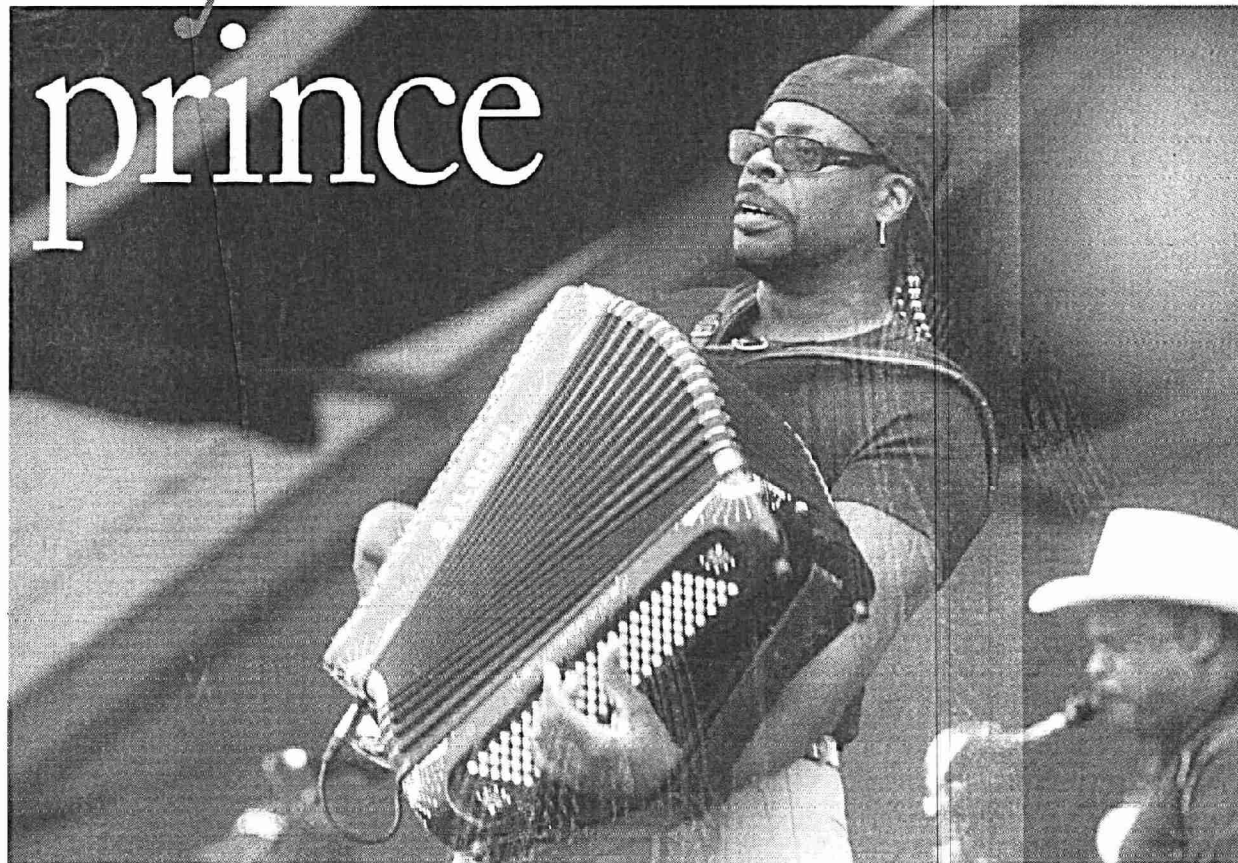


Zydeco prince

Heir to the accordion C.J. Chenier just earned a Grammy nom, but this genre royal who started on sax as a Port Arthur kid is little known here



File photo by Pete Churton/The Enterprise

C.J. Chenier performs with his Red Hot Louisiana Band at the 2006 New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, the first JazzFest

after Hurricane Katrina. View video of the zydeco great at BeaumontEnterprise.com/video.

By Julie Chang

JXChang@BeaumontEnterprise.com
(409) 880-0747

Sweeping his fingers across the white buttons, C.J. Chenier tilts his head, eyes closed. He jerks the accordion body, creating a wheeze that can only be characterized as soulfully beautiful.

It's easy to see from his effortless handling of the squee-

zebox why the 54-year-old has gained critical acclaim as the Prince of Zydeco — and why he's nominated for a coveted Grammy this year.

What's more difficult to understand is why the Port Arthur native isn't more well-known in the region.

"I don't think he gets the

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recognition he deserves," his friend Carl Wayne Reynolds of Port Arthur, said. "He's more accepted in California and in other places than he is in his hometown."

A self-proclaimed child of the projects, Chenier was forced to realize his musical talents on the saxophone — at the behest of his determined mother — while





attending Booker T. Washington Elementary School.

"My mother made me play it. I wanted to play the trombone," said Chenier, who picked up the instrument in the fourth grade. "She was like, 'No, your daddy has a saxophone in the band, so you have to play the saxophone.'"

The King

The young Chenier's musical training was not merely a means to create a hobby. His mother, Mildred Bell, believed strongly that music was coded in her son's genes.

Bell met Chenier's father, Clifton, in Port Arthur during the 1950s while Clifton was working for Gulf Oil. A laborer by day, Clifton, along with his brother, Cleveland, played throughout the Gulf Coast at night, melding rock 'n' roll and blues with the folk music of his Cajun predecessors — zydeco.

"Somebody wanted him to dig a ditch one day. He got fed up and said he took that shovel and stuck it by that man's foot and said, 'You dig it. I'm going on the road,'" the younger Chenier recalled of his father. "He hopped in his Cadillac and took off."

Although Clifton often sported a red velvet king's crown in his promotional photos and on stage, the prop wasn't a facetious demonstration of ego. Quickly dubbed the King of Zydeco by music critics in the 1970s, Clifton popularized zydeco while redefining the genre with the introduction of the corrugated metal washboard as an instrument.

"Clifton came up with the idea that had evolved

from the hand-held clothing washboard," said Roger Wood, Houston-based author of "Texas Zydeco."

"According to an interview, he drew a picture of it in the dirt ... and it hung over the shoulder. Clifton was king."

Music over the refinery

Back in Port Arthur, Clifton's son was making his own mark on the local music scene, conducting and writing music for the Lincoln High School jazz band while playing with a local band, Carl Wayne and the Magnificent Seven. "C.J. was an exceptionally good musician," Reynolds said. "He always would take control. I knew he wanted to be a leader."

Itching to start his own band, C.J. Chenier recruited neighborhood musicians to form Hot Ice, a funk cover band. Obtaining permits from the city, Hot Ice would throw concerts in parks while also playing to crowds of hundreds at clubs, proms and parties.

"Instead of him going on his paper route, I went on his paper route for him to allow him to go play music," said nephew and Port Arthur resident Reginald Green, 49. "We always knew something great would happen with him because music was his passion."

Port Arthur during the 1970s failed to embrace zydeco as readily as other parts of the nation. Funk, soul and R&B overshadowed Clifton's ascension to zydeco royalty.

Chenier did not realize his father's success until he went on the road with the band, named Clifton Chenier and the Red Hot Louisiana Band.

He received a call from Clifton in September 1979, who asked him to play sax with the band.

"C.J., what did your mama say?" his sister, Elois Green, asked her brother. "Go with your daddy or get you a job?"

Chenier, the Port Arthur kid who chose music over refinery work, spent the next years touring Europe and the continental United States in his father's old Dodge 12-passenger van.

"You see the desert that you see on television. A hundred miles from LA, you see the big smog cover that you always saw in magazines," said Chenier. "To me, travelling is the best thing in the world."

Reinventing Chenier

When Clifton died in December 1987 from diabetes, Chenier was devastated.

With Clifton absent for most of his Chenier's childhood, the two finally had bonded on the road through music.

Clifton had been grooming Chenier in the years prior to his death to inherit his legendary band, asking Chenier to pick up the accordion when Clifton got sick.

"It hit him hard, but he knew that eventually this was going to happen," Reginald Green said of C.J. "He was going to have to keep his legacy going and at the same time, create his own."

The day after Clifton's death in Lafayette, La., Chenier was out on the road again. This time, he was leading the Red Hot Louisiana Band.

Throughout the 1990s, Chenier worked hard to re-

invent himself. He didn't sing in French like his father, his voice was more of a baritone than his father's, he didn't play the accordion like his father.

This reinvention brought Chenier the same mainstream recognition as his father — if not more. Chenier and the Red Hot Louisiana Band made an appearance on PBS's "Austin City Limits," the Jon Stewart Show, CNN and SXSW Music Festival in Austin.

Paul Simon also featured Chenier on the "Rhythm and Saints Album," inviting him on tour in 1990.

"I had fun when Paul Simon played the Cajun Dome in Lafayette. I got to experience how he performs," he said. "I still have the most fun with my band."

Grammy nom

By the turn of the millennium, Chenier's career had plateaued as zydeco moved away from the traditional style to a hip-hop fusion.

"Most of the zydeco bands are playing more of the hip-hop style of zydeco," Reynolds said. "C.J. plays like his daddy plays, and he's not going to change his style."

Chenier continued to tour and has released two albums in the last decade. His latest, "Can't Sit Down," has been nominated for a Grammy in the Best Regional Roots Music Album category — the equivalent to the category his father won in almost 30 years ago.

"I got to feel songs first and feel good about them and then it's time to go in and record," Chenier said. "If I had went in any time before, the CD wouldn't have turned out like it did."

Even with as much recognition as Chenier has

received over the decades, some close family and friends in Port Arthur do not believe Chenier gets the recognition he deserves.

Reynolds believes that hip-hop versions of zydeco have made the traditional zydeco Chenier plays irrelevant in mainstream music. Chenier also has not toured much around Southeast Texas.

The Museum of the Gulf Coast has recognized his father, but has yet to induct Chenier into the ranks of famous native musicians.

While challenges still exist in his hometown, Chenier credits Port Arthur — especially his school music teachers — for shaping him into the musician he is today.

"What I took away from Port Arthur? Took all my musical feelings," he said.

Read about some of the other talents with Southeast Texas ties who have made their mark in music: 7A

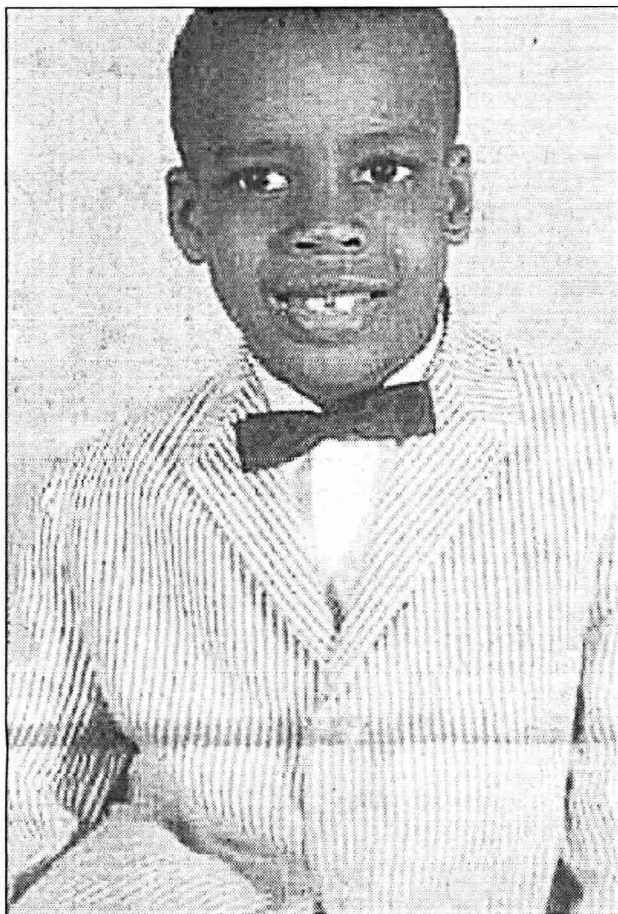


Photos provided by Elois Green

C.J. Chenier, front, joined his father's band in 1978. Shortly after his father's death in 1987 from diabetes, C.J. went on to lead the band.



Dubbed the King of Zydeco by music critics, accordion player and singer Clifton Chenier worked at Gulf refinery in Port Arthur in the 1940s and 1950s before becoming a full-time musician. Clifton is credited with introducing the corrugated metal washboard instrument.



CJ. Chenier's mom made him pick up the saxophone as a fourth-grader at Booker T. Washington Elementary in Port Arthur. Although Chenier primarily plays the accordion now, he still considers the saxophone his first love.