

Cajun Dance

(Louisiana/Texas, United States)

Field research and notes by Jerry Duke, Ph.D, Professor (Emeritus) of Dance Ethnology and Folklore, San Francisco State University. Cajun and Zydeco dance have grown apart since 1980-90 when this research was done.

The word “Cajun” comes from the word “Acadian.” Acadia is used to refer to regions of North America that are historically associated with the lands, descendants, and/or culture of the former French region. It particularly refers to regions of The Maritimes with French roots, language, and culture, primarily in



New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, the Magdalen Islands and Prince Edward Island, as well as in Maine. French-speaking settlers came from this area to Louisiana in the 18th century. Few, if any, people exist who have a clear lineage from those original settlers, but many people who live in southwestern Louisiana and southern Texas rightfully claim the Cajun culture as their own. Cajun culture has been heavily influenced by settlers from many places and times, and the dances are variations of dances that have been popular throughout the United States. There are three basic dances popular now: the Two-Step (with arm figures, it is called Jitterbug), the Waltz, and a modern version of the Jitterbug (also known as the Cajun Jig). The Two-Step and the Waltz, which are older, are found in several rhythmic and stylistic variations, a full discussion of which can be found in my book, *Dances of the Cajuns* (1984). A few variations are listed below.

The Black Creole cousin of Cajun music and dance is “Zydeco,” which some folks say is the source of Rock ‘n Roll music. Even though the style recently took on the name “Zydeco,” it has been around a long time and has had an influence on many Cajun musicians. Both are obviously influenced by Caribbean music and dance, which also has African roots with French influence. The Two-Step is done to both styles of music, but has a hip-swinging flair when done by Black Creoles to “Zydeco” music.

Pronunciation: KAY-juhn

Music: 2/4 meter

CD NAME, Track # _____

Cajun Two-Step

The Cajun Two-Step is a three step dance done to 2/4 music. It is found in two rhythmic variations: Quick-Quick-Slow, and Slow-Quick-Quick. The latter is more common and is my favorite. The dances listed below are styles of that rhythmic variation. The “Basic” is so named because it is the simpler of the variations. It is common around Lafayette and the central part of Louisiana, but is not the only variation to be found there. All variations of the Two-Step are done in relaxed Ballroom Dance hold. The man begins with the left foot and the woman begins with the right. This alternates with each measure.

<u>Meas</u>	<u>2/4 meter</u>	<u>Pattern</u>
	I.	<u>BASIC</u> (M begins with L; W with R) Rotate slowly as a couple either CCW or CW.
1		Step in place (ct 1); hold (ct &); step bkwd with little or no turn of the body (ct 2); step in place (ct &).
2		Repeat meas 1 with opp ftwk.
	II.	<u>BASIC WITH TRAVEL</u> (M begins with L; W with R) Move as a couple, one partner fwd, the other bkwd.
1		Small step fwd (or bkwd) (ct 1); hold (ct &); large step in the same direction (ct 2); small step in opp direction (ct &).
2		Repeat meas with opp ftwk.
	III.	<u>PORT ARTHUR (TX) SPECIAL</u> (Similar to <u>BASIC</u> but with twisting feet)
1		Wt on both ft, twist heels inward (ct 1); lift one ft (M's R; W's L), while twisting heels outward (ct &); step bkwd while twisting heels inward, with an optional kick down and fwd with the free ft (ct 2); step into original place while twisting heels outward (ct &).
2		Repeat meas with opposite ftwk.

Cajun Two-Step Common Arm Figures

When arm figures are done with the “Basic” or the “Port Arthur” styles, the dance is called “Jitterbug.” Arm figures are started on ct 1, finished by ct 2, and are followed by the steps found in “Basic” ct 2, &. Arm figures are done from the double handhold position (M and W facing, holding opp hands between) except for “Outside Arch Under,” which is also done from the Ballroom position.

Outside Arch Under: Done from Ballroom position. Can be done on ct 1 of any measure, but usually on meas 1. M guides W under uplifted L holding W's R. W steps fwd and turns R to face M while M steps fwd and turns L to face W. Both turn approximately one-half.

Inside Arch Under: Done from Ballroom position. Can be done on meas 2 following an “Outside Arch Under,” or on ct 1 of any meas. M guides W across in front of him with uplifted L arm holding W's R while changing places. W steps fwd and turns L to face M as M steps fwd and turns to R to face W.

Brush-Off: Done from the double handhold position. More easily done on meas 1, ct 1. M brings L arm in front level with his waist to guide W to his R side while stepping fwd and turning half L away from W, releasing handhold. M continues to turn to face W while she turns either direction to face him (the man usually guides her turn direction).

There is a different Cajun Jitterbug (also known as Cajun Jig) which is done with a buzz step. It most likely came from what I learned as the Mexican Merengue (which may have come from Polish settlers in northern Mexico and southern Texas). It is popular especially among younger dancers.

Cajun Waltz

There are many ways to do a Cajun Waltz. In most variations the three-count waltz rhythm is maintained; however, one variation uses four counts against the three-count music, and others use four steps over two measures (two steps of which take two counts each (Slow) and two take one count (Quick). The dance can begin on either Slow or either Quick.

Six-Count Waltz: There are several variations of the six-count waltz found throughout Cajun land. It is really the Texas Two-Step (a popular country western dance done in six counts to 2/4 music, using one and a half measures) transposed to two measures of waltz music.

M travels fwd most of the time while the W travels bkwd. The dancers can turn one-half while traveling and the M goes backward for a while.

My favorite variation is done in Ballroom position.

- I. JERRY'S FAVORITE. M begins with L, W with R.
- 1 Touch (M slightly fwd with L, W bkwd with R) (ct 1); step in that spot (ct 2); touch in the same direction (ct 3).
- 2 Step in place (ct 1); step in the same direction (ct 2); step in the same direction (ct 3).
- 3-4 Repeat meas 1-2.

Note: Turn at will. Even though specific ways of turning will be shown, they are only suggestions.)

Presented by Jerry Duke