

## PA's Prince of Zydeco nominated for Grammy

By **Brandon Janes**  
The News staff writer

After the controversial overhaul of this year's Grammy Awards, including elimination of categories like Best Zydeco/Cajun Album, **C.J. Chenier** — son of the undisputed "King of Zydeco" Clifton Chenier — has earned a powerful Grammy nomination.

Chenier's album, "Can't Sit Down," competes with four other nominees in the category of "Best Regional Roots Music Album," a competitive category now that genres that once had their own awards, like Hawaiian or Native American music, have been lumped into one.

If the Port Arthur native wins this February, Chenier and his father will be the only father and son to both win Grammys for Zydeco music.

Father, Clifton Chenier, who worked for several years at the

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Port Arthur petrochemical plants before taking his band on tour, won the award for his album "I'm Here," in 1983, at the end of a long career that created the new kind of music called Zydeco, a term Chenier is credited for, according to son C.J. Chenier.

"It was called 'La La' music before him," C.J. Chenier told the News during a telephone interview on Monday. "It's written in the history books."

C.J. Chenier was born on Texas Avenue in West Port Arthur and grew up in the Port Arthur housing projects during the 1960s and 1970s.

He lived in Port Arthur's notorious Carver Terrace Apartments until the fourth grade.

Chenier's first music lessons were second grade piano lessons at Booker T. Washington Elementary School.

In high school he began branching off into the saxophone and flute, playing styles of funk and blues.

When he was 15, a freshman at Lincoln

High School, a musician named Tim Jacket heard him playing saxophone outside his house and said "Man you play too good to be playing in a house," Chenier recalled.

He was recruited into the band Carl Wayne and The Magnificent Seven.

"At the myth of Carl Wayne I started wanting to get my own band together," Chenier said, recalling how he founded the band Hot Ice.

"The called us the little Earth, Wind and Fire," Chenier added, because the band played funk music.

During that time his sister encouraged him to get a job at one of the refineries as most of the young men were doing but the idea never seemed to stick.

"At that time we just wanted to play music," Chenier said.

"We would go to the city to get the permit to play music at the park across the street from Booker T. Washington. Before long we had the whole town out there partying."

In 1978, one week before his 21st birthday, Chenier's father asked him to join the tour with his famous band Red Hot Louisiana Band on saxophone, playing his first show at a club called the Sparkle Paradise in Bridge City.

Chenier toured with his dad's band for the next nine years and it was during this time that he started fooling around with the accordion.

As his father's health began to deteriorate Chenier stepped in on the accordion, opening the shows even though he said his playing on the new instrument was "not fluent yet."

This baptism-by-fire teaching method worked on young Chenier and by the time his father died in 1987, Chenier's career as the new prince of Zydeco had begun.

"There's nothing that can replace that time," said Chenier about his time with his father. "Everything that I knew about Zydeco I learned from him."

Clifton Chenier was the first Zydeco musician ever to win a Grammy.

Twenty years and eight CDs later his son has produced an album worthy of his



own award.

"Can't Sit Down," is a Zydeco album wholly different from the father's approach, full of blues and funk lines weaved in to the Zydeco rhythms.

"Dad told me to be the best I could be at my style," said Chenier.

The album is the first Chenier has produced on his own label, World Village.

"I knew how I wanted it to sound better than anyone else," Chenier said, "I just said we're going to do it my way this time."

The album was recorded in one "kick-butt session," according to the liner notes, and features original songs and several covers of songs like "Clap Hands," by Tom Waits and "Got to Have Peace," by Curtis Mayfield.

But everything on the album is danceable, Chenier said. Hence the name.

*bjanes@panews.com*



Courtesy Photo

**C. J. Chenier**, Abraham Lincoln High School Class of 1976, has been nominated for a 2011 Grammy in the category of Best Regional Roots Music Album.

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