

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

Welcome to La Louisiane. Conversations brought to you by the official magazine of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. I'm managing editor Marie Elizabeth Oliver. Our guest today is Todd Mouton, author of the new book *The King of Zydeco, the Life Music and Legacy of Clifton Chenier*. He's co-founder of Dirty Rice, the Louisiana music show here on KRVS, and one of the driving forces behind the Dr. Tommy Comeaux Memorial Endowed Chair in Traditional Music here at UL Lafayette. He's received widespread recognition for his journalism and cultural advocacy from organizations such as the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. Todd, thank you so much for joining us.

**Todd Mouton**

It's great to be here.

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

It's awesome to have you here, and it's been a big year for Clifton Chenier, 100 years this past June, and we have here on the table just some examples of what's been produced: A tribute to *The King of Zydeco*, the new album from Valcour Records featuring the Rolling Stones, among many others. He's the cover star of our magazine, and we just had a sold-out show at the Acadiana Center for the Arts, which I know you were a part of, and then your book, which I learned so much from. So, what do you feel like — why has this anniversary sparked so much? It just feels like so much creative energy here, like things being produced around this anniversary. I think it was a very welcome thing for everyone interested in Clifton, everyone aware of Clifton, and it was a groundswell. It was, you know, the, I mean, no one ever thought, I don't think or predicted, that the Rolling Stones would put out a Clifton Chenier single on his 100th birthday, that it would time with my book, that the cover the magazine, this, this show at the ACA. I mean, everyone, I think, sort of is recognizing that this is sort of like a point at which a person kind of becomes, in a way, immortal. They kind of, they enter the firmament, and you say, "man 100 years of not just their life — would have been his birthday, but it's about 100 years of recording." You know, we don't know a lot of what happened before Clifton. There's no real audio documentation, and so we're sort of celebrating everything he did and everything that's come after him. And I think this is kind of one of those things where you gather it all up, and you sort of push it forward, and you say, "you know, the world sees Clifton Chenier, the world sees Zydeco. The world appreciates this, and it's time to kind of elevate it to its rightful stature." And you know, many comparisons can be made about Clifton, but Bob Marley, Muddy Waters. Robert Johnson, he's one of these figures that sort of came and took everything before him and changed everything after him And from right here in Lafayette and Acadiana.

**Todd Mouton**

In fact, in fact, from sort of a little trail, you know, I think that's one of the cool things, is that certainly Lafayette has a claim, certainly St. Landry Parish, certainly Iberia Parish, certainly Texas, yes, yes. But really, the world, you know, and, and it was fun working on the book, because he blazed a trail. He did not leave a lot of breadcrumbs, though it was really hard to figure out there's references to him playing all over the world, but, but is there documentation? Substantiation, corroboration?

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

You had to do some reporting.

**Todd Mouton**

You had to do some digging, and in the process, I got to work with a lot of great researchers, including here at the University, Sandy Hymel and around the country, and we sort of tried to ferret out what was profitable and what was not, because the story is remarkable enough without any embellishment. Yes,

but when you wear a crown and you play these four hour shows, and, you know, you sort of change people's lives. And so, the tales, the myth, it kind of gets bigger and bigger and bigger. I think that's deserved on one level, but on the other level, what did he actually do? He actually worked really hard. He actually was a man of very modest means who had a vision, right? And somehow was able to just piece it together over the years, and in a lot of ways. You know, the Forrest Gump reference gets overused, but Clifton popped up over and over again, whether it was in Chicago, whether it was in Los Angeles, even in the book, we found St. Petersburg, we found Milwaukee, we found places we didn't know about. And of course, overseas. And then there's his recordings, which he made lots and lots of recordings. Some years he made multiple albums for multiple labels distributed in multiple countries. And of course, now we live in this sort of digital internet world, which has helped us find some things, right? But also. So, it's sort of hard to explain back how he managed to sort of blanket...

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

Right, without any, yeah, he didn't have the internet, he didn't have social media. He didn't even really have the same kind of digital media that we have.

**Todd Mouton**

He, I mean, even just intellectual property, you know, that's another thing. It's, you know, there are certainly heirs, and there's certainly descendants, and there's certainly folks doing things to celebrate his legacy, but explaining all the songs that he wrote, explaining all the little stylistic things that he sort of came up with, that sort of stuff, first of all, it kind of belongs to him, right? But as as, as the circumstances show us, they belong to these things belong to the world and, and that's what's exciting, is it sort of the world came together. In other words, no one rang a bell and said, "Hey everybody, 2025 - 2026 it's," Yeah, I didn't call Mick and, you know, and so forth as well. But the Smithsonian's got a box set coming out, and, you know, and so there's all these things and again, I think it just speaks to like, the breadth of his influence, much less the depth. And so, it was lucky for me that I've been working on this book for a long time, and other folks also saw that we were gonna have a really significant 12 months, but much more than that, right?

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

Centennial, right? I want to talk a little bit about your work with the Comeauxtians; we mentioned in the beginning, but this album that came out benefits a new scholarship in Clifton Chenier's name for the Traditional Music Program that didn't exist before your work. So, what does it mean to essentially have the Rolling Stones almost be a fundraiser, you know, for this program that you worked along with your friends to create?

**Todd Mouton**

I think it's an incredible turn of events. I think that this idea that we all worked so hard to create this program. And, you know, we also supported the music business program, the group of us. And so now, when you start to see the wheels turn, and you're like, well there's actual music business out in the community that is, that is going to help benefit the University, the idea, yeah, that the Rolling Stones would raise the profile of this whole project. And again, the records got incredible contributions, you know, members of Los Lobos and Taj Mahal, and you just go down the list of folks. And really the record, this tribute record, shows kind of the breadth of Clifton as a songwriter, how he worked his way into all sorts of other styles of music, as opposed to just sort of the hardcore, zydeco, kind of blue stuff we know about, but it's super gratifying to think that it can all tie together, and to think that the University can be a place where people can go not just to learn more through all the great folklife resources the Center for Louisiana studies, but to go put their fingers on a donated piano accordion and to be instructed by masters from around the community. This is a, this is just an incredible turn of events. And again, not something — I don't think anyone foresaw, but having a Traditional Music

Program, you know, is sort of a beacon or a magnet, and it allows these things to happen and and I think many more things will happen like this. So, it's been super awesome that things can tie together like that.

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

And you mentioned the Cajun and Creole Music Collection here the Center for Louisiana studies archive. How was that helpful for you and your work, and then maybe just sharing how that could be helpful for people in the future? Like, why are these archives so valuable?

**Todd Mouton**

Well, there's so much work to be done. You know, in particular, there are some great resources here on Clifton Chenier, zydeco, Creole culture, but for the first 30 years of Clifton's life, there's very little known about him. And one of the fun things about this project is that it's updatable. And so, we're going to continue, sort of like a journalistic focus that's great on the book, because we're very close to proving some things and disproving some things about Clifton's life that have long remained in question. And so, the key to these primary sources, though, is that there's so much more to learn and figure out. And I know that because in 2010 — I'm sorry, 2015, I first published *Way Down in Louisiana*, which had lots and lots of information on Clifton Chenier. But in the last 10 years, new connections, new ways of figuring things out. You know one little fact, when you go back and you rifle through some of these, there's a great photograph of Joel Savoy as a little boy. I was looking for something else. I was in a misfiled area of a photo collection. The names were misspelled, and there's a picture of Clifton Chenier, Cleveland Chenier, Chris Strachwitz, looking at Mark and Anne Savoy, and also looking at them as their son Joelle, who would later go on to produce this album. He's about this tall, so that's amazing. They were all in the same place at the same time in 1981. So going back to the archives, going back to all the different resources, really, around the globe, you know, all of a sudden things start to make more sense as you go. So, if you don't have this collection and repository, you can't reinterpret and reanalyze and reconsider. In other words, someone might say you might have heard two or three times something that just didn't sound true. But then all of a sudden you find a shred that sends you to a sort of a third place, and you go, we know it wasn't actually true the way the person said it, but it did happen. And so, we were able to kind of share some of that research. I had a couple editors and again, researchers helping me out to find these things. But there's more.

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

Yeah, so what was one thing that maybe just surprised you, or that you chased down?

**Todd Mouton**

You know, there's a few good ones. I'm working on, like a top 10 — 10 things we didn't know about Clifton Chenier, but I think a couple of the most significant things are that there is an interview with Studs Terkel from 1983 that no one seemed to know about. One of my collaborators found it. We got permission to listen to it. We got permission to transcribe it. In that interview, Clifton says definitively that no one taught him, which you know there, because who, how do you learn? Well, obviously he played a different instrument than the one most were playing at the time. So, he really clearly states that he also basically explains how he thought I'm going to call this music zydeco. He sort of took the name from gatherings and from things he had heard, and, of course, the lyrics to a song. And he created zydeco. He sort of explains that definitively. And again, we didn't have him really doing that before, and he meant for himself, he's gonna call his music zydeco, almost like a branding exercise. He didn't realize it would be, it would be quite as impactful, and everyone would want to be part of it. And it would be this kind of culminating factor. But there's things like that, and then there's just some, some challenging things. We weren't exactly sure about his health, and we now know that in November of 1979 is when he had his foot amputated. That means he continued for another eight years playing gigs,

really, with dialysis, with all these things going on in his life, and so that really illustrates kind of his drive, that really illustrates the fact that the world was catching on to him, maybe too late, but he just couldn't. He wanted to get that spotlight. He wanted to do it because he loved it, but he paid a price. He grew up in a tough time with very little resources, and even the king of zydeco, as beautiful and wonderful as many of us can recognize that title to be. It did not come with a castle. It did not come with a crown with real jewels. It came with a road and a pair of keys, and thanks to Clifton Chenier, it's now a phenomenon.

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

Yeah, and I know, for a lot of us who grew up here, it almost feels like we always knew about Clifton Chenier. We don't know how — there's just, you know, someone who we felt familiar with, but your book, just those things you mentioned, I mean, so many facts that maybe people might not know. Can you share a little bit about you know, why it's worth not only reading the book but just familiarizing yourself, if you think you are, if you think you know everything there is to know about Clifton?

**Todd Mouton**

Well, this was a great man, you know, who did great things and when you look at his life, is sort of 33 years of touring and recording. He certainly played at least 200 gigs a year. So, he played 6,000 performances, something like that. Incredible. But there's only, there are only about 50 or 60 posters. There are only about four or five newspaper ads that we can find at this point. We may find more. But yes, Clifton is someone that is, in a way, part of the fabric. He's part of our atmosphere. But the who was this person? What was he like? And one of the greatest things in the absence of many in depth interviews, and anyone who really got to sit down, sit down and ask him, What made him tick. We have the voices of his bandmates, and I was able to do extensive interviews with Paul Little Buck, Senegal before he passed jump and Joe Morris before he passed, Stanley Buckwheat, Darle Jr., before he passed. And they sort of light up, you know, his portrait, and explain what it was like to work and to travel with him. And so it's kind of one of those things where it's an ongoing story, as much as Clifton Chenier passed away at age 62 his legacy, the stories, they continue, but again, getting down to the truth and why he's so meaningful, that was kind of the point is to try to kind of define it and to sort of crystallize it for people. But it's going to do the same thing again. It's just going to it's going to diffuse, diffuse itself, and become an influence and keep going.

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

Well, if you're just joining us, this is Marie Elizabeth Oliver, managing editor for La Louisiane. I'm here with Todd Mouton, author of the new book *The King of Zydeco*, the life music and legacy of Clifton Chenier. So, I know we've talked about the book, a little bit about Clifton's legacy, but what drew you personally, to the to the book, into telling this story, I know you've been like you said. You've written a previous book; you've been at this for a while. What is your personal connection to him?

**Todd Mouton**

I think, you know, I think this is a good point for anybody out there who's got passion and interest in something is, I never saw myself as the Chenier biographer. But like pretty much everyone mentioned in the book from, you know, I've got quotes from folks back in the '50s all the way to Mick Jagger, you know, this year, it meant something to them, just like it meant something to him. And so, this was music that I heard about. I loved it. You know. I didn't really understand it at first, not just the lyrics, but just, where is it coming from? Why is he playing the sort of bluesy stuff on accordion, but, but, man, it just drew me in and grabbed me and it's beautiful, and it's wonderful. And so, like everybody in this book from again, David Hidalgo, Zachary Richard, all these people that are quoted it, it led me to a place where it was actually my dad who said it's criminal that there's not a book about this guy. He's sort of the linchpin. And as I've said many times, there's roots, there's branches, he's the trunk, you know, and

you can say that about other musicians and other genres and sort of, you know, sister genres and all that. But, Clifton is a singular figure, and we were so lucky to have him again blaze his trail through South Louisiana, but also around the U.S., you know, across the globe. And I think, you know, I think the answer is, you know, you follow your passion, and then at some point you find your work.

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

Yes, yes. Well, we're so lucky that that you did. And I know, again, like I said, it was a long time that you worked on this, what were some of your biggest challenges?

**Todd Mouton**

You know, it's again, for anyone that's doing work like this or interested in it. I mean, you know, people like to say, you know, if it was easy, everybody would do it. My motto the last year, as I was revising it was, this book's not going to write itself. And, you know, you just get up and go do it. And, you know, Now's the fun time. It's great. But there was a lot of fretting over just, you know, comparing facts. I mean, people tell stories the same way, generally over time, but some end up competing. And there's a few tales in here that there's an alternate version of events, and, and again, I had these two great editors who worked, you know, New York Times, Associated Press over the years. And they, you know, we just sort of saying, we kind of went with the who cares? What does it add to the story? And if it adds, we want it, and if it detracts, you know, that's not the point, because Clifton's music did not tarry. It did not dally, it came, it went, you know, you were changed. And so, the idea was to try to capture that enthusiasm. Because when you talk about his music, you can use whatever word you want. When you talk about his personality, you can use whatever words you want. But he had a huge smile, and pretty much people were magnetically attracted to the dance floor, young, old, black, white, French speaking, non and so how do you, how do you capture that? Well, with words, with audio, we have a lot of, you know, YouTube channels and all that stuff where we're putting rare audio up, but it's you just try to encapsulate it as best you can. And I think that that's kind of the hope is that this is a sort of a home base for Clifton.

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

You mentioned the dancing a little bit. I know so much. I mean, I love how you structured the book all around his music, and that was just a really interesting way to follow his narrative. But you know, even at the AcA concert where we were, you could see people there just like wanting so much to dance. And I know for people who remember Clifton and even understanding his legacy, so much of it was about the dancing. Did you come across any of that in your research?

**Todd Mouton**

Absolutely. And, you know, I get to work with, you know, the fantastic designer, Megan Barra, who's a roots music expert and collector of cool artifacts and you know, loves to dance. And I think there are so many quotes in here that we sort of just pulled out, you know, like Clifton at one point says, "If you can't dance to zydeco, you can't dance, period." And there's a Rolling Stone article from 1971 where the writer is basically setting the scene there out in Richmond, California. And he basically says, after the first few notes, it was pandemonium. And, you know, it's just so over the top, the way he's describing this scene in California in 1971 and you're like, that's how a lot of people feel when they see this. And it does make you want to move. And I think that's another point, is that, like, Louisiana. We have this great way in south Louisiana, you know, food, music, dance, it's kind of all tied together in a little bow. And you — certainly Clifton's music and his songwriting and his creativity, and really his encyclopedic knowledge and ability to just pull pieces and parts from songs over the years, that's a main thread here. But we know from again, many sources, including that Rolling Stone article, that when there's food, because there was boudin and stuff at this event he went to, when there's food and dancing, the music definitely gets better.

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

And for people who may want to dive a little deeper into the music, obviously this album, obviously your book. But do you have any recommendations on you know, where people can listen?

**Todd Mouton**

Sure. And another motivation for doing this is, you know, if you go on any of like the streaming services and you look for Clifton Chenier, you get this hodgepodge of songs from maybe across his career, maybe not representative. They're based on some sort of an algorithm and some sort of a, you know, a use case, I guess. But in the book, we included suggested listening with every chapter. And those playlists are being built out and posted. There was this in working on the first book, found this very rare DVD from 1977 this is 15 songs live in Baton Rouge, and it was with the seven-piece Red Hot Louisiana band, which was Buckwheat Zydeco on organ, of course, Little Buck John Hart, just an incredible band. So, you know, that's kind of a holy grail visual and musical document. Again, I kind of think the tribute album really shows the branches, although the Rolling Stones track, which includes, of course, Steve Riley, Curley Taylor, Dave Ranson, Zachary Richard, lots of folks. That one is incredible because, you know, the idea was hatched over here by producer CC Adcock, and when he sent the tracks to Mick Jagger, and they came back with vocals and harmonica, I think everybody in Acadiana was surprised that the Rolling Stones were keeping our musicians on the track and adding and interweaving with because that's rare for them, right? It's never been done. They've never had a record where they sing in French. They've never had a record where they have one side with Clifton Chenier and one, one artist, another artist and them. And they've certainly, you know, never listed a featuring, but I think that gets at the point, which is rock and roll and Zydeco are just, it's all it's all in there. And I think one of the coolest things was that the Rolling Stones got all this notoriety. We find out that they've been listening to Clifton Chenier since 1965, right? All these things well, you know, Dickie Landry introduced Mick Jagger to Clifton in 1978 there's all these through lines, but yes, for them to sort of not only lend their name, but to create this sort of peanut butter and chocolate combo that is illustrative, representative, demonstrative of what Clifton did. I think is really kind of an icing on the cake moment,

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

Absolutely well, before we go, anything else you wanted to mention, or I know you're going to be kind of on a book tour and sharing your knowledge during this anniversary year.

**Todd Mouton**

I think you know the answer is, follow your heart. You know, it's what Clifton Chenier did, and there's so much beautiful, valuable, folk roots, hybrid, cutting edge music out there that, you know, be like Clifton. That's it. Blaze a trail. That's my advice.

**Marie Elizabeth Oliver**

Well, thank you so much for being here today. We really appreciate it. Thank you, and we appreciate you joining this conversation with La Louisiane, the official magazine of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette since 1989. Check back next month for more discussions with members of our University community. You can listen to the archive of this interview by visiting [louisiana.edu/magazine](http://louisiana.edu/magazine). KRVS is listener supported public radio for Acadiana, a service of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Thanks for listening.