

THE QUARTER-STEP WALTZ

EXT. SKY. DAY.

A great sweep of horizon, filled with huge, towering clouds, heavy and dark near the ground, turning white and silver as they ascend.

OVER THIS we hear SLOSHING and MUCKING. A MAN GRUNTING and MUTTERING, CURSING in Cajun French.

EXT. A DITCH. DAY.

We see in CLOSE-UP a pair of black rubber boots sloshing about in a Muddy Ditch.

The GRUNTING, MUTTERING, and CURSING (*en francais*) continue.

EXT. A SUGARCANE FIELD. DAY.

Standing in the Ditch at the edge of a field of eight-foot high sugarcane is FILO DESORMEAUX, an old man, and the source of the sounds and cursing.

With the shovel which he wields with skill, Filo is clearing the Ditch.

Filo wears loose-fitting pants, with suspenders, and a long-sleeved shirt buttoned to the neck.

Filo stops his work, addressing us.

FILO
*Bonjour, mes amis! Bienvenu a la
Louisiane.*

Filo sticks the shovel into the ground.

FILO (CONT'D)
Good morning, my friends. Welcome
to Louisiana!

Filo steps out of the Ditch.

FILO (CONT'D)
Oui est con pere?

He waits a moment before translating, which he does with a broad smile.

FILO (CONT'D)
Mais -- who's your daddy?

CUT TO:

EXT. SOUTH LOUISIANA. DAY.

A bird's-eye view of the checkered flatland of south Louisiana: a patchwork of green sugarcane fields, brown fallow fields, and tree-lined bayous meandering between them.

OVER THIS the unaccompanied VOICE of a MAN SINGING a plaintiff song in Cajun French.

EXT. CANE FIELDS. DAY.

A high-angle view of sugarcane fields being harvested. Huge cane-cutting machines are busy cutting the cane and laying it across the rows.

SINGING CONTINUES.

EXT. A CANE FIELD. DAY.

We are in a cane field. The stalks are eight feet tall and grow thickly together.

EXT. ROADWAY. DAY.

A two-laned hard surface road cuts through fields of tall sugarcane.

We come to a Dirt Driveway, about a quarter-mile long, which leads through the tall sugarcane to:

EXT. THE DESORMEAUX HOMEPLACE. DAY.

This is the Desormeaux home. It is a two-story Acadian-style cottage, expanded, modernized, and amply porched.

We see that they are devout Catholics by the white-rocked Mary Grotto in the yard. Even their satellite dish has a Mary painted on it.

EXT. HOMEPLACE. FRONT YARD. DAY.

An Ancient Live Oak Tree dominates, several branches nearly touching the ground.

Not far off lies a cluster, a Grove, of younger trees: a dark, mysterious place, an oasis in a sea of sugarcane.

The SINGING stops.

EXT. CANE FIELD. A DITCH. DAY.

Filo is wiping off the mud from his hands with a huge blue bandanna.

FILO

So --- who IS your daddy? You see, down here in sout Luziana everybody's related to everybody. It's jus' dat you don't never meet 'em all until somebody gets married... or dies.

EXT. CANE FIELD. DAY.

From over Filo's shoulder we see the Grove.

EXT. CANE FIELD. DAY.

As Filo addresses us, he walks toward the Grove.

FILO

Now ev'ry once in a while I say somethin' in French. *Maïs* when I was growin' up people look down on you if you spoke it but me, I couldn't help it, no.

EXT. THE GROVE. DAY.

From within the cool darkness of the Grove we see Filo stepping out of the bright day into the Grove which is a mysterious place, vines growing up into the trees and hanging down like long gnarled fingers.

EXT. THE GROVE. DAY.

Within the Grove, Filo searches for and finds his mug of coffee which sits on a stump.

Beside the stump sits Filo's accordion.

FILO

French was all I knew 'till I was a man and my daddy, it's all he ever

(MORE)

FILO (CONT'D)
 spoke. An' let me tell you... sometimes
 people do more dan look down on you.

Filo drinks deeply from the mug.

FILO (CONT'D)
 I been kicked in places a man only
 talks about at Emma Lou's Lounge on
 a Sat'day night.

Filo sits himself down on the stump.

EXT. CANE FIELD. DAY.

From the brightness outside of the Grove we see into the
 darkness of the Grove, lit only by a few slanting shafts of
 light.

FILO (V.O.)
 Now me, I got eight brothers and
 t'ree sisters. Mais now, we're less
 dan a han'ful. Dare's me, my little
 brother Roland, and our sister
 Bernice.

EXT. THE GROVE. DAY.

We see Filo in CLOSE-UP:

FILO
 An' we expectin' her to be joinin'
 the res' any time now....

EXT. THE GROVE. DAY.

Filo rouses himself up.

FILO
 Mais now you might t'ink dat dat
 might make me kinda sad. An' you
 would be right, yah.

Filo sweeps up his accordion.

FILO (CONT'D)
 But dare's somethin' about us Cajuns
 dat keeps us from stayin' sad for
 too long.

He starts squeezing out a single note, then a chord, repeated into a rhythm.

FILO (CONT'D)
An' it's dat -- inside his head --
ev'ry Cajun's got -- A Band!

EXT. THE GROVE. DAY.

From deep within the darkness of the Grove, we can barely make out the dim, shadowy, luminescent figures of THREE OLD MUSICIANS (playing fiddle, accordion, and triangle), who seem to have magically materialized.

FILO (V.O.)
Now we don't all hear it at the same
time or in the same way --- but it's
dare!

Now the BAND joins in with Filo's rhythm, taking it up and bursts out into a vigorous two-step.

EXT. THE GROVE. DAY.

Filo can restrain himself no longer and dances around the stump raising a cloud of dust as the Band plays away.

EXT. HOMEPLACE. FRONT PORCH. DAY.

We see Filo's wife, Teenie (TEE), through the front screen door. She is a small, sinewy woman. She slowly hangs up the telephone. The news she has just heard is not good.

TEE
Filo? FILO!

She goes out onto the front porch.

TEE (CONT'D)
FI-LO!

She notices something in the distance.

EXT. HOMEPLACE. FRONT PORCH. DAY.

From Tee's angle we see Filo in the Grove. His dancing makes him appear to be fending off an attack of stinging insects.

Tee sees no Band. Hears no music. She shakes her head knowingly.

EXT. THE GROVE. DAY.

Filo is in rare form. The Band, which we now hear, is playing away. He is oblivious until the sound of Tee's voice stops everything...

TEE

Filo! ... If you woulda squeezed me half as much as that thing we'd have a lot more to show for it than jus' t'ree boys.

Filo has frozen in mid-stride ready to play his accordion. He squeezes out a pathetic chord and addresses us:

FILO

My wife. Too bad I don't carry her aroun' inside my head.

And the Band abruptly disappears.

FILO (CONT'D)

(to Tee)

I squeeze you I get a squawk. I squeeze this I get --- music.

He squeezes a note. Tee takes the accordion from him.

TEE

(softly)

Filo....

FILO

My little sister Bernice...?

TEE

Yes....

EXT. HOMEPLACE. FRONT PORCH. DAY.

Filo is seated on the steps. Tee hands him a cup of coffee and joins him.

TEE

Should we have a wake?

FILO

Wake? We all knew she was gonna die. She knew she was gonna die. It was a one year wake. An' don't you think she didn't enjoy it neither.

TEE

Anyway --- it'll be nice to see the
t'ree boys back together.

FILO

Two-t'irds of 'em never left!

TEE

You know what I mean. Leon counts
too.

FILO

Leon don't like the way we dress. He
don't like the way we drink. He don't
like the way we dance. An' he don't
like the way we talk. Or maybe it's
his new bride you're interested in.

TEE

Well, we've never seen her.

FILO

Some nerve! Getting' married in the
middle of plantin'. I tell you he
done it on purpose!

TEE

Will Roland come?

FILO

Little brother Roland. Oh, *mais* yah.
He'll fly down from California for
t'ree things: One, Bernice was his
sister too; two, so he can try to
put his arm aroun' my shoulder an'
say, "Well, Filo, it looks like it's
jus' you an' me now"; an' t'ree ---
(savoringly)
Gumbo....

TEE

We'll jus' have to remember to keep
Roland and Marguerite separated.

FILO

Mais how come? They been doin' it
good enough themselves for ten years!

EXT. HOMEPLACE. DIRT DRIVEWAY. DAY.

MARGUERITE, scarf flying, is driving a yellow Cadillac convertible. On the seat beside her is a large casserole.

Marguerite is a large woman. Not fat. Large-boned, as we say. Like her body, her self is large. Shall we say gregarious.

EXT. HOMEPLACE. FRONT YARD. DAY.

Marguerite pulls up in a cloud of dust. She gets out.

MARGUERITE
(overly dramatic)
Oh, Filo. Filo.

FILO
(wearily)
What is it, Marguerite?

Marguerite's moods have as many shifts as a Grand Prix race.

MARGUERITE
Corning Ware of course. I make the
bes' Corning Ware crab 'n crawfish
etouffee funeral casserole there is.

Marguerite heads into the house.

TEE
Well, I guess I betta get out yur
suit. It'll need pressin'.

Tee goes in.

EXT. INTERSTATE HIGHWAY. DAY.

A white Volvo with an opened sunroof is traveling down the interstate.

INT. VOLVO. DAY.

Classical music plays. LEON drives while SYLVIA, quite blonde but down-to-earth lovely, is tying Leon's tie.

SYLVIA
Leon, I hope we're not late.

LEON
 We're bound to be in time for something. There's the wake. Then the funeral. Then the burial. And finally the get-together. It could go on for days.

EXT. STATE HIGHWAY. DAY.

On the outskirts of the town, in a large open field, workmen are assembling a carnival midway.

LEON
 (v.o.)
 We're just in time for the Sugarcane Festival.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. VOLVO. DAY.

From Leon's angle we see a dilapidated brick building fronted by an immense shell parking lot going by.

LEON
 (wistfully)
 Emma Lou's Lounge. A loud, dirty, rough and tough honkey-tonk.

SYLVIA
 Sounds disgusting.

LEON
 Yeah --- Always wanted to go in there.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD. DAY.

They are stuck behind a slow-moving tractor pulling several wobbling carts loaded down with sugarcane. The road parallels a bayou on one side and fields of sugarcane on the other.

Leon pops the cassette playing classical music out and turns on the radio.

LEON
 Better start getting in the mood.

Cajun music bursts out. Sylvia sticks her head out of the sun roof.

SYLVIA
WHAT'S THAT?!

LEON
SPANISH MOSS.

SYLVIA
AND THAT?

LEON
A BAYOU.

SYLVIA
WHAT?

She ducks back into the car.

INT. VOLVO. DAY.

LEON
A bayou. You take an oversized ditch,
add lots of mud, throw in a couple
of sofas, a rusted icebox, and at
least half a dozen automobile tires ---
and you've got a bayou!

EXT. BAYOUSIDE. DAY.

Leon and Sylvia stand at the bank of a bayou. This particular one not being at all like his description. It is quiet and still, the green grass growing to the water's edge.

SYLVIA
Is there anything you approve of
here?

LEON
You.

He stoops down to swish at the water.

LEON (CONT'D)
I wonder if you'll taste it?

SYLVIA
Taste the bayou water? Why?

LEON
Oh, when people visit down here and
decide to stay, it's said that they
"tasted bayou water".