERO}$ – which I will now apply to Choates. In Jones' equation, PC represents *personal charisma* or, as in the case of outlaw heroes such as bank robber Pretty Boy Floyd, *psychotic character*. CB stands for *credulous biographer* and SD for *social definition*. The next part of the recipe adds R or *recognition* to I, *imputation*, and E, *expurgation*. In Choates's case, numerous accounts, just a few of which I have mentioned here, attest to his personal charisma, even when extremely drunk. Credulous biographers perhaps first appear in the form of the listening public, unaware of Choates's personal troubles and behaviour offstage, enjoying his spirited performances and later puzzling at his seemingly sudden death. Later on, uncritical biographers pen the liner notes to various releases of Choates's recordings, further constructing his legendary status. For example, Tim Knight's liner notes for Arhoolie's re-release of several Choates tracks attribute his Austin arrest to 'his aggressive temperament' which 'caused him to run afoul of the law',²⁴ rather than the more straightforward and sadly mundane failure to make alimony payments. Brown singles out the anonymously-penned liner notes of the 1960 release, *The Original Cajun Fiddle of Harry Choates*, as another example of the repetition of 'tall tales' about Choates with little attention to fact.²⁵

However, as the construction of Choates as a Cajun musician and hero demonstrates, the biographers of any given personality are not simply repeating facts or 'tall tales', but constructing specific narratives meant to be meaningful in particular contexts. Thus, as Jones explains, social definition is also a crucial part of the formation of a folk hero.²⁶ He writes,

If the incipient hero and his actions are seen as potentially the apotheosis of a set of values, then the individual's identity and behaviour must be altered by means of expurgation and imputation, since no [individual] fulfils in every way the persona demanded by the group. The process obtains whether the hero ultimately serves as a model of behaviour for emulation, as a source of wish-fulfilment, or both.²⁷

It is in this part of the process, then, that folklore plays such an important role, as various narratives form a corpus that defines and amplifies the subject's heroic qualities. In examining the contexts in which Choates performed, both expurgation and imputation appear to be at work. Choates's musical prowess and sociability are emphasized, while his alcoholism is attributed to the perils of the musician's lifestyle, the regrettable price of genius, or the emotional stress of assimilation.²⁸ His expertise as a jazz guitarist – a Houston guitarist and banjoist declared that Choates 'played three times more guitar than he ever did fiddle' – is regularly omitted in discussions of his repertoire, whereas his fiddling, as a vital aspect of traditional Cajun music-making, is highlighted.²⁹

Choate, moreover, was not only a renowned fiddler, he was a celebrated *Cajun* fiddler. Houston record producer Bill Quinn emphasized the ethnic connection in recording sessions in 1946 following the great success of Choates's 'Jole Blon', newly adamant that Choates record only traditional tunes and songs. In fact, Brown declares, 'John Lomax himself could not have produced more authentic recordings of traditional sounding Cajun fiddle music, rendered in its purest possible form'.³⁰ Tracks such as 'Allons a Lafayette (Let's Go to Lafayette)' and 'Basile Waltz' were recorded in French with acoustic instrumental accompaniment. Even Brown turns to romanticizing both Cajun culture and Choates in describing the results of these sessions, rhapsodizing that, listening to these recordings, 'one couldn't imagine that the fiddler heard on these recordings even had an awareness of electric instruments – much less had been playing electric jazz guitar nearly every day for the previous seven years'.³¹ Yet, this rural-urban, acoustic-electric hybrid musician did indeed exist. Recordings with titles such as *The Original Cajun Fiddle of Harry Choates*,³² *Harry Choates: Fiddle King of Cajun Swing*,³³ and *Cajun Fiddle King*,³⁴ however, reinforce the Cajun connection and elide Choates's other areas of musical endeavour.

The Cajun presence in Texas during Choates's time continued to be centred in East Texas' 'Golden Triangle', an area roughly marked by the cities of Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange. As previously noted, this is where Choates first embarked on his musical career. Cultural geographers Dean Louder and Michel LeBlanc observe that the 'Cajuns who departed Louisiana during the agricultural depression of the 1920s and the Great Depression of the 1930s were the "most marginal of the marginals [...] the people who had less than the [Louisiana] prairie people, who had nothing"'.³⁵ Although East Texas's oilfields and associated businesses offered steady employment, as a group, Cajuns continued to be economically oppressed in their new home.

Group identity was reinforced not only by maintaining traditional practices such as music-making, but by the prejudice with which their Anglo-Texan neighbours, and in many cases bosses, met the im/migrants.³⁶ Brown notes that, 'the likes of Harry Choates [...] would not have even made it through the lobby of most Southern recording studios of the time', attributing Bill Quinn's acceptance of the Cajun musician to his east coast upbringing.³⁷ Even into the 1970s, university-educated Cajuns in Texas found it difficult to find employment matching their

qualifications, due to 'the major oil companies' reluctance to hire and promote Cajun administrators'.³⁸ Louder and Leblanc write that the Catholic Cajuns also chafed at the religious condescension of their Anglo-Protestant neighbours, quoting an interviewee who exclaimed, 'You see, here in Texas the Baptists are going to try to tell you what to do'. The Cajun appreciation of plentiful food, drink, music, dancing, and gambling has never met with the approval of conservative Protestants.³⁹ In addition, such disapproval has often been based not on personal experience with Cajun culture, but rather the stereotype of the Cajun as 'drunken, indolent' and simplistically focused on hedonistic pursuits.⁴⁰

But Choates also worked outside of Cajun Lapland. His performance circuit ran from Louisiana to central Texas. Choates would meet his end in the city that now officially bills itself as the 'Live Music Capital of the World', Austin. In contrast to east Texas, as French studies scholar François Lagarde notes, 'Austin [and central Texas] has never been very "French"'.⁴¹ Perhaps Choates was *allowed* or *expected* to be 'more' Cajun in central Texas than in Cajun East Texas. Moreover, Ryan Brasseaux asserts that 'Cajuns viewed [Jole Blon's] popularity as a positive and validating affirmation removed from the prejudice that often underscored relationships between Francos and Anglos'.⁴² Grabowske, although he grew up in Texas and California and performed with various bands throughout Texas, was not familiar with the Cajun sound until he first heard Choates perform. He and Choates first crossed paths in Corpus Christi, on Texas's Gulf coast, around 1947. At the time, Grabowske was playing with country bandleader Charlie Walker. Grabowske said, 'I thought that was the greatest innovation, I never heard it before. And he [Choates] came in there and all of them were very different looking. They were all Cajuns, you know.⁴³ And his band all wore, which was unusual back then, they all wore black, and you know, you just didn't, most of the cowboys back then [wore matching cowboy shirts with stitching and piping and hand-painted silk ties] [...]. And could they play!' But not everyone reacted as favourably as Grabowske. Western swing fiddler Tony Sepolio recalled, '[Choates] bothered my musicians – they didn't care for his type of music. The public did, but [the musicians] didn't'.⁴⁴

While Choates was able to play various styles of music with ease, his Cajun repertoire was a main attraction throughout his Texas circuit. As Grabowske explained, bands of the day frequently changed their sets according to the anticipated audience demographics – polkas for the central Texas Germans, mariachi tunes in south Texas, and so on. Two nights before his final arrest in Austin, Choates asked fellow fiddler George Uptmor to sing in his place at one of his appearances in Waco. Uptmor remembered, 'Well, God, that was a dream come true to me. I didn't sing a whole lot of Cajun – I told Harry I'd do the best I can. He said, "Oh, hell, there ain't no real Cajuns out here anyway, just say anything. They won't know the difference"'.⁴⁵ Choates's own command of Cajun French was weak. Although he spoke English with a Cajun accent, as music critic Michael Corcoran has noted, 'Choates was a Cajun who gained fame singing in a language [...] he wasn't fluent in and rarely used in conversation'.⁴⁶ Neither is there any evidence that Choates was particularly

concerned with preserving Cajun music. Both Brown and R. Brasseaux indicate that the post-World War II push to record Cajun music did not necessarily come from musicians such as Choates, but from record producers seeking to capitalize on the interest in Cajun music and culture initiated by Choates's wildly popular 'Jole Blon'.⁴⁷ Still, fluent or not, his recording of 'Jole Blon' – and this was not the first recording of the song – was the most well-known and the one that other musicians wore out trying to learn Choates's licks.

The lingering, legendary aspects of Choates's early death revolve around his addiction to alcohol and his treatment while in jail. As one internet poster explained to another on the Mudcat Café website,

You should check out Harry Choates (pron Shoats) [sic] if you haven't heard him. Remembered by some as 'a no good, wine-head son-of-a-bitch' and also as the best known and perhaps most successful of Cajun fiddlers in his short career. The last 5 of his 28 years were spent basically on a wild drunken spree. In 1951, he was arrested for non-payment of maintenance and thrown into an Austin jail, pending transfer to Beaumont. During the night, he suffered an attack of the DTs and was brutally beaten to shut him up. He fell into a coma and died.⁴⁸

Herein lies the crux of the mystery. What really happened to Choates during his time in jail? As indicated by 'Stewie', there are persistent rumours regarding Choates's treatment at the hands of the law that have contributed to the folklore surrounding the musician. In *Country Music, U.S.A.*, folklorist Bill Malone reports that Choates 'died in the Austin city jail under clouded circumstances, a victim of delirium tremens or, as many of his friends insisted, of police brutality'.⁴⁹ The personal experience narratives of those who visited Choates in jail play into the rumours as well, bearing witness to Choates's suffering. Fiddler Junior Burrow told Corcoran that '[Choates] didn't know us. He didn't know anything [...] I'd never seen anything like it'.⁵⁰

Grabowske's account of the last hours of Choates's life have been widely reported, no doubt due to the guitarist's striking recall. But as many times as Grabowske has told the story of his last visit with Choates, it was heartrending to see how vividly the experience sprang to life in his memory as he recounted it to Peter Narváez and me, and how he still puzzles over it. At the time of Choates's arrest, the two men were both members of Jesse James and His Boys. The band played live on Austin's KTBC radio station every day at 1.00 pm. Grabowske recalled,

Me and the fiddle player and the drummer – from the radio station it wasn't far to the courthouse – we went up there to see him and when we got there he was shaking all over and he was delirious. He didn't even recognize [us] and he was banging his head on the [bars]. We said, 'We've got to do something' [...] And so we were going back to the radio station to try to seek help [...] from Mr Kellum, the radio station manager. But when we left we heard sirens, when

we left the courthouse and we were walking back. [Before that] we went to the person there in the jail and told him. See, his [Choates's] head was bloody, it was awful, and he was just flopping around in there. I didn't even know what DTs were [...] but by the time we got back to the radio station, [Choates] was dead on arrival at the hospital.

Just as Grabowske did not know the cause of Choates's frightening appearance and behaviour, biographers and journalists have wondered whether or not his jailers recognized the seriousness of his condition. Grabowske confirmed that Choates's death inspired intense speculation at the time.⁵¹ While he doubts that any beatings took place, he still marvels at the guards' seeming indifference to the state in which Choates's bandmates found him. Grabowske continued, 'When we got there, his eyes were blurry, glazed, and he would fall and run into the walls [...] It was bad, it was horrible'. He notes that although Choates's vision had deteriorated such that he apparently could not see his fellow musicians, he appeared to recognize their voices.

Like Grabowske, Brown dispels as much rumour as he can, detailing Choates's suffering due to suddenly being cut off from the alcohol on which he had been dependent for so many years. Due to the longstanding addiction, Brown speculates that Choates quickly advanced to the most dangerous stage of withdrawal, delirium tremens. Without medical attention, this stage of withdrawal can be fatal. Choates's health was already extremely poor at the time of his arrest. The autopsy conducted by the Travis County Coroner, Dr Harold Williams, declared fatty metamorphosis of the liver and inflammation of the kidney to be the most significant factors in the musician's death. However, as Brown notes, Williams also documented a 2.5 cm cut across Choates's forehead, a contusion on his hip, and lesions on the skin that may have been a result of advanced liver disease.⁵² Whether or not the cut and contusion were self-inflicted, which is highly plausible given Grabowske's description of Choates banging his head and stumbling around in his cell, the question remains regarding the various officers' response to Choates. Either physical violence or neglect on its own would have hastened Choates's deterioration. The question remains as to motivation – but brutality *or* indifference on the part of the jailers may have been interpreted by Choates's fans as ultimately a murderous act of discrimination against a member of an ethnic minority in medical crisis.

Choates's ethnic background, exciting performances, and sudden, seemingly inexplicable death at a young age have all contributed to the construction of a folk hero.⁵³ Thus, I propose an additional element to Jones' folklore formula – MD for *mysterious death*. Covering a wide range of circumstances, a *mysterious death* is the final factor that may inspire a variety of folkloric responses, from personal experience and occupational narratives, such as those related by Grabowske, to legends, as exemplified by Stewie's post to the Mudcat Café. It is important to note that currently, even with the mass-mediation of painstakingly detailed accounts of Choates's time in jail and the subsequent autopsy, legends about Choates's death

continue to circulate. With the addition of *mysterious death*, the formula might be rendered $(PC + CB) \times SD (R + I + E + MD) = HERO$, as it is the social definition of the death that determines its meaning. Moreover, all elements of the formula must be understood to be unstable, in that the quantity and composition of each is constantly in flux in the crucible of the folk process.

As I have indicated, there is little in the documentary record to suggest that Choates actively sought to claim and project a Cajun identity, either privately or publicly, beyond that which he employed in the heightened moment of performance. However, as a flamboyant public figure he was well-situated to function as a locus for beliefs, attitudes, and images, both esoteric and exoteric, around Cajun ethnicity in Texas. We may engage Jones's formula by utilizing accounts which omit or soft pedal, and thus expurgate Choates's less admirable qualities, or consider the positive reception of the same traits and occurrences as acts of social definition and in this case, perhaps, cultural resistance. Jones reminds us that 'outlaw heroes [...] often emerge during periods of relative deprivation or oppression among various groups in society', in which there are positive needs for negative social behaviour whether the group in question passively identifies with it or actually engages in it as well.⁵⁴ The *social definition* of Choates as a Cajun outlaw hero facilitated the redirection of his potentially deviant behaviours into more 'socially acceptable'⁵⁵ and potentially empowering forms, enabling a marginalized group in Texas's ethnic mix to simultaneously affirm Cajun identity and resist Anglo-Texan cultural hegemony.

Notes

¹ Holly Everett, 'The Association I Have with this Guitar is My Life': The Guitar as Artifact and Symbol', *Popular Music and Society*, 26 (1990), 331–50.

² See, for example, Holly Everett and Peter Narváez, 'Me and the Devil': Legends of Niccolò Paganini and Robert Johnson', *Contemporary Legend*, new series 4 (2001), 20–47; and Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000). A recent popular culture example of such contrasts was the extremely successful reality television series, *The Osbournes* (2002–2005) starring heavy metal shock-rocker Ozzy Osbourne. As the lead singer of Black Sabbath and later as a solo artist, Osbourne entranced fans and repulsed parents across North America, Europe, and beyond. The MTV series *The Osbournes* portrayed the private life of Osbourne as a relatively mild-mannered, drug-addled father and husband. The 'real' Osbourne perhaps remains unknown to the public. During an interview aired on BBC radio in 2009, Osbourne said that he is so mortified by his appearance in *The Osbournes* that he is unable to watch it.

³ Andrew Brown, *Harry Choates: Devil in the Bayou*, liner notes, Bear Family Records BCD 16355, 2002, p. 3. I have not found any documentation of interviews with Choates himself, nor references to such materials. To date, the most comprehensive and credible account of Choates's life is that penned by music historian Andrew Brown for the liner notes of the two-CD set, *Harry Choates: Devil in the Bayou*. In addition to clarifying the details of Choates's brief life and career, Brown's recounting includes a wealth of data gleaned from interviews with Choates's contemporaries. While this paper draws heavily from Brown, it is the folkloristic analysis of this and other biographical accounts that contributes to a greater understanding of both Choates's legacy and the occupational folklife of musicians in general.

⁴ Barry Jean Ancelet, *Cajun Music: Its Origins and Development* (Lafayette, LA: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1989), p. 30.

⁵ Brown, p. 3.

⁶ Michael Owen Jones, '(PC + CB) x SD (R + I + E) = HERO', *New York Folklore Quarterly*, 27 (1971), 243–60.

⁷ Barry Jean Ancelet, *The Makers of Cajun Music* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), p. 26.

⁸ John Broven, *South to Louisiana: The Music of the Cajun Bayous* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 1983), p. 31.

⁹ See Paul M. Lucko, 'Choates, Harry H.', in *The Handbook of Texas Online*, www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/CC/fch67.html [accessed 28 June 2008]; Mary Meaux, 'PA's [Port Arthur's] Choates Receives Marker', *Port Arthur News*, 21 July 2008, www.panews.com/local/local_story_173185123.html [accessed 2 July 2009].

¹⁰ Cow Island lies in Vermillion Parish, which today promotes itself as 'the Most Cajun place on Earth'. See the parish's website at www.vermilion.org/ [accessed 25 June 2009].

¹¹ Brown, p. 7; Ryan André Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown: The Emergence of an American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 276.

¹² Robert Plochek, 'Cajuns of Texas: Let the Good Times Roll', in *Texas Almanac 2008–2009*, ed. by Elizabeth Cruce Alvarez and Robert Plocheck (Dallas: Dallas Morning News, 2008), p. 543.

¹³ Tim Knight, *Harry Choates: The Fiddle King of Western Swing*, liner notes, Arhoolie CD 380, pp. 2–3.

¹⁴ James 'Jim' Grabowske is a legendary musician in his own right. Similarly to Choates, he began playing professionally while still in his teens. He is an inductee of the Texas Steel Guitar Hall of Fame. Interview 5 May 2008.

¹⁵ Brown, p. 81.

¹⁶ Brown, p. 79.

¹⁷ Ryan André Brasseaux, 'Bayou Boogie: The Americanization of Cajun Music, 1928–1950' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2004), p. 82.

¹⁸ Brown, p. 74.

¹⁹ Brown, p. 83.

²⁰ Brown, p. 75.

²¹ Brown, p. 66.

²² Brown, p. 80.

²³ Brown, p. 82.

²⁴ *Harry Choates: The Fiddle King of Western Swing*, Arhoolie CD 380, 1993.

²⁵ Brown, pp. 91–92. See *The Original Cajun Fiddle of Harry Choates*, D records D-7000, Houston, 1960.

²⁶ Santino has discussed the importance of occupational narrative in the formation of the folk hero. See, for example, Jack Santino, 'Characteristics of Occupational Narrative', in *Working Americans*, ed. by Robert H. Byington, Smithsonian Folklife Studies, no. 3 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1978), pp. 57–70.

²⁷ Jones, p. 246.

²⁸ Regarding the pressure of assimilation that some see as contributing to Cajun musicians' early deaths, see Ryan André Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown: The Emergence of an American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 187. It is difficult to assess the credibility of such a statement with regard to Choates in light of the fact that he was never interviewed.

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In addition, the topic does not appear to have been discussed with any of his bandmates or relatives by later interviewers.

²⁹ Brown, pp. 15, 92.

³⁰ Brown, p. 45.

³¹ Brown, p. 46.

³² *The Original Cajun Fiddle of Harry Choates*, D records D-7000, Houston, 1960.

³³ *Harry Choates: Fiddle King of Cajun Swing*, Arhoolie, LP 380, 1982, re-issued as CD 380, 1993.

³⁴ Harry Choates, *Cajun Fiddle King*, Aim Records AITG 1205, Australia, 1999.

³⁵ Dean Louder and Michel Leblanc, 'The Cajuns of East Texas', in *French America*, ed. by Dean Louder and Eric Waddell (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), pp. 301–15, (p. 311). Here the authors quote an anonymous interviewee, who explained that Cajuns in Louisiana looked down on those who left to go to Texas, judging them to be 'ill mannered [...] and unkempt'.

³⁶ Carl Brasseaux, 'Grand Texas: The Cajun Migration to Texas', in *The French in Texas*, ed. by François Lagarde (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), pp. 273–86 (p. 281); R. Brasseaux (2009), pp. 135–37.

³⁷ Brown, p. 36.

³⁸ C. Brasseaux, p. 278.

³⁹ Louder and Leblanc, pp. 313–14; see also R. Brasseaux (2009), pp. 29, 131–32.

⁴⁰ Shane K. Bernard, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), pp. 16, 50.

⁴¹ François Lagarde, 'Birth, Stock, and Work: French Immigration in Texas', in *The French in Texas*, ed. by François Lagarde (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), pp. 157–77 (p. 161).

⁴² R. Brasseaux (2004), p. 96. While it is outside the scope of this paper, both of R. Brasseaux's works discussed here (2004 and 2009) examine at length the wider cultural significance of 'Jole Blon', as well as the factors that facilitated Choates's great success with this oft-recorded tune.

⁴³ I asked my mother, who grew up in Lamesa, Texas (about 480 km northwest of Choates's established gig route) in the 1940s and 50s, if she remembered when she was first aware of Cajuns and/or Cajun culture. Unlike Grabowske, she recalled, 'I first heard of Cajuns when I was a child. My dad had relatives in Louisiana and one of his cousins married a girl they said was Cajun. We in fact met her when they came to visit. She was a very pretty girl. I expected her to look foreign in some way, but she did not.' My mother does not remember ever hearing of Harry Choates.

⁴⁴ Brown, p. 82.

⁴⁵ Brown, p. 85.

⁴⁶ Michael Corcoran, *All Over the Map: True Heroes of Texas Music* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), p. 7.

⁴⁷ Brown, pp. 45–46; R. Brasseaux (2004), p. 108.

⁴⁸ Stewie, post to discussion thread 'Lyr Req: Rubber Dolly' *The Mudcat Café*, 6 March 2000, mudcat.org/Detail.CFM?messages__Message_ID=190658 [accessed 20 June 2009]. The Mudcat Café is a music and lyric database and networking site for individuals interested in traditional music.

⁴⁹ Bill C. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, rev. edn. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), p. 231.

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⁵⁰ Michael Corcoran, 'The Ghost of Harry Choates', *Austin American-Statesman*, 17 July 2001, nl.newsbank.com [accessed 12 July 2008].

⁵¹ See also Brown, pp. 89–90.

⁵² Brown, pp. 88–89.

⁵³ The general public was probably unaware of the very serious extent of his alcoholism or of his personal problems, and the contemporary paparazzi machine that reports celebrities' every move, especially run-ins with the police, did not yet exist.

⁵⁴ Jones, p. 253.

⁵⁵ Jones, p. 252.