

The Orchestra Bordenave

SOCIÉTÉ
DES
AUTEURS, COMPOSITEURS & ÉDITEURS DE MUSIQUE
10, Rue Chaptal, PARIS

M. Housat, Bordenave
dit: Bordenave Maurice

Né.....
Département.....
Demeurant.....

ORCHESTRE BORDENAVE
10, Rue Chaptal, PARIS

no 3087

A black and white portrait of a man with a mustache, wearing a dark suit and a white shirt with a dark bow tie. He is holding a mandolin or a similar stringed instrument. The portrait is mounted on the lower right portion of the document.

What follows is the story of the band who accompanied Maury Smith on the recording of the album, Mirage. And, like a good mirage, some of it is actually based on people, places and events that actually happened. I mean, you can't make a mirage out of nothing, right?

It was in April 1926 that 25-year-old classically trained performer and composer Maurice Houssat-Bordenave formally proposed the musical union that later came to be called the Orchestra Bordenave. Encouraged from an early age by musical parents and benefitting from the extra attention enjoyed by “only” children, young Maurice found his every musical whim indulged. At age 14 he was granted special enrollment in the Conservatoire de Paris where he studied for two years, mastering composition and performance on several instruments, and where he was hired as full professor at age 20.

Bordenave went on to compose and perform with the greats of his time, (Debusey, Ravel and Bizet to name a few) at the finest Continental venues. A regular fixture at the Paris Opera, his path crossed those of prominent men and women of politics and the arts. Primarily remembered as a violinist, he was also a fine pianist and was proficient upon orchestral instruments from across the spectrum of his day. Later in his career he helped found the École Normale de Musique de Paris with Auguste Mangeot and pianist Alfred Cortot where he taught until his death in 1949 at age 73.

While serious classical music constituted Bordenave's vocational bread and butter, he was also known to frequent the bal-musette dance halls near the Conservatoire de Paris in the 19th Arrondissement's Parc Vilette and on the Left Bank's ancient market street, Rue Mouffetard. These “operas of the poor” featured popular tunes from rural France and Italy played on accordion, hurdy-gurdy and a bagpipe known locally as the *musette*, hence, the name. (See below for more information about the history of the bal musette.)

While other members of the bourgeoisie visited the bal musettes for the excitement of mingling with the lower classes and to experience (and, presumably, enjoy) the close-order dances typically performed there, Bordenave came for the musical improvisation on nightly display at these proletarian venues. While trained in the classics, he relished the chance to hear music set free from its traditional forms.

It was at one such cabaret, The Petit Bourree at 74 rue Cardinale Lemoine in the Latin Quarter one warm spring night in 1926, that the great mandolinist Issac Marsh and Tedham Porterhouse, Chicago's finest harmonica player, were in the house. The two American musicians were touring Europe with a traveling ragtime band, The Peerless Orchestra, and knew just how they liked to spend their off nights--immersed in the Parisian nightlife.

That night Bordenave overheard Marsh and Porterhouse discussing the characteristics of the band's repertoire and he engaged the duo in conversation that, after the dance, led to drinks at Bordenave's favorite cafe followed by a long evening walk along the quais of the Seine. The

three seemed to agree on many important musical issues--the importance of form, the centrality of technique, and the possibility of a new musical style that raised improvisation to a central position. Before the night ended, Bordenave invited Marsh and Porterhouse to consider staying in Paris to join him in developing a new musical project blending Porterhouse's harmonica, Marsh's mandolin and Bordenave on banjo, an instrument which he'd been exploring for several months. The warm glow of pastis and camaraderie rendered Bordenave's proposition irresistible, and plans were laid for a morning meeting to hammer out the details. That meeting found the three in agreement that it hadn't just been the liquor talking--their musical connection was real and time would show, it was enduring as well.

By mid-May, the orchestra's roster had expanded to include Marsh's daughter, Angelina, on bouzouki, and Porterhouse's compatriots Lew Jakin on drums and, Emil "Stale Bread" LaCoume, on bass. A New Orleans native, LaCoume brought a particularly potent musical essence to the group. He had been a founding member of The Razy Dazzy Spasm Band, an early New Orleans group regarded by some as the first jazz band. (Other members of the group were Harry Gregson, Emile "Whiskey" Benrod, Willie "Cajun" Bussey, Frank "Monk" Bussey and a boy known only as "Warm Gravy." They also had another member who was known as "Chinee" and a singer known as "Family Haircut."). In the 1890's and early 1900's this band performed in the streets of the New Orleans' red-light district known as Storyville, the cradle of jazz, where Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver and Louis Armstrong cut their musical teeth before the authorities shut down the disreputable establishments such as Funky Butts and Tom Anderson's Cafe in 1917, dispersing the prostitutes and grifters and sending jazz north to Chicago, Kansas City and New York. When another band appropriated the name Razy Dazzy Spasm Band and its musical style for a performance at the Haymarket Dancehall, the original band members pelted the stage with rocks, leading the venue's owner to change the name of the second band on all advertising to the Razy Dazzy Jazzy Band, which some claim is the first time the word *jazz* was used in print in connection with music. But perhaps I digress.



“Taken at the New Orleans resort area known as the West End around 1903, this photo shows, left to right, Abbie Brunies, Charlie Cordilla and Emil “Stale Bread” LaCoume who played zither, piano, banjo, and guitar and led various “spasm” bands consisting of such home-made instruments as cheese-box banjo and soap-box guitar.” From A Pictorial History of Jazz by Willaim Gautier and Orrin Keepnews.

Meanwhile, back in Paris, in the late summer of 1926, Bordenave suggested the name The Left Bank Orchestra for the band, which name was employed for their first several performances, but eventually the other musicians rebelled and insisted that Maurice’s musical talents and leadership required that they call themselves The Orchestra Bordenave.

My interest in the Orchestra Bordenave began many years ago when my Dad’s genealogy work uncovered the identity of a young woman in an old photograph found among some family papers. She was about 8 years old, dressed in formal attire, beautifully coiffed in the early 20th century style and surrounded by musical instruments. As it turns out, this was the young Angelina Marsh, whose great grandfather, Philip Henry Smith, was also my Dad’s great grandfather. (Did everybody get that?) This makes Dad and Angelina second cousins, which makes her my second cousin once removed, (I think). Here’s that photo of young Angelina:



And another of Angelina later in life.



Angelina's grandfather, John Henry Smith, was apparently very musically inclined and he passed this talent along to his children. Angelina's grandma, (John Henry's wife) Elmira Westfall, was also a musician and performer in traveling shows with her family in the Missouri and Kansas frontier. Here's Elmira:



John and Elmira's daughter, Sarah (Sadie) Smith, married Isaac Marsh in 1883 and Sarah and Isaac's daughter, Angelina Elmira Marsh, was born of this union in Delavan, Illinois (near Peoria) in 1889. Angelina's brother, John Smith Marsh, was also an accomplished musician . He is pictured here with his paternal grandfather, John Henry Smith (my Dad's great uncle) and with one of the many instruments he played:



Moving from Delavan to St. Louis, presumably to expand opportunities for their children's musical training, Angelina's parents, Isaac and Sadie Smith Marsh, established the Marsh Family Band to entertain tourists attending the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair:



and later, they founded the I.M. Marsh Mandolin Orchestra.



Angelina and John, of course, played in both bands. Here's what my Dad wrote about Angelina in his genealogical notes:

Angelina became well known for her musical abilities. An item from the Minier (Illinois--the small town near Peoria where my Dad was born) News in 1898 states she, at the age of eight, was tested by the band master (John Phillip) Sousa and was found to have remarkable powers in the musical field. Angelina graduated from high school in Delavan in 1907. She was salutatorian of her class. She married Roy Curtis in 1909 and resided in Delavan and later, Chicago. She lived for several years in Paris, France and studied music there. Her daughter Beverly was born there. Angelina died in St. Louis, december 31, 1934.

Here's a photo of Angelina in Paris in 1928 holding her new baby, Barbara, who would, I guess, be my third cousin.



Sometime after Dad wrote the paragraph above, he was able to contact Beverly, Angelina's daughter, who was about Dad's age. Dad and Beverly struck up a lively friendship and were in frequent email contact for many years before Dad passed away. Beverly lives in Texas and never made it to Illinois to meet Dad in person. Likewise, Dad never made it down there to see her. However, a couple of years ago, Beverly's son, Richard, came to visit Dad for an afternoon and I was lucky enough to be there when he came. Lots of family stories were swapped, a great deal was learned by all and we had a truly wonderful time together.

That afternoon I became intrigued when Richard mentioned that his Grandmother Angelina had performed at the Paris Opera in the 1920's. When my interest became apparent, he shared as much as he knew about his Great Grandfather Isaac Marsh's encounters with Maurice Houssat Bordenave in Paris. I am deeply indebted to Richard for the information and photographs he shared.

My long unrealized dream of finding a photo of Maurice Bordenave himself was satisfied two years ago when Al traveled to Paris and visited the little shop at 35 rue Charlot in the 3rd Arrondissement that sells old postcards, photographs and other artifacts from estate sales and such, and returned with three quirky and whimsical photos to share. The first, an avatar for Al himself which he calls "Relaxed Man":



A second which reminded Al of me, which he titles “Banjo Man”:



And the third, which of course completed my long-time desire, was the musician’s union card for Maurice Houssat Bordenave pictured above and elsewhere at the Cafe. Clearly, you just never know what you’re going to dig up when you start looking into your family history or through the dusty archives represented by a quaint Parisian curiosity shop.

And thanks to my Dad’s genealogy work and Richard’s kind sharing and Al’s inspired find (I hesitate to call it luck...something *drew* him to Bordenave’s Musician’s Union card...I just know it), when I found myself in need of old-time musical heritage upon which to draw during the creation of the album *Mirage*, I had to look no further than Issac and Angelina, Emil and Tedham

and Lew, and, of course, Maurice Houssat Bordenave. Drawing on their invisible support and channeling their musical inventiveness, I felt I had become one of them and I hope they would be proud to call me an honorary member of The Orchestra Bordenave.

From **A Short History of the Bal Musette**
By **Steve Tchamouloff**

Musette music is immensely appealing, evoking as it does the romantic cafes, sidewalks and dance halls of Paris. It is instantly recognizable, with its minor keys that speak of an underlying sadness, coupled with jaunty melodies and playing styles that reveal the resilience of the human spirit.

Edith Piaf (1915-1963) began her career in the bal musettes, and she paid tribute to the form and musicians in one of her best known songs, L'Accordioniste.

The musette, also known as the cabrette, was a small goatskin bagpipe, one of the most popular instruments in the 19th century in the Auvergne, the great expanse of hills and meadows at the heart of the French Massif Central. The instrument was brought to Paris by the Auvergnat immigrants who poured into the capital to find work as laborers and then opened little bar/shops selling charcoal and wine, as well as the miniature dance halls known as bal musettes. The first bal musettes featured Auvergnat bourrées, plus polkas, mazurkas and, above all, waltzes. (Waltzes dominated the bal musette repertoire to the extent that sometimes modern players use the word "musette" to refer to the waltzes from this tradition.)

In the 1900s the accordion appeared on the scene, brought by Italian immigrant workers. At first excluded from musette bands, the brash, sophisticated accordion eventually penetrated them, notably in the hands of the early star Charles Peguri in the Bal Bouscat of the cabretteaire Antoine Bouscatel. By the early 1900s, the bagpipe had been completely supplanted.

In the inter-war years, the bal musettes flourished, with foxtrots, paso dobles and javas augmenting the dance repertoire. The java especially, with its entwined, hands-on-partner's-bottom stance and underworld association with the swaggering young dudes known as apaches, came to typify the louche world of bal musettes such as Balajo around the Place de la Bastille, or the Bastoche in Paris' slang.

In the 1930s, two other elements were added to the mix. The first was jazz -- known as "swing" -- which, like the accordion, at first was strongly resisted; the mobile, acrobatic antics of swing dancers didn't fit at all among the close-clasped couples on a packed little bal musette dance floor.

Even though bal musette and jazz were not originally thought to be an appropriate mix by dancers and club owners, it turned out that many of the finest players in Paris were gigging one night in a swing ensemble and the next night playing for a bal musette. In time, pieces from the

two repertoires began sneaking into each other's sets, and, by the 1940s, it was common to hear the two styles intermixed throughout the course of an evening.

The second element, linked to jazz improvisation, was Manouche, or gypsy, music played by musicians who began to join the musette bands as banjoists, then as guitarists. Django Reinhardt started his career in musette bands in Paris. (A new biography, "Django: The Life and Music of a Gypsy Legend" by Michael Dregni, tells this story.).

Right through the 1950s, musette accordion was the sound of popular France, and stars like Gus Viseur, Tony Murena and Jo Privat traveled to the USA and guested with bands of the stature of Glenn Miller's. Although from the 1960s onwards, rock, disco and newer dance music marginalized the musette accordion style, it has survived remarkably well. Dozens of little regional dance groups still feature accordion waltzes and javas among a cross-section of dance styles for everyone from teenagers to grandparents at rural summer balls and weddings across the country. At the other end of the spectrum, serious accordion virtuosi such as Richard Galliano, who accompanied the chanson star Barbara, continue to attract great critical respect in the jazz and new music world.