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2012
The Music of America

Traditional Ethnic and Regional Music and Dance that's "Homegrown" in Communities across the U.S.

AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

Dennis Stroughmatt et L'Esprit Creole



**French Creole
Music from
Missouri**

**FREE AND OPEN
TO THE PUBLIC**

**Thursday
June 21, 2012
12 NOON - 1 PM
Coolidge Auditorium
Ground Floor, Thomas Jefferson Building
Library of Congress
10 First Street, SE,
Washington, DC**

Closest Metro Stop:
Capitol South
(orange and blue
lines), located one
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Dennis Stroughmatt et L'Esprit

French Creole Music from Missouri

Dennis Stroughmatt et L'Esprit Creole have garnered acclaim for their lively performances of music representing folk traditions which were introduced by French colonists and have continued to evolve and thrive in various parts of North America. They are among the few musicians active today who specialize in French Creole music of what was once known as Upper Louisiana or the Illinois Country, encompassing portions of present-day Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana.

Originally from the small town of Albion, Illinois, fiddler, accordionist, and singer Dennis Stroughmatt was raised in a family that had been involved in riverine commerce in the Wabash, Ohio, and Mississippi valleys for four generations. His parents and grandparents instilled in him a deep appreciation for the diversity of folk cultures found throughout those regions. His formative experiences included attending Twelfth Night balls and rendezvous in the historically French communities of Vincennes, Indiana, and Prairie du Rocher, Illinois. He also performed as a drummer with local country musicians forty or more years his senior; notably the accomplished old-time and Western swing fiddler Chlores Worlow.

Dennis combined his interest in French Creole culture with his musical knowledge when he began visiting Old Mines, Missouri, in the 1990s at the encouragement of noted regional historian Frank Nickell. Located in the Ozarks, sixty-five miles southwest of St. Louis, the area called Old Mines encompasses the village of that name and adjacent portions of Washington, St. Francois, and Jefferson counties. French-speaking colonists, including immigrants from both Canada and northwestern France, began settling there in the early eighteenth century. They and their descendants were initially miners.

Old Mines was geographically more isolated and ethnically more homogeneous than most other historically French communities in Missouri and Illinois, and thus less subject to acculturation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. French Creole folklife remained predominant there longer and to a greater extent than it did in most other such communities. When Stroughmatt began visiting, *bouillons* - social gatherings featuring homemade chicken soup and music - still happened regularly, and some elder residents remained more comfortable conversing in their local dialect of French than in English. Stroughmatt became a frequent participant in the culture of Old Mines. He often took a tape recorder with him to document the language, stories, songs, and cultural history shared by such residents as Annie Pashia, Natalie Villmer, and Kent Beaulne. He also took along a fiddle, which had belonged to his great-grandfather and which he was just learning how to play, acquiring techniques and tunes from local fiddlers Roy and Pete Boyer and Charlie Pashia.

After graduating from college in 1993, Stroughmatt joined the staff of the Vermillionville Folklife Village in Lafayette, Louisiana, and became active in the Cajun music community, learning from fiddlers Faren Serrette, Black Allemand, and Canray and Merlin Fontenot. He returned to Illinois to continue studying history, completing a master's degree at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in 1998. He subsequently obtained a certificate in Québécois French language and culture from the University of

Québec at Chicoutimi.

Stroughmatt has performed with various musicians and bands since the 1990s, including the Brown Baggers, an eclectic folk group that he co-founded while at Southern Illinois University; Bon Temps Roulez, which evolved from the Brown Baggers; Louisiana-based groups Sheryl Cormier and Cajun Sounds, the Acadian Aces, and the Bayou Teche Band; and members of the Ardoin family, including Morris and Dexter Ardoin.

In 2002, he formed Creole Stomp, a band with electric instrumentation that performs Cajun, Zydeco, and Creole music of both Louisiana and historic Upper Louisiana. His other band, L'Esprit Creole - the one featured in today's performance - has acoustic instrumentation and specializes in music of Upper Louisiana, drawing extensively upon the repertoire that he learned in Old Mines. The personnel of L'Esprit Creole varies somewhat but regularly features guitarist, mandolinist, and bassist Rob Krumm of Cahokia, Illinois, a historically French community on the Mississippi near St. Louis. Krumm is a member of the Bequette family, French Creoles who have lived in the region since the early eighteenth century. Joining Stroughmatt and Krumm today is bassist Jim Willgoose, a native of Boston, Massachusetts, who now lives in southern Illinois and teaches at Kaskaskia Community College in Centralia.

The most recent recording by Stroughmatt and L'Esprit Creole is *La Belle Blondine: French Creole Fiddle Tunes & Ballads from Old Upper Louisiana, Volume III* (Swallow Records, 2012). With either L'Esprit Creole or Creole Stomp, Stroughmatt has performed at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, the Philadelphia Folk Festival, the Louisiana Folklife Festival, the Midwest Folk Festival, the Illinois State Fair, the National Mississippi River Museum in Dubuque, Iowa, the Focal Point in St. Louis, the Old-Time Music, Ozark Heritage Festival in West Plains, Missouri, and many other venues.

Dennis Stroughmatt currently resides in his hometown of Albion, Illinois, with his wife, Jennifer - also a musician who occasionally joins Dennis onstage - and their daughter, Ragan. He travels frequently with both Creole Stomp and L'Esprit Creole. He also teaches courses at Olney Central College and presents lecture-recitals throughout the region, including programs at schools in historically French communities, in which he encourages students to participate actively in their own folk traditions.

Matt Meacham
Adjunct Instructor of Anthropology
Southwestern Illinois College.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

