

Would you like to see a photo of perhaps the happiest child in the world?

If so, I'll direct you to the Web site of Grammy-winning zydeco musician Terrance Simien, the latest artist-in-residence for the Mississippi Valley Blues Society's Blues in the Schools program. Land on the home page at TerranceSimien.com, click on the "Creole for Kidz" tab, and check out the picture of the little boy – he looks about three or four – photographed at one of Simien's concerts. You'll have no trouble knowing which kid I'm referring to: He's wearing a red Spider-Man T-shirt, holding a gold-bead necklace, and boasting what might be the most infectiously joyful smile you've ever seen.

"That's the zydeco smile, man!" says Simien, with a laugh, when I reference the child's photo during our recent phone interview. "You *get* that, man! You get that when you hear the music. You just start smiling, and people start dancing That's what that music does to you!"

The Web-site photographs of Simien, meanwhile, find him sporting some serious zydeco smiles himself – which only makes sense, as the artist has an awful lot to smile about. Alongside his ensemble Terrance Simien & the Zydeco Experience, the Louisiana-based, 48-year-old musician has toured nearly 50 countries, and given more than 7,000 performances, during the band's 32 years together. In 2008, the group's *Live! Worldwide* album earned it the very first Grammy Award presented in the new category of Best Zydeco or Cajun Music Album – a category for which Simien and his wife and manager Cynthia had spent years petitioning.

And when he's not performing publicly, the piano, trumpet, and accordion player is generally busy educating youths about his music's roots in his outreach program "Creole for Kidz & the History of Zydeco," a multicultural arts program that has reached more than 500,000 students worldwide. In addition to performing three public concerts, Simien will be delivering a one-man version of his group's presentation at 10 area schools during his November 4 through 8 area stay, and he calls the opportunity to educate young people about the blues-influenced Cajun dance music of zydeco "a passion that's been evolving through the years.

"I mean, there's nothing like playing for a group of kids," he continues. "Just getting them into the music, and seeing their faces... . We'll do these shows sometimes for two, three thousand kids at a time, and they'll really be blown away. They'll say 'Wow! I've never seen anything like this before! *Thank* you!"



Something in Your DNA

Simien's fascination with zydeco began when he himself was a child in rural Louisiana. "That was the music that we heard growing up," he says. "I first heard it at our church in St. Landry Parish, in the little church community we grew up in called Mallet. In our church hall, we used to have fundraisers, and one of them was a zydeco dance, and I remember really loving the music from as early as three years old."

Yet while Simien had been playing the piano and started on the trumpet at age 10, he admits that for most of his youth, "I wasn't listening to zydeco. We didn't have any zydeco records at my house when I was a kid, and like all the other kids, I kind of got into the popular music on the radio, you know.

"But when I was a teenager, I started going with my dad to these zydeco dances. And I remember going to this place called Slim's Y-Ki-Ki in Opelousas, which was a famous zydeco dance hall – it's still there – that was built back in the '40s. I went with him and saw there were a few teenagers there with their parents, like me. And we started dancing, just having a good time, and I really fell in love with the kind of come-as-you-are, laid-back atmosphere of that whole scene.

"You know," Simien says with a laugh, "whenever I went out to hear the popular music, you had to be dressed a certain way, and you had to dance a certain way, and it wasn't fun for me at all. You didn't want to make a wrong move; otherwise the kids would be talking about you until you

graduated.

"But over there at the zydeco dance, it was not like that. Man, everybody was just letting go and enjoying the music. People were *smiling*. People were having *fun*. And you didn't see any fights or anything like that, man. You were just out having a good time."

Simien's early love for zydeco led to the gift of an accordion for his birthday ("I might've been 13 or 14"), which the young man taught himself to play. "It wasn't that hard to learn," he says. "I picked up on the style of John Delafose, who was a popular musician in the zydeco circuit where I grew up. I just learned all his songs, and then I started learning some Clifton Chenier, and I started writing some of my own songs, and the music just evolved from there."

From his youth, Simien says, "I always dreamed about having a band. And my vision, before I had the zydeco experience at dance halls, was to start a cover band." Yet as he became more deeply entrenched in Creole music and its history during his teen years, Simien says he began to feel less a desire than a responsibility to help build awareness of zydeco and its origins.

"One of my biggest motivations was seeing it and then saying, 'Wow, so many people my age don't even *know* about all this stuff. Don't even know the history behind it.' Because it's a multiracial, multicultural collage of influences that came together in Louisiana that make this music, and make this culture.

"I mean, my family alone was here since the mid-1700s. I'm part French, African, Spanish, Native American, and German, and all these cultures came together in Louisiana and started families, and fused together, and made this music. And that's why so many people can automatically connect with it, because there's something in there that's in your DNA. It's more than what they hear – they're feeling something inside of them." With a laugh, Simien adds, "I think it's their blood talking to 'em, you know what I'm saying?

"So I came to realize, hey, this isn't just Louisiana history. This is *American* history, man. And if we don't all step up, this is gonna be a thing of the past. Because there really wasn't anybody making any effort in the Creole community to educate about this, you know?"



Goin' Down the Bayou

While still in his teens, the artist formed the zydeco band Terrance Simien & the Mallet Playboys in 1981, and he admits that, initially, it was difficult finding fellow teen musicians for the ensemble. "Guys would say, 'Aw, man, I can't play that zydeco stuff! That's for old people!' But those same guys, you know, are zydeco musicians today. They all *live* for that stuff now."

What Simien says was less difficult, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, was his band's ability to book sets at local venues. "It was such a novelty around home, you know – a teenage zydeco band – that people would book us because we were *young* doing it. It was like, 'Let's book these kids!' So it was actually easier to get bookings then. Even though," he adds with a laugh, "some of the older zydeco guys were getting pissed off because we were getting their gigs.

"And now, you have tons and tons of teenage zydeco bands coming out of the Creole communities down here in south Louisiana, and also around southeast Texas, and even in California. There are a bunch of teenage bands around there in the San Francisco Bay area and in Los Angeles – a lot of Creoles settled there back in the early 1900s, looking for better jobs and stuff, and brought the culture with them, you know?"

With the renamed Terrance Simien & the Zydeco Experience's higher-profile engagements including a breakthrough set at the 1984 World's Fair in Louisiana, an appearance in the 1987 Dennis Quaid thriller *The Big Easy*, and a concert at Australia's Sydney Festival that was attended by 100,000 music fans, the band made music history when, in 2008, it won the first Grammy in a category fought for by Simien and his wife for seven years prior.

"We just felt, 'Hey, you have styles of music like Hawaiian music, and Native American music, and folk music, and all of these styles of American music that deserve to be recognized, and

ours isn't there.' So we started a little campaign, and began petitioning the Grammys' board of trustees to establish a new category.

"A lot of the process involved educating the community about zydeco and networking and then uniting

the community We worked really hard at it for seven years. And finally, on our fourth petition, after a letter of recommendation to establish the category was brought forth to the trustees, they voted for the category almost unanimously."

But as proud as Simien is of that accomplishment, he says that the 2001 creation of his "Creole for Kidz & the History of Zydeco" program will always remain a professional and personal highlight.

"I always wanted to reach the kids and connect them with this music," he says, "because *as* a kid growing up with this music, you know, I was connected to it, and it was a real positive experience for me. You know, growing up dancing and having a good time, and not feeling any pressure from bullying or anything like that It was an atmosphere that was just so joyful and laid-back, and I think all kids should experience that."

And, the artist says, that sense of joy is certainly evident when the youths he performs for learn that the music of Terrance Simien & the Zydeco Experience is prominently featured in 2009's New Orleans-set Disney film *The Princess & the Frog*.

"In our programs, I'll always ask the kids, 'How many of you guys have seen *The Princess & the Frog* ?' And I'd say

95 percent of the audience's hands go up, and they'll go up all excited. '

Oooo! Yeah!

'And I'll say, 'Well, guess what, guys? We have a song in that movie.' And then I'll start singing 'Goin' down the bayou, goin' down the bayou ...,' and I'll see these little girls putting their hands over their mouths, you know, all surprised, like, 'Oh,

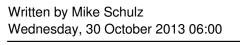
that

song! I

know

that song!' And then we'll get 'em to sing the song with us, and then all of a sudden, that's *it*

. They're connecting with the music.



"So thank you, Disney!" says Simien, laughing. "Because kids from now until forever are gonna be watching that classic and connecting to the music."

Terrance Simien will perform three public concerts during his Blues in the Schools residency: at the Center for Active Seniors (1035 West Kimberly Road, Davenport) at 11:30 a.m. on November 6; at the River Music Experience (131 West Third Street, Davenport) at 7 p.m. on November 7; and at The Muddy Waters (1708 State Street, Bettendorf) at 9 p.m. on November 8. For more information on Simien's area residency, call the Mississippi Valley Blues Society at (563)322-5837 or visit MVBS.org.

For more information on the artist himself, visit TerranceSimien.com.