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. Today, we're bringing you a very special interview with artist and UL Lafayette alum Dickie Landry about his good friend Clifton Chenier. La Louisiane's editor, Dr James Savage spoke with Landry about his photograph that graces the cover of the new Valcour Records album, "A Tribute to the King of Zydeco," Chenier's legacy — and that night, Mick Jagger met the king. He also shares the significance of the new scholarship supported by the album that will benefit Zydeco accordion students in the UL Lafayette Traditional Music Program. A very special thank you to the Center for Louisiana Studies for allowing us to visit with Landry in the beautifully restored Roy House.

James Savage
Dickie, thank you so much for doing this and joining us to talk about the King of Zydeco, Clifton Chenier, your friend.

Dickie Landry
Anything for Clifton.

James Savage
Appreciate that. So just, I think the toughest question I'm going to ask you is this one, OK? What made Clifton Chenier special? What made him a star?

Dickie Landry
What made him a star? His presence, his attitude and his devotion to the music. I'll quote him by saying, "If you're gonna be something, be something." So, I guess that was his motto. He wanted to be...he wanted to be known. He wanted to be...it was a joy to see him perform. It was a joy to speak to him and putting that crown on his head and going like, "I'm the king." How can you dispute that?

James Savage
I'm going to jump ahead a little bit. But tell me about the stage presence. Tell me what would I see if I went to a Clifton Chenier concert.

Dickie Landry
You would see a man six foot nine or something, gold teeth, a big smile on his face, a huge accordion around his neck. I produced a concert in New York at Carnegie Hall with him and John Lee Hooker and Lightnin Hopkins and other people, blues people, and he was the last one to come on stage. And when he walked in, he had a crown. I mean, he looked, literally looked like he took over the stage. In the meantime, people were practically passed out, and first words out of his mouth, he says, "I know I'm supposed to play this Zydeco — play some Zydeco tonight. But I wouldn't be here if it weren't for the song “Jolie Blonde." So, his first song was “Jolie Blonde,” and the audience, in five minutes were up and dancing in the aisle. Next day, there's three magazines in New York, the best blues of the night, Clifton Chenier. So, he looked like a king when it came out. You know, his presence was overwhelming.

James Savage
That show at Carnegie Hall was a long show, and he was later on the bill.

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Dickie Landry
Well, what happened is that you're not supposed to touch your equipment once everything is set up and on the stage. Well, the people of Chicago were pretty well intoxicated, and they came and started changing everything. So, the sound was a disaster. So, we got a 15-minute late start, and by the time he came on at 12:30 which is overtime at Carnegie Hall, very expensive, but it didn't matter. He won the prize.

Dickie Landry
How long did he play that night?

Dickie Landry
Yep, a 45-minute set, yeah, yeah.

James Savage
That was pretty typical?

Dickie Landry
No, a four-hour set. I remember once here, one Christmas Day, Eve and Day, I was talking to his guitar player. I said, "Remember Christmas Eve? We played three jobs." "Oh no, Dickie. We did four." At one of the dances, he gets on stage and goes like, "I'm so happy y'all came out tonight." And his manager came up and said, "Clifton, we haven't even started the job yet."

James Savage
He was ready to go. He was ready to play. Yeah, yeah. Was it hard to stop Clifton once he started playing? Was it?

Dickie Landry
The deal with the musicians is that if you went to the bathroom, pack up your stuff and go home, it's four hours straight. No break. Nobody gets off the stage, yeah, yeah, yeah. He worked hard. He was a hard worker. Hard drinker too.

James Savage
Yeah, yeah. Did that help with the music?

Dickie Landry
Oh, I have no idea.

James Savage
Well, let's take a step back. How did you meet him?

Dickie Landry
I met Clifton in 1972 after the filming of Les Blank's Hot Pepper. A teacher at the University here told me, I should hear this man. So, he took me to the Dipsy Doodle in the swamp behind Breaux Bridge, or Henderson, I mean, in the swamps. Walked in and John Hart was a saxophone player, and he was a

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good friend of mine, and I was really impressed by the music. So, I walked up to John, I said, "You think I could sit in?" "Well, I'll ask Clifton." So, they mumbled, and Clifton, he said, "We got a white boy from Cecilia whose gonna try to play that Zydeco." So again, I'll say I didn't realize that they're going straight for four hours. And after two hours, I was, I'm not used to playing four hours straight, so I was getting tired, so I started to walk off the stage, and Clifton says, "Hey, white boy, stay on the stage. You're doing the music well." So that's how I first met Clifton.

James Savage
That's pretty high praise.

Dickie Landry
Yeah, yeah. And anytime I had a chance, I sat in with him, mostly at Cankton and the Blue Angel here in Lafayette, and wherever he was.

James Savage
You played saxophone for four hours. Could you talk after you were done? Your lips must have been numb.

Dickie Landry
No, no. You get used to it. You know it's like running.

James Savage
I'm gonna just take your word on that, because I'm not much of a runner, so.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver
If you're just joining us, you're listening to a conversation with La Louisiane's editor James Savage and Dickie Landry about Clifton Chenier.

James Savage
Let's talk about the concerts. And I want to talk specifically about this night when you took this photo because this photo graces the cover of the tribute album to Clifton, and you shot this in 1972. And where were you?

Dickie Landry
At Jay's Cockpit Lounge in Cankton.

James Savage
Was it a big place?

Dickie Landry
As nightclubs go, you know, the attraction was the rooster fights in the back.

James Savage
Say that again.

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Dickie Landry
They had rooster fights in the back. They had a cockpit lounge. So, after the Saturday night gigs, there was always gumbo. This shot was covered. Had one light, couple of light bulbs on stage. That was it. And we photoshopped this out, you know, for the cover. Yeah, the ceiling was so low, as you can tell, that Cleveland used to put his hand on the ceiling and stretch his back and look at me and order a Crown Royal.

James Savage
And you'd bring him a drink.

Dickie Landry
I'd bring the drink.

James Savage
What makes this picture special?

Dickie Landry
The intensity of both of them. When Clifton closed his eyes, he was in Nirvana. They were gone and Cleveland; look at those eyes, just like it was just, you know, it's an intense photograph.

James Savage
The concert at Verbum Dei in Los Angeles, okay, you brought a special guest to meet Clifton. This is 19...

Dickie Landry
...72 OK. It was my 40th birthday. I was in Los Angeles doing a concert with Philip Glass at Whiskey a Go Go. And I was staying with some friends of mine in Brentwood, and I show up at 4:30 in the morning. There's a surprise birthday party for me. So, I walk in. The hostess told me there's a famous person back in the back room. So, I walk back there, and it's Mick Jagger. So, I walked up. I said, "Hey, man, I heard you don't like birthdays." I said, "It's my birthday. Be kind, you know, like, be nice." He said, "Well, how old are you?" I said, "I'm 40." He says, "I'm 37. I'll never reach 40." And I just blew him off, and I went to the party. The next scene in the restaurant with the Philip Glass Ensemble having dinner, and his manager, Earl McGrath, who I knew at the time, came to me and said, "We're in the back room, keep one person you want, and let everybody go home and come and join us." I kept a friend and walked to the back room, and it was Mick Jagger, Malcolm Morley, the English artist, Earl McGrath, the manager, and a couple of women. So, during the conversation, Mick says, "Your accent. Where are you from?" I said, "South Louisiana." He immediately, "Clifton Chenier! The best band I ever heard, and I'd love to hear them again." I said, "Dude, you're in luck. They're playing at a Black high school in Watts tomorrow night." "Really, can you set it up?" "Yes, sir." Next morning, I called Clifton. I said, "Clifton, I'm bringing Mick Jagger." "Well, who's that?" I said, "He's with the Rolling Stones," and Cliff goes, "Oh yeah, that magazine; they did an article on me." So, he had no idea who Mick Jagger was. Mick picks me up in the limousine. We go to the school Verbum Dei, and he says, "Go in and check and see if it's cool." I said, "OK." "So, I walk in, and it was set up in the gymnasium just like a Zydeco club here, with the checkerboard tablecloths, a setup, whiskey, coke, seven, ice. And I was walking around, I started hearing people speaking French. I'm going, "Wait a minute."

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Dickie Landry
I stopped one guy and said, "Hey, man, you're speaking French. Where are you from?" Lawtell? What? Yeah, that man over there is from Opelousas. What? So, he said, "Our parents came here during the Second World War to build the ships. So, we grew up in Watts." So, there's this contingency of Creoles in Watts.

Dickie Landry
So, I go back to the car and said, "Man, come on. Nobody's even recognized you or cares who we are." I mean, there must have been 400 Black people and maybe 10 white walk in. Nobody looked at us as we party, we dance, had a great time. Intermission comes, introduce him to Clifton. Clifton still doesn't recognize, I think he said, "Yeah, your magazine wrote an article about me." Anyway, Cleveland comes always said, 'Hey, man, I want you to meet my family.' So, I said, go off. So, he went. Came back about 15 minutes. He said, Dickie, they were talking to me. I couldn't understand a word they were saying. So anyway, intermission is over, people started to come get customs autograph, and Mick starts to back up, and I just and they walked right by him to get customs autograph, and he looked at nobody's gonna believe in this story. And then last year at Jazz Fest, the Stones played, and I went to the concert. It was, you know, to watch an 83-year-old man run around the stage like a teenager was quite impressive. The power of the, you know, music. And that person, that evening, I did a concert at Chickie Wah Wah, solo concert, and I told the story to the to the audience. The next day, there was a luncheon at Antoine's with Jimmy Jagger, his son, and Leslie Jagger his daughter. They told me he might be there; he might not be there. So, knowing maybe OK, so I was late, and I get a call. What he's here. We're having dessert right now. So, I was three miles away trying to get it over. So, I told Francis Pavy, "Let's walk." So, we just beelined it through the Quarter. And I walked into the restaurant, from bright sunshine to a dark restaurant, and somebody mentioned, "Dickie Landry's in the house," and somebody immediately stood up and started coming towards me, and I'm going like, "And who are you?" So, I recognized him, and got a big hug, and we sat down, started talking about that evening in Los Angeles, and at one point I said, "Do you remember that evening?" He says, "Like it was yesterday."

James Savage
Well, as Dr. Savoie said in the commencement ceremony last week, you know your life's not bad for a boy from Cecilia.

Dickie Landry
Not bad, not bad. Have you ever been to Cecilia?

James Savage
I have.

Dickie Landry
There's a big change in the past 86 years. One major change. Coming from Bayou Teche, you either take a right, go to Piggly Wiggly, or you go to the church. Well, right on the corner there was this abandoned gas station, mechanic shop, which had fallen apart. Roof caving in for the past 40 years. It's finally gone. So, that's the only change in Cecilia in 86 years, but we got great musicians from Cecilia.

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James Savage
Well, let me ask you that the University where we're at today is your alma mater. You just recently received an honorary doctorate from your alma mater. This CD benefits students studying traditional music, specifically Zydeco at your alma mater. What does that mean for you as an alum of the University of Louisiana?

Dickie Landry
It'll mean that the music will continue for generations. There'll be a new generation every year of some young kid who probably never thought of playing Zydeco or Cajun music, deciding on a career in the music, or recording it, or writing music. You know, writing some songs. You know, it's so it's a great, great thing with the scholarship thing that'll continue the process of young kids writing Cajun music and Zydeco music and new songs. Yeah.

James Savage
We could do this all day.

Dickie Landry
I have so many stories.

James Savage
Yeah, well, I hope we get to hear some more of them sometime.

Dickie Landry
Anytime.

James Savage
I think that's all my questions. There's anything else that you'd like to add about Clifton, or your career?

Dickie Landry
I'm just looking forward to the future. I don't know how many years I have left, but I'm gonna enjoy as much of it I can. If you're gonna be something, be something. If you'll be nothing, be nothing. That's Clifton Chenier, king of Zydeco.

James Savage
I have absolutely adored this conversation. Dickie, thank you so much.

Dickie Landry
Thank you, sir.

James Savage
Thank you.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

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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 an archive of this interview by visiting louisiana.edu/magazine KRVS is listener supported public radio for Acadiana, a service of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Thanks for listening.

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