

# LOUISIANA LIBRARIES

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## *Interview with Dr. Joshua Caffery, Musician & Folklorist*



### Biography

Joshua Clegg Caffery is a writer, musician, and producer based in St. Martin Parish, Louisiana. Currently the Alan Lomax Fellow in Folklife at the John W. Kluge Center in the Library of Congress, he is the author of *Traditional Music in Coastal Louisiana: The 1934 Lomax Recordings*. A founding member of The Red Stick Ramblers and a longtime member of the Louisiana French band Feufollet, Caffery was nominated for a Grammy for the Feufollet album *En Couleurs*. He is the producer of the acclaimed collection of Cajun and Creole drinking songs titled *Allons Boire un Coup* (Valcour 2004), and he currently serves on the board of the Louisiana Folklore Society and as a Fellow of the Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Louisiana.

### Interview

**Louisiana Libraries:** Why did you become a folklorist?

**Joshua Caffery:** My interest in folklore studies as a professional endeavor originated, in many ways, in my obsession with American vernacular music as well as an early love for literature, particularly literature indebted or inspired by folk traditions. I was also interested in mythology from an early age. All of these things began to intersect when I was an undergraduate. I majored in Religious Studies because it allowed me to spend time thinking about mythology as well as the psychological underpinnings of religious thinking. I also started trying to play traditional music around this time, but primarily bluegrass and Appalachian music. I had heard a bit of Cajun music growing up, but it was only the touristy, kitschy stuff with dancing crawfish and whatnot. However, I ran across a book in the LSU library that changed my mind about things: Barry Ancelet and Elemore Morgan, Jr.'s *Cajun and Creole Music*

*Makers*. The interviews in this book with people like Dennis McGee and Marc Savoy really blew my mind, and I realized there was so much more to learn there. It piqued my interest because there was this tangible interaction with the old, the traditional, and the mysterious, yet also this very powerful individualism and sense of defiance of mass pop culture at large. It appealed to my own proclivities and still does.

After finding that book, I started learning more about the music, and I eventually visited the Savoy Music Center, only to find that Joel Savoy, Marc's son, was a student at LSU. Joel played in a band that I had at the time called Brother Theresa, along with Richard Burgess and Glenn Fields. Brother Theresa, in some ways, was a template for The Red Stick Ramblers—swing tunes, originals in a traditional vein, Cajun songs from Joel, etc. When Brother Theresa disbanded, the Ramblers emerged from its ashes. For much of my twenties, I made a living playing with the Ramblers, working as a journalist and editor writing about music and culture, and even trying my hand at booking bands. In one way or another, I worked with traditional music in area. Eventually, though, I met my wife and we decided to settle down, and I needed to find a more stable occupation. I had always imagined returning for more advanced degrees and working as a teacher, and folklore studies seemed to provide a path that would allow me to become a professional while cleaving to the things I was (and remain) passionate about: literature, mythology, creative writing, traditional culture, etc.

**Louisiana Libraries:** You have been teaching for several years at the Episcopal School of Acadiana—your own alma mater from 1993. What are some difficulties and rewards of being a high school teacher? And how do you include folkloristic research into English classes?

**Joshua Caffery:** Other than booking zydeco bands, being a high school teacher was the toughest job I've ever had. In order to do it well, it simply requires enormous and consistent amounts of energy, creativity, and time. The down side of this, as many

teachers will tell you, is that one doesn't have much left for one's own family at the end of a 14-16 hour day. There are important rewards, of course: June and July, for instance. There's also the tangible feeling that you're helping people at a crucial and often painful time in their lives, and that your attention, love, and encouragement can be powerful and meaningful. I'm not sure if I will teach high school again, but I'll have an eternal respect for the profession—one our society simply does not understand or value appropriately.

I am really more a student of literature than a folklorist, *per se*. I don't do much field work, and I don't try to do ethnography, so I'm more a literary folklorist. In other words, I'm primarily interested in folklore that manifests as oral literature. Therefore, integrating folklore into a high school literature course seems natural to me. When I teach the British Romantic poets, for instance, I spend a good long while on balladry, because it was so much a part of Romantic poesis, of course, but also because it allows me to show how the ballad developed as a form over time. I like to look at ballads collected in the Appalachians and Louisiana, as well as more modern adaptations of ballads, as a way of showing that those genres that inspired the Romantics persists in one way or another into the present. One of my favorite classes at ESA involved singing, with the class, one of Wordsworth's literary ballads to the tune of an Appalachian ballad. Because Wordsworth understood and followed the ballad form, it worked perfectly.

**Louisiana Libraries:** How did you earn graduate degrees while singing and playing with the Red Stick Ramblers? Or is it in a musician's very nature to multitask?

**Joshua Caffery:** I was actually playing with Feufollet when I earned my graduate degrees, at least my MA. At the time, it was a perfect fit, because the other members of Feufollet were in school, and we only travelled during the summer and on the weekends. Also, Feufollet's tendency to combine esoteric folkloric songs with modern instrumentation and songwriting in a traditional vein appealed to my own academic and creative interests.

**Louisiana Libraries:** How was playing in the Red Stick Ramblers different from Louisiana French band Feufollet?

**Joshua Caffery:** In Feufollet, we were much more focused on French music, of course, and our live shows were, for the most part, Cajun dance music, with a few arrangements of older songs interspersed. I played electric guitar with Feufollet, and I enjoyed showing up and improvising solos based on two-steps and waltzes. With Feufollet, the creativity of the band really occurred in the studio, and I remember the albums we did together as being very playful and exciting. With the Ramblers, our shows were a bit more about tight arrangements and precision, and the repertoire was more complex and varied. When we made it into the studio, we played the songs as we played them live for the most part, and we focused on getting strong takes based on our natural sounds.

**Louisiana Libraries:** How did you get interested in Alan Lomax's work in Louisiana? How has your book, *Traditional Music in Coastal Louisiana: The 1934 Lomax Recordings*, been received thus far?

**Joshua Caffery:** I can't remember where I first heard about the Lomax collection, maybe in Ann Savoy's book titled *Cajun Music: A Reflection of a People*, but it always struck me as this very mysterious and important entity whose boundaries and contents were undetermined. I thought of it as I thought of the Upanishads or the Mahabharata—as something vital and foundational, but also distant and perplexing. I became more interested when I visited the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress after a gig at the Kennedy Center with Feufollet. We met some of the folks involved with the collection, specifically Todd Harvey and Stephen Winick, and our brief meeting with them made it clear that I wasn't the only one mystified by the recordings, because they simply had not been studied in much depth. At the time, I began to talk to Barry Ancelet, who had transcribed and studied some of the recordings, and he encouraged me to look into it in more depth.

The book has only just been released, but the few formal reviews I've seen are positive. I've been

most pleased with informal reactions from fellow musicians and scholars of the music, who have been as excited as I was to learn of the many curiosities of the collection.

**Louisiana Libraries:** In 2013, you won the prestigious Alan Lomax Fellowship in Folklife Studies at the Library of Congress. What are your goals for your fellowship year?

**Joshua Caffery:** While working on the book, I came across a number of “leads” that I’m hoping to pursue and develop for publication. In trying to reckon with 200 or so songs, I couldn’t go into depth on everything I was interested in, so I’m using the free time to focus in on research possibilities. For instance, I’ve just completed an article on Joe Féraille, a character who shows up a good bit in Cajun and Creole folksong, but who no one has really explained. I’ve just completed an article, based largely on songs from the Lomax collection, in which I argue that Féraille is a Louisiana descendant of the Yoruban deity, Ogun, and a kindred spirit (so to speak) of the Haitian lwa, Ogou Feray.

**Louisiana Libraries:** What will you do once the fellowship is finished?

**Joshua Caffery:** That’s a good question. I may end up teaching in a university, though the job market for folklore and literature is rather tight these days, to say the least. I may also return to teaching high school, but I’m not sure at this point. Someone recently congratulated me on the success of my career. My response was, “Thanks—now I only wish I had a job to go along with it!”

**Louisiana Libraries:** Do you get to play the guitar much in DC? Are you going to go back to the professional musicianship after the fellowship is finished?

**Joshua Caffery:** I do play a good bit of guitar, though I’ve been working on my banjo playing more intently these days. My primary musical focus is playing with and for my daughter. I want to her

to grow up in a family where people make music at home together, instead of just consuming it passively via the internet.

**Louisiana Libraries:** Did the Washington shutdown affect your work at the Library of Congress?

**Joshua Caffery:** Yes, it was actually pretty miserable. One grows accustomed to having the resources of the largest library in the world at one’s disposal. The Library was shut down, and I spent a couple of anxious weeks writing in a coffee shop on Capitol Hill. In a way, it was a vacation, but a peculiarly stressful one in that I was unsure if I would get paid. Also, I had to keep a close eye on the news in order to see if I’d be going to work the next day. Watching the fiasco unfold was quite depressing. Years from now, however, I’m sure I’ll look back and see it as a quaint and historical experience.

**Louisiana Libraries:** If you could require every Louisiana librarian to read one significant folklore book (your book notwithstanding), which book would you choose?

**Joshua Caffery:** I would have to name Barry and Elemore’s *Cajun and Creole Music Makers*. The photos are beautiful, and Barry is the master of asking the right question and then getting out of the way for the makers of the music to tell their story in their own words. The book just sucks one into the culture.

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