



The Mississippi-born singer Sarah Savoy performs at the 2014 Mawazine Festival in the Moroccan capital of Rabat. Photo by Sife Elamine

## Mawazine sessions: meet the Cajun queen Sarah Savoy

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It was a first. Entering the green room to interview Sarah Savoy before her Mawazine Festival performance in the Moroccan capital of Rabat, the singer makes an absolute fuss over my comfort.

She put down her accordion to ensure I was sitting in a comfortable chair and asked a band member to make me a cup of fresh espresso before asking me to dig into her plate of sandwiches and meats.

Responding to my gratitude, she just smiles and says: "Oh, that's just a Cajun thing."

The Mississippi-born singer is one of the leaders of the global Cajun music fraternity. It's a genre that although deeply embedded in America's heartland, continues to be performed widely in foreign territories.

"There are Cajun music festivals everywhere these days," Savoy says. "Places such as Australia, New Zealand, France, England, Germany, Holland and even Finland."

Dating back to the late 18th century in the American state of Louisiana, Cajun music is often referred to as a subgenre of Americana, with its

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associated country and folk influences.

Where those styles follow a measured pace, however, traditional Cajun music is distinguished by its sheer peppiness – tracks often have a pounding, up-tempo beat as fiddles and accordions battle for melodic control.

The musical exuberance is often complemented by lyrics that can move from dark tales of hard luck and unrequited love to humorous odes to relationships. A Cajun song is available for all occasions – from weddings to funerals.

However, the tunes only form a soundtrack to what Savoy calls the “Cajun way of life”. In a way, the genre is similar to hip-hop in that the music offers a window to a wider culture.

“It’s our music, our food and the way we live and work together,” she says. “So no matter where we live, that way of life is still with us. So I live in France, the capital of cheese and bread. But I will call my Cajun friend and say: ‘I am making some shrimp etouffee, do you want to come over?’ She would come down and we would eat and then play music together. That’s how we live and it becomes contagious once you are part of it.”

Savoy was born into it. The 35-year-old is the daughter of two of the most influential artists in Cajun music, Marc and Ann Savoy. She recalls her childhood life at home as being filled with communal meals and musical performances.

“My mom and her friends would get together and she would tell us that they were ‘practising’.” What she really meant was partying and playing music,” says Savoy.

“They would sit together and sing late into the night while we fell asleep.”

While it all made for pleasant memories, Savoy realised in her early twenties that she was only listening to one facet of traditional Cajun music.

“I was playing in a punk-rock band,” she recalls. “And then, just listening to Cajun music during that time, I realised that a lot of these songs were written by men. They would sing about how their poor little wife left them.

“Then, when the rare woman would sing – which was, like, only a handful of them in a hundred years – they would sing about what will they do without their big man.

“Now, I am not a feminist,” she says, but explains that she instead “wanted to focus on Cajun music’s other subjects, which are really about having a good time”.

Ironically, she began performing those upbeat traditional Cajun numbers while living abroad.

After spending three years in Russia “to learn the language of my favourite writer, Dostoyevsky”, Savoy moved to France in 2007, where she got married to the Cajun music performer Manolo Gonzales.

She started a new band, with her and her husband on guitars, and released last year’s debut album *Cajun Born* under the moniker *Sarah Savoy & The Francadians*.

Savoy's punk roots shone through in the release, with modern and traditional Cajun songs delivered in an almost rockabilly style.

The follow up, *En Route Chez Moi*, recorded under the new band name *Sarah Savoy's Cajun Raunchy-Tonk*, was released this year and was a stripped-down affair. Savoy and Gonzales recruited a new ensemble to record a set of classic Cajun songs by giants such as the late Adam Herbert (*Ouvre La Porte*) and Milton Adams (*Midnight Playboy Special*).

Savoy also ditched the guitar for an accordion made by her father. The intimacy of the recording was a real showcase for Savoy's sensual voice, which at times moves from playful to morose to fiery.

The album's unpolished nature was deliberate, Savoy explains.

"I wanted to keep the music as live as possible and not have us record in these small rooms to make it perfect," she says. "It is basically us sitting around in a friend's house and somebody recording us. Which is the way it is meant to be, really."

With that, Savoy picks up her accordion, ready to take the festival stage. She says she hopes to perform in Abu Dhabi one day – and if ever the opportunity arises, she promises she will come armed with typical Cajun hospitality.

"I would love to be there if you folks will have me," she says. "I would come down there, we would play and go to party afterwards where I would cook for all of you. It will be a fun time."

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