

Zydeco musician Chris Ardoin on a journey to get back his creative passion after being shot on stage

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Until the gunshots rang out, the July 30 performance was like any other, Zydeco musician Chris Ardoin said.

The 40-year-old Lake Charles native was the subject of national media attention and a flurry of online concern six months ago when at least one unknown shooter opened fire at the Zydeco Bike Fest in Colfax, Louisiana, an outdoor concert and mud riding event, injuring Ardoin and a 14-year-old boy in the crowd.

An arrest has not been made in the case, Grant Parish Sheriff Steven McCain said Friday.

Ardoin said the day after the shooting over 3 million people visited his official Facebook page and in the aftermath he received calls from everyone from Billboard magazine to The New York Times. The attention inspired mixed feelings.

He appreciated the well wishes from fans and community members, but he worried interest in the dramatic nature of his injury would eclipse his career — he felt like a prisoner to the moment, to his injury. He didn't want it to be a spectacle, Ardoin said.

In the six months since, Ardoin said he's been quietly building back — as a musician, and a man — trying to get his career back to a place of forward motion and regain his passion for music, all while embracing a new, intensely grateful outlook on life.

A show like any other

“It was calm as can be,” Ardoin said.

His group, Chris Ardoin and Nustep Zydeco, had wrapped their set and were packing gear and preparing to load up their equipment to leave. A DJ played songs while concertgoers dispersed and ATV and bike riders migrated to the track for the midnight ride to cap off the night’s festivities.

That’s when the first few shots rang out.

The Zydeco musician said the danger wasn’t obvious until the second barrage of shots were fired, around 20, near the side and back of the stage, he estimated. Ardoin said he was attempting to pull his bass player down behind the drum riser when he was struck. His bass player said he felt the whizz of the bullet and heard the thump as it struck Ardoin in his right side, near his armpit, the musician recalled.

Ardoin said doctors later told him he got lucky: because of his muscular build and the way he was moving when struck, the bullet moved toward his back instead of inward and avoided his lungs and other major organs.

“I put my hand around my back because that’s where I felt it, and when I swiped my hand around under my arm it was full of blood. Then everybody was freaking out. For some reason I was calm. I said, ‘Look, y’all calm down. I’ve got high blood pressure and I don’t need to be freaking out,’ ” Ardoin said.

Panic seized the festival after the shots rang out.

Thousands of attendees packed into their vehicles and attempted to flee the grounds at the same time, the Grant Parish Sheriff’s Office said, creating blockages that slowed emergency responders. Ardoin estimated it took between 45 minutes to an hour before EMTs were able to reach him.

When they did, he looked out at a line of onlookers with phones poised nearby and made one demand: I’m walking into the ambulance, not getting on a stretcher, Ardoin said.

He didn’t want his wife, Kerri, or other family members to see him wheeled away on video. Before getting in the ambulance, he called Kerri to ensure she wouldn’t learn of his injury from social media posts.

“I said, I’m calling to let you know I got — and when I got the s and the h out, she lost it. For some reason that night my 10-year-old was up and sitting in the chair with her. He did his grown man duties and took care of his mama. He comforted her. He told her, ‘He’s OK, mama. He’s calling and he’s talking to you,’ ” the musician said.

Ardoin said he tried hard to hold back any fear and anxiety. Not knowing what was happening inside his body, he didn't want the what-ifs to overwhelm him. He wanted to stay conscious and sharp.

Some of that was also a holdover from his time as a high school athlete playing football, basketball and running track. There he learned the importance of being a leader even when you're hurt or the game isn't going as planned and pushing the team to the finish line, he said.

When the doors to the ambulance closed, he finally let the composed exterior drop, he said.

"I laid down and said, 'Hey man, do you mind if I yell right quick?' and he said, 'No man, by all means do your thing' and I let out a big curse word and he got to doing what he had to do," the Zydeco musician said.

He was taken to a hospital in Alexandria where he was evaluated in the emergency room and eventually cleared of serious injury. The bullet was initially left in place. Ardoin had it removed in Lafayette roughly two weeks after the shooting, and then began stretching and weight work for physical therapy.

"I don't want them to see me bow out."

A month after his injury, Ardoin decided to test the waters and get back onstage for the first time with a show at Prospect Park, a diner in Houston, Texas, for Labor Day weekend.

His main inspiration were his sons, 10-year-old Collin and 7-year-old Carter, Ardoin said.

The 40-year-old is a fourth generation Zydeco musician. Ardoin grew up playing alongside his grandfather, Alphonse "Bois Sec" Ardoin; father, Lawrence Ardoin; brother, Sean Ardoin and a slew of cousins and friends, carrying on the tradition begun by his grandfather's cousin, Améd  Ardoin.

At 9 years old, Ardoin shared the stage with his father at Carnegie Hall, the storied concert hall in New York City, an experience he said he cherishes as an adult.

He wants his sons, who are playing the keyboard, drums and exploring other instruments, to have the opportunity to play onstage with their father one day.

"I don't want them to see me bow out. As soon as the road got rough, he jetted, and not just with music with anything in life. I don't want them to see me get to a rough patch and then quit. I'm going to go back for them. I'm not going to force them but if they want to play music, I want them to feel OK going out and playing," he said.

The musician said he felt strong mentally ahead of that first show, but questions still buzzed in his mind. How would his body respond? Would he be in pain, during and after the show? Would he be spooked by surprise noises, like the revving of passing vehicles and motorcycles?

Getting back onstage in Houston helped assuage those anxieties. There were no surprises and no post traumatic stress-like reactions to noises or being surrounded by a crowd, and his body suffered a manageable amount of soreness and discomfort afterward, Ardoin said.

Seeing the joy on the faces in the crowd, the swaying bodies and the spirit of togetherness became the second motivation propelling Ardoin's return. The musician said he felt a responsibility to represent the Creole culture and culture of Zydeco music and ensure people weren't spooked by his injury and deterred from attending shows.

The last step is choosing to do it for himself. Ardoin said he's still trying to fully recover the joy and passion he had for music before his injury.

"It feels like you're finding yourself again."

Ardoin said he hasn't tried to force himself into a creative space.

From July until January, the musician said he'd walk into his home studio, flip on the lights and look around. He'd sit down with the intention of working on the album he set aside after being shot but would scroll videos on YouTube, unable to tap into that love and natural flow.

Then he'd leave without touching a single instrument or piece of equipment, he said.

"All the stuff that I remember creating before the injury where I'd say, 'Oh man, they're going to love this song,' I'm in the studio listening to it and I'm ready to delete it...It was depressing. You know why, but you don't know why. This is second nature to me. I can usually come in here and come up with something on the spot. Why can't I come in here and do anything?" Ardoin said.

The Zydeco performer estimates he's 80% recovered creatively.

It's taken time to release the frustration and resentment he felt at being injured while in his comfort zone, bringing people joy performing his music, but he knew he couldn't let one person take that away from him, he said.

In the last month he's had a breakthrough, ideas pouring out of him in the studio almost faster than he can put them down. He's done small things, like outfitting the studio with colored LED lights and candles, to ease his mind. It's been a relief feeling that joy flow back in, Ardoin said.

"It feels like you're finding yourself again. You get that warm, tingly feeling inside. It's like, 'Oh, there you go. That's the one I've been missing,'" he said.

Ardoin said there are elements of his career he's slow to revisit, or may not return to at all, like playing at wide open, lightly regulated outdoor venues. He said he wants to feel a little more control over the space he's playing in.

His upcoming set at Festivals Acadiens et Créoles in March will be his first foray into a fully outdoor festival since his injury.

A new appreciation for life

Six months out from the shooting, Ardoin said at times it still feels like it just happened.

The weather will change or the air will dampen and he'll experience sharp pains in the damaged nerves where the bullet traveled. When standing in the sun, it feels like his back is on fire, he said, and other times he experiences numbness.

But with the pain, the trial has brought blessings, he said.

Artistically, Ardoin said he feels like the injury shook him from complacency. It's easy to stick with what works, using the same formula of lyrics and arrangements, but the 40-year-old said now he's thinking about his creative process differently and pushing himself to try new things.

Aside from his work with Nustep Zydeco, Ardoin said he wants to put more effort behind honoring his heritage and the heritage of Zydeco music by exposing his sons and younger audiences to the traditional style. It's important fans of the genre know the style's roots so it can endure for generations to come, he said.

Outside of music, Ardoin said he has a greater appreciation for being alive.

About two weeks after the shooting, Ardoin said he left the house to go on a drive. The sky was blue, the temperature perfect and the humidity comfortable — a perfect day. In his moment of appreciation, Ardoin said it dawned on him: if things had gone differently, he would have already been dead two weeks. No beautiful day, no time with his family — just gone.

"I started calling it the awakening. It opened my eyes to a lot of stuff and it made me appreciate being able to do what I do, where I come from and just to be alive," Ardoin said.