

DUKE BARDWELL

the journey

By Wayne Franklin | Photography by Michael Belk

WHEN HE LEANS FORWARD, A HINT OF MISCHIEF IN HIS EYES, one can't help but be drawn in. He laces his stories with an amazing level of detail without ever getting mired in tedium. His descriptions paint as compelling a picture as any committed to canvas by the Great Masters, and his pauses are as carefully and effectively placed as rests in the symphonies of Beethoven or Bach. Such is his mastery of the medium that the listener laughs when he wants them to laugh, cries when he wants them to cry. One would be forgiven if they tried to respond, forgetting that the speaker is present only through the magic of cinema. Its a testament to the masterful storytelling of Duke Bardwell in the upcoming documentary "Bayou Country."



I feel that I know Duke Bardwell as well as if I had spent days on end with him, listening to him recount the highs and lows of his musical career. Yet, I have only met him on a handful of occasions. For most of the time I've spent with him, we have been separated both by time and the glass of a video screen. For nearly two years, while laboring with director Kris Wheeler to mould 40 years of plot into a compelling film, I've been privileged to study Bardwell — his every mannerism, the timbre of his voice, the lines of his face. I've listened to him unspool his yarns countless times, yet they never grow old.

"Bayou Country" details the divergent paths of Bardwell and his song of the same title. Bardwell and guitarist Trevor Veitch penned the tune in 1969, when the two were backing iconic folk revivalist Tom Rush. As Veitch tells it, they were staying in a sleazy New York City hotel watching the moon landing and wrote "Bayou Country" because there was nothing else to do. In today's politics, there is a new buzzword: change agent. That is exactly what "Bayou Country" became for Bardwell. When his life needed it most, that song offered him redemption in a most unexpected way. Behold the power of a song.

During the Renaissance, Italian artists embraced exotic pigments from the world over, but for the most important subject, the human face, they relied on terra verte pigment mined locally from the hillsides around Verona. Bardwell's approach to songwriting employs a similar approach, as evidenced in "Bayou Country." While verses that recount the political strife of the late '60s cement the song firmly in a specific place and time, it is the lyrics rooted in Bardwell's Louisiana upbringing that give the song an ageless appeal.

The song's unnamed protagonist, who bears some resemblance to Bardwell, is richly layered with the local color of the bayou, rendering him with a timeless beauty worthy of DaVinci and Michelangelo. Born in Louisiana on the

*of a man ...
and his song*





Bayou Manchac, he becomes a world traveler, but he longs for the idyllic life of fais do-dos and Cajun women he left behind amid the Spanish moss and big oak trees. Though the lyrics speak of a longing that is specific to and idealized vision of life in Louisiana, the rich detail and understated emotion tug at the heart of the wayward traveler in everyone. It speaks to the oft-spoken desire of us all to return to an unattainable place — a more innocent past.

Like the hero of a Howard Hawks film, the protagonist owes much of the displeasure in his current situation to a woman. That doesn't make Bardwell a cynic on the topic of love, however. "You and I," a song penned as a wedding gift for his sister, reveals the heart of a hopeless romantic. As with "Bayou Country," the lyrics are dripping with rich Southernisms and water imagery, as evidenced in verses that compare the smoothing effect of a woman's love on a man's hardened countenance to the power of a rushing river: "*like running water over stone, you wear away my edges in due time,*" he writes.

The power of Bardwell's storytelling is never more poignant, whether in anecdote or in song, than when he is transparently self-effacing. Throughout "Bayou Country," the film, Bardwell lays bare his soul on the disappointments of a career spent within an arm's length of greatness, but always obscured in the shadows of those who would brave the glare of the limelight. The film itself examines the fatal flaws and missed opportunities that resulted in Bardwell walking away from music, seemingly forever, in the mid-1980s. A cursory viewing of the film would give the impression that his fatal flaw was in addiction and women or, as Bardwell puts it, "drinkin', snortin' and cavortin' — heavy in the cavortin' back then." A closer viewing, however, reveals those abuses as

merely a symptom of a restless spirit and a perpetual dissatisfaction with the status quo. Bardwell himself suggests that these flaws stretch back to his childhood. "I was probably officially A.D.D., only they didn't have Ritalin back then. You just got your ass whipped, and I got my ass whipped all the time."

Though Bardwell's time with Tom Rush was brief, he benefited from the influence of songwriting icons such as Janis Joplin, James Taylor, Jackson Browne and Joni Mitchell. The songs he wrote in the months immediately after his dismissal by Rush would find their way into the heart of a new project — a Baton Rouge band called Cold Gritz and the Black-Eyed Peas. Shortly after the band debuted on the Louisiana scene, with their signature swamp funk sound and interracial line-up, they scored an unprecedented record deal with legendary producer Lou Adler. The band, however, imploded before the album could be finished. Only "Bayou Country" was released and remains the band's sole legacy.

Within a few short years following the break-up of Gritz, Bardwell's charm and musical prowess earned him a regular gig with old friend Casey Kelly, opening for Loggins and Messina. Those experiences led to an opportunity to play and record with Jose Feliciano. While recording with Feliciano, he got the chance to work with Elvis' drummer, Ronnie Tutt. The two hit it off, and Tutt invited Bardwell to audition for an opening as Elvis' bass player. He got the gig. Unfortunately, Bardwell's time with Elvis was tumultuous, and when the relationship ended, he was left embittered and disheartened.

Duke earned a few more once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, playing with Gene Clark of the Byrds and Emmylou Harris. But

after a few more years of trying to achieve success on his own terms, Bardwell walked away from the music business — at least until “Bayou Country” reminded him why he had begun playing music in the first place.

Today, Bardwell plays neither for money nor fame, but for the love of music and the joy of the crowd. The clarity and self-awareness with which he tells his story reveal him to be a man wounded from the journey, certainly, but also redeemed. In addition to running his own small business, he plays on a

regular basis with at least four different acts and has created his own line of pepper sauce, “Unca Duke’s Geaux Jus.” Bardwell’s pepper sauce, like his stories and his songs, reveals the character of the man; it is spicy with a hint of sweetness, seductive with a considerable kick, imbued with the flavors of the bayou, and it always leaves you wanting more.

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EMERALD COST LIFE

Unca Duke’s Geaux Jus

By Margit Bisztray | Photography by Michael Belk

In Chinese medicine — one of the oldest, most enduring healing systems — vinegar is said to cure almost everything, including insomnia, dysentery, worms and infections. But as it so often goes with ancient wisdom, the miracle of vinegar isn’t some obscure knowledge passed along through doctors; it’s folk knowledge. Including in rural Louisiana.

The same can be said about chilies — whose antibiotic qualities were known to the natives of early Peru and Mexico — and of garlic, high in vitamin C and so powerful it’s even said to stave off vampires.

Vinegar, chilies, garlic: put them all together and what do you have?

If you’re anywhere Duke Bardwell and Byron Chism can reach, you’ve got Unca Duke’s Geaux Jus: a premium pepper sauce made from a honey-infused balsamic vinegar and white balsamic vinegar with whole garlic cloves and chili peppers.

Geaux Jus is French for “go juice.”

“Happy mouth, I call it,” says Bardwell. “That heat that only mellows with age.”

Bardwell — best-known locally as a musician who once played bass for Elvis Presley, recorded with Emmylou Harris, backed up Kenny Loggins and now plays

with local bands Hubba Hubba, Dread Clampitt and the Blue Orleans House Band — started making Geaux Jus in his home kitchen simply for fun.

“I was growing things in my back yard like peppers, basil, and other herbs and putting them in vinegar. I thought, ‘This is kind of fun.’ I developed a formula with four different vinegars. I’d vary the ingredients with tarragon or rosemary, depending on what was growing, and give bottles of this Unca Duke’s Geaux Jus to my friends.”

One such friend was Byron Chism, whom Bardwell met when they both worked at Criollas, when Chism was a waiter and later, after culinary training, a cook. Years later, Chism was having

enormous success with his product, Butt Rub, and had already navigated launching a food product, from securing an FDA-approved production site, to UPC and nutritional labeling, to marketing. Based on his experience, and a hunch, he felt he could sell Geaux Jus.

“It was Byron’s idea to pursue a commercial label,” says Bardwell. “I’d never have thought to do a thing like that.”

So what exactly attracted a businessman like Chism to Geaux Jus?

“I’ve never seen a product like it anywhere,” says Chism. “And trust me, I look. Hot sauces there are thousands of but not pepper vinegars. It’s a simple concoction, a unique Southern condiment, that hasn’t carried over to the corporate world because it has to be homemade. Commercial varieties have always lacked a certain depth of flavor and character. But Duke’s product has a life of its own. It’s unique in the marketplace.”

When Bardwell first shared his production information for analysis, Chism’s feedback was mixed.

“Byron said the good news was that, yes, we could do this. The bad news was how I made it was way too expensive,” Bardwell recalls. “He sent me a list of ingredients we could get in bulk that I had to substitute into the formula. At one point, I really didn’t think it would work. But one morning in the nether-land of half-sleep, it came to me. I had the whole house smelling like an Easter egg (from the vinegar). It was hard on Rebecca, my wife. But the next day I called Byron and told him I had the formula. It came to me in a dream.”



"It's labor-intensive," says Chism. "By its very nature — a hot, acidic, wet product — it can't be factory-produced. My job was to bring a product like that into the market. Going from home kitchen to store shelves — there's the mountain."

Chism, the businessman, marketer and cook, describes Geaux Jus as a "specialty food product for people already cooking at home who want something unique. It adds a real soulful zest to food. The heat, sweet and sour all play off each other. And it's got a nice hit of garlic," he ends slyly. "I use it in a spray bottle as a baste for pork and ribs. It adds moisture and flavor."

Unca Duke recommends Geaux Jus in any recipe calling for vinegar: over bitter greens, in salad dressings, for pickling eggs or okra, as a marinade for fish, chicken or beef, in jerk seasoning, gazpacho and stock. Their test chef is Gail Underwood, and she's forever concocting new uses.

Locally, Geaux Jus is offered at Stinky's Fish Camp (where they serve Unca Duke's Geaux Juice BBQ shrimp) and at the Blue Orleans (where he is in the house band) and at many of the local stores where Byron's Butt Rub is sold.

In addition, "It makes a bad ass martini and an even badder ass bloody Mary," Bardwell says. "I mean baaaaaad ass."

On the future of Geaux Jus, he says the next product he's playing with is pickled okra with ginger, habanero peppers and garlic.

"That worked so good, I was stunned. It works in any recipe requiring a little acidity," he says, adding that Underwood has also used Geaux Jus in a Quiche crust recipe.

He testifies to the ancient health benefits touted by the Chinese, Peruvians and who knows how many others as well.

But it doesn't stop there.

"It has been known to cure the chigger bites and to remove the corrosion bloom on the battery terminals," he jokes.

"I can't tell you how many friends of mine carry this around with them everywhere. If they're feeling sick or just low down, just a taste gives them a lift, believe it or not. Ed from 'For The Health of It' (a local health store) says his favorite new appliqué is a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich dipped in Geaux Jus. I tried it, and he was right!"

It's good for you. It's easy, fun, versatile, delicious, traditional but also new. Sounds like you just can't geaux wrong. ■

