
CULTURE

JOIE DE VIVRE

LES ARTISTES

save the last dance

Lafayette photographer Philip Gould examines Acadiana and the world through his images

BY WILLIAM KALEC
PORTRAIT BY ROMERO & ROMERO

PHILIP GOULD HAS PHOTOGRAPHED a bevy of distinct locales across the globe, so the fact that he's holding a camera while the guy next to him is holding a machete isn't necessarily strange.

Nor is the location, really.

Sure, it sounds like they're deep in a South American rainforest instead of a waltz away from Highway 31 in St. Landry Parish, but when it rains like it's been raining in recent months, plant life tends to grow faster than nieces and nephews you haven't seen since the last family gathering. No, what's peculiar about all of this is what Gould and Co. are hoping to find once they whack through all this thorny brush — The French Club, a dance hall that's been closed for 55 years.

"Photographically, Louisiana is an incredibly generous state," says Philip Gould.





Included in the new book, “Ghost of Good Times,” released in October, Gould’s French Club photos illuminate a place left in the dark for decades. The book is authored by local writer Herman Fuselier, whom Gould couldn’t praise enough and credited more than once for coming up with the idea. A liberal sheen of dust and dirt blanket an interior styled for a

different day. While the music played inside dared patrons not to move their feet and the pours were heavy-handed, the place was doomed before the first dance. Apparently, the French Club neighbored a church, and the priests believed a place to pray and a place to party shouldn’t coexist so closely, so the dance hall owner eventually caved to the pressure.

“And in many of these cases, they had a Last Night, they turned off the lights, and they locked the doors — that’s it,” Gould says. “It’s like nothing has happened. There are cases of JAX Beer, unopened. The liquor licenses from 1958 to 1961 hang on a bulletin board. The chairs and tables look like they haven’t moved in 50 years. It was truly this amazing

moment where you just go, ‘Holy Smokes.’

“Time stood still, but nature did not. Louisiana’s climate of rain, wind and pervasive humidity just marched on and left a patina of decay. What’s left is another sort of beauty.”

Page after page validates Gould’s claim, as snapshots of rotting and rusted authenticity show just how

long ago it was when these humble establishments were the entertainment epicenter of Cajun communities, back when live music swam through a sea of cigarette smoke to our ears, not via oversized speakers in a sterile, cavernous corporately-owned casino or arena today. Though Gould was able to capture a sizeable portion of these long-forgotten



landmarks with his camera, a few of these weekend temples toppled within the last five years — missed opportunities that sparked a sense of immediacy to do this book now.

“There is a time and a place for a project or an idea and

this project is pertinent to this moment,” Gould says. “These projects come together and almost do themselves. I just do the looking and take some photos as I go.”

Obviously, there’s a little more to it than that. Gould’s selective

eye and talent to gain access to the places and trust amongst the folks he photographs has evolved ever since landing a job at *The Daily Iberian* in New Iberia after graduation from San Jose State in 1974. Lured away a year later by a paper with a larger



circulation in Dallas, Gould ditched all that and returned to Louisiana to document the region through pictures. Gould laughs when recalling how patrons at his first exhibit, a photo collection of Cajun people that debuted in 1979, figured the artist attached to the show must

be an old man considering the amount and diversity of images on display.

Gould was 28. "I was fortunate to photograph the Cajuns before Mulate's, before the great national discovery of the Cajun culture," he says. "There was an

interesting innocence to people back then. They were jokesters, often amusing themselves at my expense. They were welcoming. Incredibly practical. But I don't think they were aware of what was to come.

"At the core, the people are the same. The context is a bit

more contemporary now, and I think (Cajun) people are a bit more aware of what distinguishes them now as a culture from a multitude of cultures in the United States. But still, it was a different time."

Over the years, Gould's images have documented how much has

changed — from the landscape, to the landmarks, to the way of life — yet even still, there's no confusion where these photos originate, as the content in each is unmistakably Louisiana.

"Photographically, Louisiana is an incredibly generous state," Gould says. "This is an amazing

place to photograph for a whole list of reasons. One: a tremendous sense of tradition. There's a reverence for things from the past. Two: The landscape. And finally, there's a nice sense of quirkiness that emanates from Louisiana and the people here. Time and time again, amazing

things have happened and I was lucky enough to be there with my camera."

So, Gould is asked, if Louisiana has been overly giving, do you think you've said 'thank you' for its generosity?

Gould pauses for a good five seconds, laughs, and then

says, "I feel when I take a photograph and put it on my website, or Facebook, or what-have-you, in some way I'm giving it back to people here. It's my responsibility to share it....By presenting the photographs, people here get a sense of themselves." ◀

