

CAJUN HUMOR

Is The Joke On Them?



Justin Wilson, above right, and Revon Reed, left, keep clapping.

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Most Americans unfortunate enough to live outside of Louisiana don't even know what a Cajun is. Those who think they know generally base their conceptions on the quaint garb and patois of internationally-known humorist Justin Wilson. There are some Cajuns, however, who will tell you that the dialect humor of Justin Wilson is neither Cajun nor funny.

Though a safety engineer, Justin Wilson became an internationally-known humorist "accidentally," after discovering that his audiences were much more attentive when his safety lectures were laced with a joke or two.

Born in Roseland, Louisiana, Wilson has been exporting his brand of humor to the rest of the continental United States, and to Canada, for 42 years.

When he isn't lecturing on human relations to a police academy, making a roux on his public television show, "The Cooking Cajun," organizing his thoughts for his daily radio commentary, recording yet another of his Cajun humor albums (18, so far), or dictating a book of his Cajun humor, Wilson sometimes reflects on the drawbacks of

being an internationally-known humorist: "Every time you say something, you're supposed to be excruciatingly funny."

One of Wilson's stories, as recorded in Justin Wilson's *Cajun Humor*, concerns the mother crawfish who gives her baby crawfish their first tour of the world. "Dey not gone but about t'irty feets an' de two li'l baby crawfish t'row up bot' dey claw an' SHOOM, high gear reverse. An' de mama crawfish she say: 'What de matter, chirren?' Dey say: 'What dat big ani-mule up dere, ma-ma? What dat \$3, hanh?' An' she say: 'Don' be scared fo' dat, chirren. Dass a horse, an' a horse don' eat crawfish.'

"So dey walk about t'irty t'ree feets more, an' de two li'l baby crawfish chuck up bot' dey claw sommore lak dat, SHOOM, high gear reverse. An' de ole mama crawfish say: 'What in de worl' de matter now, chirren?' An' dey say: 'What dat big ani-mule up dere, ma-ma? What dat is, Hanh?' 'Oh, she say, 'don' be scared fo' dat. Dass a cow, an' a cow don' eat crawfish, too.'

"An' dey walk about t'irty t'ree more feets again an' de ole mama crawfish t'row up bot' her claws—put it in double high gear reverse,

SHOOM. De li'l bitty crawfish say: 'What de matter, ma-ma, what de matter, hanh?' She says: 'You see dat big ani-mule up dere, chirren? Run lak de devil. Dass a Cajun. He'll eat anyting!'"

Perhaps the most vehement objector to the dialect humor of Justin Wilson is Paul Tate Sr., a prominent attorney in Mamou, a small town in the heart of French Louisiana. President of the Louisiana Folk Foundation, Tate considers Wilson "a redneck bigot and racist." Says Tate, "All he's doing is taking Polack jokes and other ethnic jokes and making them Cajun and making people laugh, including Cajuns who have been brow-beaten into inferiority. To the extent that these jokes are 'Cajun,' they're offensive. To the extent that they're humorous, they're old bag."

According to Tate, the habitual misuse of words which distinguishes the humor of Justin Wilson is not characteristic of the Cajun. Nor is the patois itself realistic. "The Cajun doesn't tell jokes in English," says Tate. "We tell them in French." Cajun humor defies translation, he contends, "because of words sometimes, and because of situations sometimes."

Across the street from Paul Tate's law office in Mamou is Fred Tate's Lounge. Every Saturday morning teacher-writer-humorist Revon Reed broadcasts Cajun music live from Fred's. A book and a couple of albums of Cajun French humor to his credit, Reed refuses to entertain in English. "I don't know how much I'd get—30 dollars, maybe," he jokes, but it is his distaste for translation, and not the nominal remuneration, which discourages him.

Reed has a penchant for salty tales, "the kind they like in France. You don't dare tell them," he comments, "except in French. You translate them into English and they become vulgar immediately."

According to Reed, the delivery of a Cajun humorist is often more amusing than his story, which may run anywhere from five minutes to a half hour. "He laughs at the punchline before he gets to it," says Reed. "He laughs at his own talent. Everybody laughs. Then the guy forgets the punchline and everybody gets mad." Of course, the Cajun talespinner's stories are always true. If he detects skepticism, he will invariably refer his listener, for verification, to someone who has unfortunately passed away.

"The favorite topic is generally animals," says Reed, relating a shaggy dog story. Sosthene was jealous of Pierre, whose dog was better than his own. When he hit oil, Sosthene spent his money touring the country to find a dog better than Pierre's, eventually discovering one that could walk on water. Was Pierre impressed? Not by a dog that couldn't swim.

"Cajuns love to put each other down," says Reed, "just for the hell of it. Of course, they'll put down other ethnic groups too." When telling jokes, Cajuns often seem to be degrading themselves. However, Reed observes, "in seeming to put themselves down, they put the other fellow down."

Reed tells of the Cajun who confessed to a Texan that it takes 13 Cajuns to whip a Texan. While the latter preened himself, the Cajun explained. "Twelve to shake him out of the tree, and one to kick his butt once he'd down."

Though he himself refuses to entertain in English, Reed doesn't seem to object too much to Justin Wilson. "Among elite groups he's not very popular," he observes, "but ordinary Cajuns like him."