

Traditional French-Canadian Music in Ontario: Living on the Edge

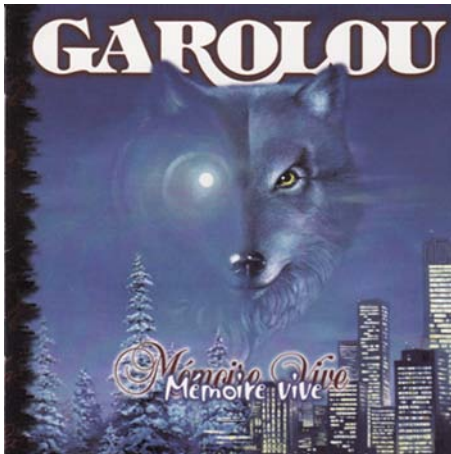
Jean-Marc Lalonde

There are about half a million people living in Ontario whose mother tongue is French, and yes, there is a French-Canadian traditional music scene in Ontario. No, it's not a very big scene. As a matter of fact, I am personally acquainted with pretty much everyone involved. On top of that, francophones have something of a love/hate relationship with their traditional musical heritage in Ontario. I'll try to make some sense of it for you.

First of all, as with any cultural group in Canada, Franco-Ontarians unconsciously let hundreds of years of oral tradition slip through their fingers when radio and television came to town. This resulted in the old songs and tunes being trotted out only on special occasions. At first, you'd hear the music at community and family celebrations: Saint Jean-Baptiste day, Saint Catherine's day, birthdays, etc... Eventually, the songs were relegated to le Temps des fêtes, or the time between Christmas and New Year's. Let's just say that if you played traditional French-Canadian button accordion music professionally, you were expected to keep your day job! What happened to this music?

A long time ago

In the seventies, there was something of a renewed interest in French-Canadian traditional music. La Bottine souriante were just getting underway in Quebec. In Ontario, Garolou, a band out of the eastern part of the province, gave a progressive rock treatment to the old songs.



They were a sensation not only in Ontario, but all across the country, including Quebec, getting lots of radio play and winning several Félix awards as well.

There was Robert Paquette and there was Cano, both from Sudbury. The band Cano wasn't a traditional musical group by any stretch of the imagination, but both they and Robert Paquette made use of the fiddle in their songs and wrote about folksy stuff. Robert Paquette's song "Rigodon" is something of a "turlutte", a rhythmic tongue-twister, a style of singing popular in the traditional French-Canadian idiom. These kinds of songs always went over well in concert in French-speaking Ontario, but never really created any kind of trend.

Donald Poliquin, originally from Hearst and now living in eastern Ontario, put out two wonderful traditional albums in the early eighties, thereby carrying the Franco-Ontarian traditional music torch almost single-handedly through this decade. Marcel Bénéteau from the Windsor area also contributed a trio of quasi-anthropological collections of that region's best traditional songs. But beyond these valiant efforts, all was rather quiet.

Now let's just skip ahead ten years. The honest truth is that Franco-Ontarian traditional music went underground—deep underground. It would take a backhoe to get it back out. That backhoe showed up in the guise of a band called Deux saisons.



In 1994 at the University of Ottawa, a new band was filling the local student bar on a near-regular basis. This was Deux saisons, a duo at the time (Nicolas Doyon and Fritz Larivière). They were showing the

student body what an old-fashioned singalong was all about. Deux saisons subsequently became a trio, a quartet, and finally a five-piece band that toured for ten years all across Canada, France and the States. They put out four albums of chansonnier-style and tradition-based music, and they won a fair bit of air-play. Guitars, mandolin, fiddles, upright bass, drums, button accordions and feet brought not only traditional sounds back into the light, but traditional songs as well. Some songs came from their families, some from other folklorists (Marcel Bénéteau), and some from research done at the Centre franco-ontarien de folklore in Sudbury. In 2004, the group decided to take an indefinite break for family reasons.

A couple of years after Deux saisons began touring and recording, a new band exploded onto the Franco-Ontarian scene with a completely new take on what to do with traditional fiddling. Combining the contemporary soul-infused vocal stylings of Michel Bénac, and the pyrotechnic fiddling of ex-Garolou violinist, Bobby Lalonde, with samples and electro-dance grooves, Swing created their own style of music: techno-trad. Wildly popular in French-speaking Ontario and enjoying a cult-like following in the Maritimes, Swing has a relentless tour schedule which takes them to all corners of the world. They are releasing a third CD this fall.

Today

I gave this article the subtitle “Living on the Edge” for a couple of reasons. First, I would have to say that the traditional French-Canadian idiom has been living on the edge of oblivion for several years, with the exception of a few champions striving to keep the flame alive. However, the other edge to which I am referring in the title is a more visual edge. Think of the border between Ontario and Quebec: that’s where most of the action is happening these days.

Following the flow of the Gatineau river going from Hull, through Chelsea, to Wakefield and back, there is a steam-train which runs daily from spring to autumn, bringing tourists to look at the river, the hills and the fall colours. Over the past several years the train has employed many fine musicians to entertain the passengers with traditional songs and music in both English and French. Members of Deux saisons have all at one time or another worked on this train. So have three members of the group I perform with, La Ligue du bonheur.

With two ex-Deux saisons members and two other ex-steam-train employees, La Ligue du bonheur began its career in the late fall of 2006. With the addition of Louis Racine, traditional recording artist, singing farmer, storyteller and square dance caller

extraordinaire, La Ligue would get together on Wednesday nights to sing and play. It was like their bowling league. Before long, word got out that Louis Racine and Deux saisons were cooking something up. Not strictly true, but not entirely false either...

On Hallowe’en night, the group received a call for a gig to take place on December 6th. In spite of having only four songs in their bag of tricks, they decided to go for it. As they negotiated, over the next few days, the gig took on more importance than they could have dreamed. It turned out that the gig was in Montreal. At the Métropolis, Montreal’s foremost concert theatre club venue. Televised. By TFO and TV5 international. With Les Batinse, Vent du nord, La Volée de castors and last, but not least, La Bottine souriante, all heavy-hitting Québécois traditional artists. La Ligue du bonheur had been invited to come in through the front door, and that they did! In this, their first year of existence, La Ligue will be touring Ontario, visiting every francophone concert hall in the Réseau Ontario as well as many schools where they will give traditional dance workshops. There should be a debut album out for Christmas.

The newest traditional group to hit the road is Le Diable aux corsets, from the farming community of Casselman in eastern Ontario. This three-woman, one-man outfit gives the traditional repertoire a unique treatment. Piano, guitar, feet, fiddle and baritone sax aren’t a combo you hear everyday. However, the group has an interesting pedigree: pianist Mélissa Racine and saxophonist Christelle Racine are the daughters of Louis Racine, esteemed member of La Ligue du bonheur. And Le Diable aux corsets’ fiddler, Émilie Aubut, spent years on the Hull-Chelsea-Wakefield steam-train. So you see, everybody knows everybody in this business.

Tomorrow

The French-Canadian traditional music scene is still “living on the edge”, but I think it has become more of a positive thing. With Swing, La Ligue, Les corsets, and Donald Poliquin all touring or putting out CDs in the near future, maybe we are on the edge of a new wave of interest in this music. Les Coquerelles out of Sudbury are making waves with their new CD *Rocklore*. Square dancing (will somebody please find a hipper name for that!) is coming back. Storytelling is making a resurgence. More than ever, live music is becoming the choice of people who are sick of TV and the Net and want to reconnect with other live human beings. Imagine: going out and meeting people you can sing, dance and laugh with! What a fresh, new idea!