

## legacy lost

Musician Sean Ardoin remembers vibrant Miller's Zydeco Hall of Fame in Opelousas

BY MICHAEL PATRICK WELCH | PHOTOS BY LESLIE WESTBROOK



**IN 1946, EDDIE RICHARD, THE CREOLE** owner of the largest amount of land in St. Landry Parish at the time, bought his six grown children their own dance hall as a gift. Like some Creole king, Richard ordered command performances near the family home at Richard's Hall on Highway 190, mostly from artists playing French "La Muisc," as zydeco was then called.

Because of Richard's, few argued whenever Opelousas, Louisiana called itself the "zydeco capital of the world." But as of this year, the club is gone, possibly forever. Though not the swankiest dance hall, and only large enough to fit 350 people on the dance floor, Richard's re-opened as Miller's Zydeco Hall of Fame in 2008, but was gutted by a fire this year in April.

"Playing at Richard's was a thing we all aspired to do," says 48-year-old "alternative Creole" musician Sean Ardoin, whose family drove often from Lake Charles to Richard's in his youth. "I have seen it from both perspectives. I saw a lot of concerts at Richard's, and also three generations of my family have played there: my grandfather, my father Lawrence Ardoin, and now me and my brothers."

In terms of what the fire means for the Ardoin family and the future of zydeco in the Acadiana area, Sean runs off a list of important zydeco venues — Ki-Ki and Slim's Y in Opelousas, the Offshore Lounge (Lawtell), Hamilton's (Lafayette) and Dauphine's (Parks) — all now relics of the past. "All of them, closed. All our iconic dancehalls of zydeco are gone."

Clifton Chenier drew the initial huge crowds that put Richard's on the zydeco map. All of the greats performed there, from Zydeco Force, to Boozoo Chavis and Terrance Simien. Many live albums were recorded at Richard's, by the likes of Nathan Williams and John Delafosse, who in 1994 suffered a heart attack while resting right after a gig at the storied dance hall. He died that evening.

Richard's also became important to the fabled "chitlin circuit" of underground clubs that employed black musicians during segregation. As such, the club hosted non-zydeco acts such as legendary bluesmen John Lee Hooker and B.B. King.

More recently, younger acts like Keith Frank and Sean Ardoin's brother Chris Ardoin have helped keep the place's reputation alive.

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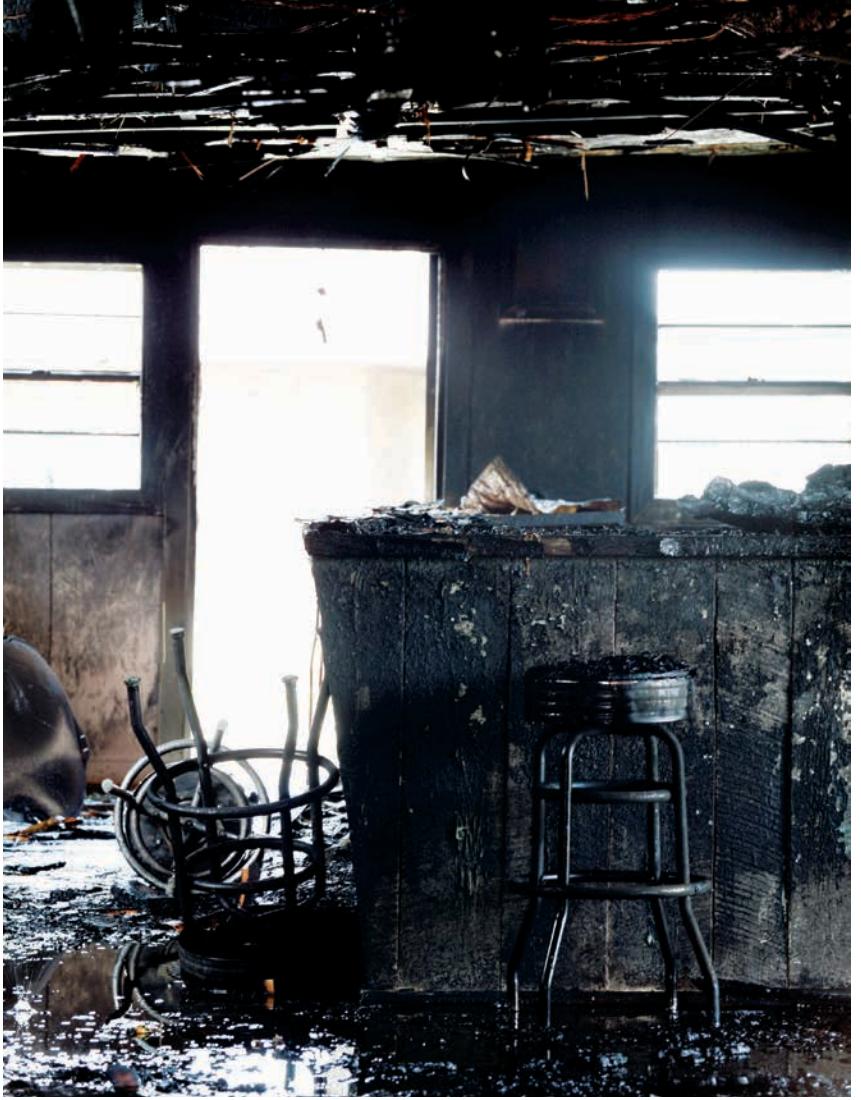
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"My brother Chris played Richard's quite a bit right when he was getting really hot," says Sean Ardooin, "But no one could beat Beau Jocque. The only person I've seen really pack Richard's out is Beau Jocque. At his height of popularity, he'd have the entire club full, plus with another 500 people outside dancing to that boom, boom-boom, boom-boom, boom-boom sound, that 'double clutching' beat."

Beau Jocque even recorded a song in honor of the place, "Richard's Club," with

the lyrics, "We are going to Richard's Club/ that's the place that the people love/ That's where they all like to go/ Listen to Beau Jocque zydeco".

"So that was everybody's pipe dream," says Sean Ardooin, "We were gonna pack it out like Beau Jacques. But no one ever did. And now I guess no one ever will."

Sean Ardooin, who played the club only once following its ownership switch and rechristening as Zydeco Hall of Fame, describes the particular rush of performing

on that tiny, hot stage, which remained unchanged throughout its long life.

"The stage was only a foot high and the ceiling was just seven feet," he says. "It was just a straight shot shotgun house, and even if it had A/C in there, you wouldn't have been able to keep it cool in there when everyone was packed in dancing."

"And it was all wood so it sounded great. There were even handmade wooden chairs and wooden tables. The whole outside was wood, everything. So going up in flames — yeah, if it caught fire there was no way..."

He trails off.

Dance hall researcher John Sharp said something similar in New Orleans's *Gambit Weekly* in the days after the fire.

"The building was built with good, old sturdy wood," said Sharp. "Once a little bit of it caught fire, that's a lot of fuel. Now, it's a gutted big black hole."

A family dispute between Richard's descendants closed the club down in 2006. Dustin Miller reopened it in 2008 as Miller's Zydeco Hall of Fame, but to Sean Ardooin it didn't feel the same.

"They kept the vibe, they just cleaned it up a little bit," he says, but explains that zydeco music had left the clubs a long time ago, and could now mostly be seen and heard only at trail rides. "The zydeco scene that had been in the clubs was all but dead even by the time Mr. Richard died. They had weekend shows at first but then it became sort of by appointment only."

Ardooin says the only great zydeco club left is El Sido's in Lafayette, owned by Zydeco Cha-Chas bandleader Nathan William's brother Sid Williams.

"El Sido's is not as old as Hamilton's but it's been around for at least 37 years, and it's a great place."

The reason for the fire at Zydeco Hall of Fame has still not been determined. Reports state that "a local band" had practiced in the club an hour before the blaze began. Current owner Miller at first told reporters he would not re-open, but sounded conflicted when he told *The Daily Advertiser*, "I've been going there since I was young, even before I was supposed to be in there. You didn't grow up in this town without going there."

Following days of intense community outpouring, Miller later told *The Advertiser* he's rethinking his decision. ▶

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