

A LITTLE BIT O' CAJUN IN THE COUNTRY

BY DEAN LEONARD
EDITOR/WRITER



The Manuel's, Abe and Dottie, have been cooking, crabbing and playing music as a way of Cajun life.

With a whole lot of Cajun heritage and a little bit of country in their souls, Abe Manuel and his wife Dottie have lived the kind of life most people have only read about in books. Both were born and raised near Lake Charles in the depths of the Louisiana bayou where cooking, crabbing and playing music was a way of life. The Cajun couple, who are both in their early 70's, have shared a life on the road and a love for music since a chance encounter at Dottie's senior prom back in Louisiana. "I was playing at her prom and a buddy of mine told me that this good lookin' girl could sing," said Manuel, leaning in



scattered about the list of entrees, it makes for an interesting menu. Shrimp is fresh peeled, and the potato salad is a favorite of the regulars.

Celebrities from all walks of life have been known to dine here. In fact, you never know who may drop in to eat a little, talk a little, and play a little. "On one of my birthdays a few years back, Merle and LeAnn Womack both stopped in to celebrate with me," said Manuel, fondly. "We closed the doors and played until 2:00 in the morning," he added, shaking his head and grinning.

With 16 grandchildren, and all but

With a whole lot of Cajun heritage and a little bit of country in their souls, Abe Manuel and his wife Dottie have lived the kind of life most people have only read about in books. Both were born and raised near Lake Charles in the depths of the Louisiana bayou where cooking, crabbing and playing music was a way of life. The Cajun couple, who are both in their early 70's, have shared a life on the road and a love for music since a chance encounter at Dottie's senior prom back in Louisiana. "I was playing at her prom and a buddy of mine told me that this good lookin' girl could sing," said Manuel, leaning in to whisper, "He kept telling me to ask her up on the stage, so I did, and she never left my side."

Manuel's Cajun Country Store, located in Milton, Tennessee, is a veritable wonderland of colorful lights, toe tappin' sounds and pleasing aromas within an old country store atmosphere. For thirteen years, the Manuel family, who call themselves "Manuel's Cajun Krewe", have taken the stage there on Friday and Saturday nights, playing Cajun music intertwined with bluegrass and country. Photographs, newspaper and magazine articles, along with mementos from their travels, embellish every square inch of the place; a pictorial biography of the unique life they've embraced.

Musically inclined since the age of nine, Manuel has spent most of his life journeying from one stage to another. "I got interested in music early on," he said. "My daddy played Cajun accordion and was the only one around at the time who could do it. He played 'house-parties' then. There was no money in it...he played for fun."

Manuel's first paying job came at the age of thirteen at a dance hall in Louisiana called Club Avalon. A few years later, he left to serve with the Navy, fighting a war and traveling the South Pacific for 4 years. Upon returning, his job at Club Avalon was waiting for him. "I stayed there from 1945 to



Dottie, grandson Taylor, and Abe

1949, and I learned to play fiddle pretty good," he said. "Lefty Frizzell had made a big hit back then called 'If You've Got the Money, Honey (I've Got the Time)'. He came into the club, heard us play, and hired me right off the stage."

Manuel traveled the roads from 1949 until 1979 mostly by bus. "I've been in every state in the U.S. except Alaska," he said. One of his favorites was 'Jolie Blonde', "It means pretty blonde...we recorded that in 1947 and it went to number one all over," he said. "We didn't write the song, we were just called to Houston, Texas to record it, so the five of us drove down there. The guy paid us \$25...not apiece, altogether. He kept all the money from the sale of it...we didn't know we were supposed to get paid," he said, laughing. After touring with the legendary Frizzell, Manuel continued to perform with some of country music's biggest stars. "I've played with a lot of big shot musicians like Hank Williams Sr., Marty Robbins, Billy Walker, and Merle Haggard," he chuckled. "If they needed a fiddle player, I was lucky to be there."

Grandson Taylor Abraham Manuel, III, age 9, is eager to follow in his "PaPa's" footsteps. He looks forward to singing with his grandparents on the

weekends and is learning to play the drums, as well as the fiddle. "He has a Cajun accordion," said Dottie, "we hope he'll pick that up, too." Taylor says his favorite song to sing is 'Hey Goodlookin'.

Fiddle playing isn't the only thing Abe Manuel is famous for. He and other members of his family serve up authentic Cajun delicacies like Crawfish Etouffee, Shrimp Okra Gumbo, and Fried Gator to the delight of their customers from Wednesday to Saturday. Manuel remembers back to the first weekend they opened, "We decided to have a fish fry, and the customers wanted us to have it again. The next weekend, some kids came in wanting to play music. My wife and I had played in Nashville the night before and my fiddle and her guitar were in the back of the car. We decided to join in and that's how it all started."

During the summer months as many as 600 people visit Manuel's on the weekend. "The streets are full," said Manuel. "One time, during Mardi Gras, we fed 3500 people...I don't think we can do that again." Gator tail and crawfish are flown in fresh from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and with phrases like FAIS-DO-DO (a Cajun dance), and POOH YI! (a Cajun expression denoting pleasure),

scattered about the list of entrees, it makes for an interesting menu. Shrimp is fresh peeled, and the potato salad is a favorite of the regulars.

Celebrities from all walks of life have been known to dine here. In fact, you never know who may drop in to eat a little, talk a little, and play a little. "On one of my birthdays a few years back, Merle and LeAnn Womack both stopped in to celebrate with me," said Manuel, fondly. "We closed the doors and played until 2:00 in the morning," he added, shaking his head and grinning.

With 16 grandchildren, and all but four living in the area, the couple stays busy. They say their grandchildren keep them young. They love what they do, and it shows. It's not unusual to find Dottie in one of the back dining rooms harmonizing with fellow musician, Norman Wade, in-between quick stirs of the gumbo. Her voice is clear, but soft, complementing Wade's aching rendition of 'Are You Teasin' Me'. And, it's not unusual to catch Abe Manuel teaching a local how to play the mandolin.

Granddaughter Ann is pleased to be part of the business as well. The twenty-five year old has been helping out since the age of twelve. "I never get tired of this," she said honestly. "I meet all kinds of interesting people here. One guy came riding up on a bicycle the other day. He said he was from Switzerland and that he was on his way from Maine to California. I had to explain to him what a catfish was!"

Manuel's isn't just a restaurant, and it isn't just a dance hall...it's an experience, steeped with Cajun culture and old-time tradition. Travel down Hwy. 96 to Milton where you can see, hear and taste for yourself. Kick off your shoes and 'pass a good time'...you'll be glad you did.

Manuel's is located off Hwy. 96, on Milton Street, just past Lascassas. Hours are Wednesday-Thursday, 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. and Friday-Saturday, 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Live music starts at 6:30 p.m. on Friday and Saturday nights.