

*La Chanson québécoise: Not the Same Old (French) Song*

Brian Thompson, University of Massachusetts, Boston

The song connection between Quebec and France goes back some four centuries, but has become a real exchange and cross-fertilization only in the last sixty years or so. France was until then the *Mère Patrie*, the obvious source of language and culture in what had been known as *Nouvelle France*. Belgium and Switzerland are relatively recent arrivals on the transatlantic scene.

Initially, songs in Quebec were those brought by the early French sailors and settlers, largely from Anjou, Normandy, Brittany and Poitou, or other provinces. Literate colonists brought composed songs with written lyrics but the much larger number of illiterate peasants and farmers also brought songs from a rich French oral tradition. These traditional folksongs already existed in multiple regional versions, and developed even more numerous home-grown versions among the widely scattered population in Quebec: some 234 for “A la claire fontaine”<sup>1</sup> [according to Gilles Vigneault (1928- ), who worked in the archives as a young man (Legras 128)]; and 350 for “V’là l’bon vent” (Normand 18)--as they were sung and passed on in various social occasions: weddings, baptisms, funerals, get-togethers of various sorts, or during long winter *veillées*. Original songs were also produced locally, whether by adapting French songs to New France localities (“Sur la route de Louvier” becomes “Sur la route de Berthier”) or commemorating local events and the realities of daily life, as in “Les Raftmans” (Normand 19). After the English victory in 1763, the cultural minority clung to its roots and preserved a wealth of traditional French songs often lost in France. This treasure of traditional music remains essential into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Gilles Vigneault, another Québécois treasure, notes: “the

folksong was at once our operetta, our opera, our theatre, our literature and our poetry. It stood in for all the mirrors which normally provide a people a reflection of itself so that it knows who it is, where it comes from, where it's going" (Vigneault 224).<sup>2</sup>

In the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, patriotic songs appear. "Un Canadien errant" (Antoine Gérin-Lajoie, 1830) is the first Canadian (we would now say "Québécois") song to have international success. The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sees a renewal of attachment to the *Mère Patrie* with songs like Louis Fréchette's "Vive la France." Traditional bawdy songs from France were also popular, but were severely expurgated under the influence of French-Canadian clergy (Roy, as cited by Normand 25). Although there were other singer-songwriters in the 1930s and 1940s, notably Ovila Légaré in the folk tradition, Willie Lamothe in the country/western vein, and Le Soldat Lebrun during the Second World War, the development of a home-grown written song tradition which is not imitative of French models begins, for all intents and purposes, with Mary Travers, "épouse Bolduc" (1894-1941), considered the "mother" of Québécois song (Legras 123). "La Bolduc"--as she became known--left her mark on Québécois song, in part by singing of everyday life in Quebec, in part by her style, a syncopation influenced, according to Michel Rivard, by American country music (Traodéc, Exclaim 122), and by her characteristic *turlute* (a kind of yodel). Vigneault notes her influence on the major French singer-songwriter, Charles Trenet (1913-2001), who refers to her in his 1950s song, "Dans les rues de Québec," and even attempts her *turlute*!

Québécois historian, Robert Thérien, underlines the importance of sound recording and mass communication in the 20<sup>th</sup> century for the creation of the modern Québécois song tradition: "It's radio that gave birth to Québécois song"--amplified by TV in the 1950s (Thérien 2008-09). But Jacques Normand (1922-1998) also played a crucial role in putting Québécois song on the

world map, so to speak. On the one hand, as Gilles Vigneault notes, though influenced by French song, he had the audacity to compose his own songs as well as to sing “I love the nights of Montreal” when, as everyone knew, the nights of Paris were so beautiful, and all you could hear on the radio at the time was Tino Rossi’s “Nuits de Chine” (Troadec 2008, 227), a song popular from the early 1920s to the 1960s. But more importantly, as director of Le Faisan doré, the most fashionable cabaret in Montreal since the arrival of the French duo of Pierre Roche (1919-2001) and Charles Aznavour (1924- ) in 1948, Normand was instrumental in getting French impresario, Jacques Canetti (1909-1997), who was in Montreal briefly in July 1950 to promote his artists and to search for “Canadian” talent for the French label, Polydor, to listen to Félix Leclerc (1914-1988), an unknown and unappreciated singer-songwriter. Leclerc had to be tricked into the radio station the next day on the pretext of recording songs for a friend’s party--he would never have accepted to sing for a French impresario. After a few songs, Canetti knew he had found “[his] Canadian,” offered Leclerc a contract with Polydor (which Leclerc signed later in the day without reading it), and flew back to Paris. In September, an incredulous Leclerc received a contract for a five-week stint at l’A.B.C., a major music-hall in Paris for December--his friends had to push him to actually go. He recorded several songs for Polydor in January, and won Le Prix de l’Académie Charles-Cros (the critics’ prize of the French recording industry), for “Moi mes souliers,” in February! Canetti then programmed him for fourteen weeks at his own theatre, Les Trois Baudets: the Québécois peasant had conquered Paris without changing his look, his texts, or his language.

A number of other Québécois singers had tried to make it in France by imitating the French, to no avail (Thérien 2008-09). On Leclerc’s triumphant, if brief, return to Montreal in April 1951, his friend Jacques Normand presented his “famous Canadian *chansonnier*”<sup>3</sup>: “Allow

me to thank France and the French critics for having revealed Félix to us!” (Thérien 2004).

Leclerc would spend three years in France, tour forty cities, and blaze the trail for Québécois song. Upon his return to Montreal he was greeted by enormous crowds, banner headlines (“Our Félix is back”) and a big banquet at the Windsor Hotel, with the usual speeches. When it was his turn, he could not get a word out, but managed to whisper to Canetti: “What an injustice. I’m just the same as before. No one wanted anything to do with me. Why?” (Canetti 77).

As Canetti puts it: “How can a single man open thus the doors of a country? Félix Leclerc made the name of Canada ring in our ears and in our hearts, he made a living blood circulate that was no longer flowing in our veins. Thanks to him, from now on the “patriarch,” Québécois song has gained a rightful place here” (Canetti 77). Pascal Normand concludes: “An exile in Europe and the admiration of the French public were necessary for his compatriots to accept him in his full originality: in fact, he was a QUÉBÉCOIS at a time when it was fashionable to be either American or French. But Québécois? . . .” (Norman 58).

If La Bolduc is the mother of Québécois song, Leclerc is indeed its father. Since 1979, the ADISQ, the Quebec professional recording association, has been giving annual awards, the equivalent of the Grammy awards in the U.S. and the Victoires de la musique awards in France, that bear his name: the Félix. In a bow to the transatlantic nature of his career, since 1996 La Fondation Félix Leclerc, administered by his daughter, Nathalie, has been giving an annual Félix Leclerc Prize to both a Québécois and a French singer, encouraging the dynamics of this cross-cultural exchange (Prévost-Thomas gives a list of winners, 170-71).

Leclerc was a revelation for the French as well. For Charles Trenet, he is “the first singer-songwriter in years to bring something new, to bring poetry to French song” (Normand 43-45). The patriarch of French singer-songwriters, Georges Brassens (1921-1980) and the Belgian

superstar, Jacques Brel (1929-1978)--both among Canetti's numerous discoveries, by the way, along with Ferré, Vian, Higelin and more recently my own friends Jean-Marie Hummel and Liselotte Hamm--often said that it was Leclerc's success that encouraged them to give it a try (Thérien 2004), and in particular to go on stage with a simple guitar (Legras 123).

Such transatlantic inspirations are not uncommon. Though he had studied piano without much enthusiasm, Robert Charlebois (1944- ) was inspired upon hearing "Eau vive" sung by Guy Béart (1930- ): he found himself "in an enchanted world" (Normand 92), saved up his money and bought a guitar. Luc Plamondon (1942- ) was similarly moved by Aznavour: "When I listened to him, his songs transported me. . . . it's songs like that that I wanted to write. It's no doubt because Aznavour was the first French singer to write in everyday language, love songs in the language spoken day to day" (Normand 131). "Pleure un bon coup ma p'tite Véro" by Francis Lalanne (1958- ) was a decisive influence on Lynda Lemay (1966- ): "A revelation! I said to myself, Ah, it's possible to be intimate like that in one's lyrics" (Trodec 2003-2004, 104).<sup>4</sup>

Leclerc's success was not immediately followed by a flowering of urban singer-songwriters in Quebec; it was not fashionable and there were few appropriate venues for such artists. Raymond Lévesque (1928- ), for example, had to move to France for five years (1953-58) (Thérien 2008-09), and it's there that he wrote the justly famous "Quand les hommes vivront d'amour," inspired by the war in Algeria. It is considered a Québécois hymn alongside Gilles Vigneault's "Mon pays" and "Gens du pays." Lévesque's song has been recorded by over forty French and Québécois singers, from Eddie Constantine in 1954 to a hip-hop version by LMDS in 2000 (Prévost-Thomas 172), but most famously by Félix Leclerc, Gilles Vigneault and Robert Charlebois (1944- ) to end the opening show of the Superfrancofête, the International Festival of

Francophone Youth, on August 13, 1974 on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City before an audience of well over 120,000.<sup>5</sup>

In 1959, Raymond Lévesque, back from France, joined forces with Clémence DesRochers (1933- ), Jean-Pierre Ferland, Hervé Brousseau (1937- ) and Claude Lèveillée--later replaced by Jacques Blanchet (1931-1981)--to form a group baptized “Les Bozos” in homage to Félix Leclerc and his song, “Bozo.” They sang in the first *boîte à chansons* in Montreal, “Chez Bozo.” Within a few years there were some 250 such song clubs, not only in Montreal and Quebec City but elsewhere in the province. As Adréanne Lafond noted in *Le Nouveau Journal* in December, 1962, “the time has come for our artists to interpret French-Canadian compositions and to forget foreign composers and lyricists” (Normand 64).

Whereas in France singer-songwriters were often drowned out by the wave of “yé-yé,” rock’n’roll, and American song in the 1960s (Johnny Hallyday, Sylvie Vartan, les Chaussettes noires...), Québécois *chansonniers* soon became the standard-bearers for a whole series of social and political demands of a broad-based movement known as the Quiet Revolution (Thérien 2008-09), and played a major role in the “conscientization”--to borrow Paolo Freire’s term--of many Québécois: we Québécois have our own language, our own culture, our own *chanson*, and are not just some second-class cultural backwater of France! Nor should we be second-class citizens of a largely English-speaking Canada!

Why song? Because after June 22, 1960--the election of a liberal government after sixteen years of what is referred to as *la Grande Noirceur* (the long darkness) of the Duplessis regime--there was a cultural and political springtime. “We discovered,” Vigneault states, “that song could contribute to something besides entertaining us: to inform, then to convert.” And that, with a simple theme: “to name ourselves in the world, to name ourselves on the planet. We

didn't have a country, and we decided to name one [...]" (Vigneault 231), not a country turned in upon itself, but open to the world, as he sings: "From my big solitary country/I cry out before falling silent/To all men on Earth/ My home is your home" ["De mon grand pays solitaire/Je crie avant que de me taire/À tous les hommes de la terre/Ma maison c'est votre maison"] (from "Mon pays," 1965).<sup>6</sup>

The popularity of *chansonniers* like Jean-Pierre Ferland (1934- ), Vigneault, Claude Léveillée (1932- ), Claude Gauthier (1939- ), Raymond Lévesque, as well as of those who covered their songs (including Renée Claude [1939- ], Pauline Julien [1929-1988], Monique Leyrac [1928- ]) was such that it had a negative impact on the song clubs, which could no longer afford such stars and began to dwindle in number by the late 1960s (Thérien 2008-09).

Robert Charlebois began as a *chansonnier*, opening for Leclerc in 1962 at the ripe old age of seventeen. He grew up, as Robert Thérien puts it, with poetic French song in one ear and American rock'n'roll in the other. He returned from California after the 1967 World's Fair which had showcased Quebec to the nations assembled in Montreal, convinced that "the only way to advance is to establish a collaboration with the whole world",<sup>7</sup> and eager to try "something different" (Thérien 2008-09). He was working with the Quator de jazz libre de Québec when his friend, Louise Forestier (1943- ), suggested putting a show together. Yvon Deschamps, artistic director at the Théâtre de 4'Sous, needed something to close out his season, and tried to get them to do a traditional mix of songs, skits and monologues, which did not sit well with Charlebois. The frustrated producer, Paul Buissonneau, at the end of his patience, told him: "Mettez-vous-le dans le cul, votre hostie de show!" ("Shove it up your ass, your f\*ing show"). As a provocation, Charlebois seized on this as the title for his "anti-show," but since the newspapers would not print *hostie* (literally, "host," as in communion wafer: many Québécois swear words are of such

religious origin), it was shortened to “L’Osstidcho.” Presented on only three occasions over several months in varying venues (“Osstidcho” in May 1968, “Osstidcho Kingsize” in September and “Osstidcho meurt” in January 1969), it was nonetheless a musical and scenographic revolution which opened doors for other artists. According to Sylvain Cormier, it was “the most important show in the history of song in Quebec” (Cormier).<sup>8</sup> The song “Lindberg,” a duo between Charlebois and Louise Forestier, was the first song by a *chansonnier* to be Number One on the Québécois charts, in January 1969 (Thérien 2008-09). This song and others, like “California” and “La marche du président,” used a specifically Québécois language, *joual*, spoken by working-class Québécois, marginalized by both the French-speaking elite and the anglophone ruling class, but able to contribute to defining a Québécois cultural identity. This amounted to a statement of independence from the clergy as well as from forces of cultural colonization, be they from France, the U.S., or the anglophone majority in Canada. As Cécile Prévost-Thomas puts it, Charlebois breathed into Québécois song what it needed to transcend the boundaries of its own esthetics and become audacious on the world stage (Prévost-Thomas 174).

Both Charlebois and Louise Forestier would go on to have considerable success in Europe. In July 1968, Charlebois represented Canada at the Festival International de la chanson française in Spa, Belgium, where he won first prize for interpretation with “California” (Normand 92). With “Lindberg” number one on the charts in France, Belgium, and Switzerland, director Bruno Coquatrix invited Charlebois to L’Olympia, the top music-hall in Paris, in April 1969, to open for Georgette Plana--a bad idea: her audience was totally inappropriate for the Québécois phenomenon. Things went badly: Charlebois ended up smashing a drum set and throwing it into the audience, much to the dismay of a Québécois critic: “And to say it’s *that* that

represents us abroad!”<sup>9</sup>--only to return in triumph in 1972 to an Olympia sold out weeks in advance (Normand 96).

If French singers had toured successfully in Quebec since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>10</sup> it had been an almost entirely one-way street until Felix Leclerc arrived in 1950. The Montreal singer Guylaine Guy was female singer of the year in 1956 and played L’Olympia the next year. Claude Léveillée wrote some songs for Piaf--she had come to see him at “Les Bozos” in 1959 and invited him to Paris--, Jean-Pierre Ferland had moderate success (Thérien 2008-09), but Gilles Vigneault showed real staying power, without changing anything about his appearance, music or language to fit the expectations or fashions in Paris, Brussels, or Geneva. Both Charlebois and Diane Dufresne became stars in France during the 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

One of the engines driving transatlantic recognition in both directions in the ensuing years was the phenomenal success of musical comedies written by the Québécois Luc Plamondon<sup>12</sup>, in collaboration with French composers: *Starmania*, at the request of Michel Berger, and then *Notre-Dame de Paris* with Richard Cocciante. Fabienne Thibeault, Diane Dufresne, Isabelle Boulay, Garou, Daniel Lavoie (actually from Manitoba, but now based in Quebec) and Natasha Saint-Pier became household names in France. Isabelle Boulay (1972- ), for example, after singing the role of the *serveuse automate* in *Starmania* some 350 times in Europe, brought out her second album, produced in France by Olivier Bloch-Lainé, was signed by French label V2, opened for Serge Lama at L’Olympia in 1999, opened the next year for Francis Cabrel throughout France as well as at L’Olympia, had her own show at L’Olympia and then her consecration at the much larger Zénith, with a new album, *Mieux qu’ici-bas*, produced by Benjamin Biolay. The album sold over two million copies. She has continued from success to success, with multiple Félix and Victoires de la musique awards, on both sides of the Atlantic.

The greatest commercial success, of course, has been that of Céline Dion, in both French and English. After an early French album (covers of songs written by Luc Plamondon), and a very successful *1 Fille et 4 types* (number one in Canada, Quebec and France, where it was certified double platinum), Dion has turned mostly to French singer-songwriter, Jean-Jacques Goldman, who wrote and composed the best-selling *D'eux* French album, with extraordinary results. She has won innumerable awards in both English and French, and sold over 200 million albums worldwide. She was even awarded the French *Légion d'honneur* in May 2008. Although Dion's French releases, thanks to Goldman, are often seen to have more credibility than her English albums, for the French public, Québécois song has sometimes been reduced, as it were, to these outstanding "voices,"<sup>13</sup> such that the wealth of creative talent in Quebec is still barely known in France.

There have been, however, other notable Franco-Québécois collaborations. Pauline Julien (1928-1998), who began her singing career in Paris cabarets, developed a close friendship with French singer-songwriter, Anne Sylvestre (1934- ) and frequently sang her songs. Anne returned the compliment with a song addressed to Pauline, "Dis-moi, Pauline," including this line: "The only good kisses come from Quebec" ["Il n'est bon bec que de Québec"] (Hidalgo 117). With the help of Québécoise poet and director Denise Boucher, they put together a theatrical show, *Gémeaux croisés*, in which they sang their own or one another's songs. Created in Belgium in November 1997, the show toured France and Quebec for two years to rave reviews. [I remember driving from Boston to Montreal to see it!]

Following the 2005 hurricanes, Zachary Richard (1950-)--originally from Louisiana but adopted, like Daniel Lavoie, by Quebec--collaborated with French superstar, Francis Cabrel (1953- ), on a benefit concert in Paris in November of that year. One of the fruits of the concert

was a musical one, “La promesse cassée,” co-written by the two artists, with all proceeds going to support New Orleans artists devastated by the storms ([www.zacharyrichard.com/](http://www.zacharyrichard.com/)). Richard’s rendition of the traditional tune from Louisiana, “Travailler, c’est trop dur,” made it a French standard.<sup>14</sup>

Over the years some well-known French singers like Aznavour and Cabrel have also regularly toured Quebec. They can arrive, do a couple of interviews, give a few concerts, and be quite successful. Sixty years after starting his career in Quebec, Aznavour returned for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Quebec City and sang for over 100,000 people on the Plains of Abraham on July 6, 2008. Going in the other direction has been harder, requiring both a local structure of support, an extended stay, and repeated trips to really make an impact. Relatively few Québécois artists have managed, like Leclerc and Vigneault, to pull it off. Over the last fifteen or twenty years, however, there have been a number of Québécois artists with impressive French and, indeed, European careers. Often, they have been helped by French “parrains” (godfathers) who take them under their wing: Charles Aznavour for Linda Lemay; Jean-Jacques Goldman and, earlier, Eddy Marney for Céline Dion (at least for her French-language career!); Francis Cabrel for Isabelle Boulay; Pascal Obispo (1965- ) for Natasha Saint-Pier (1981- ), from New Brunswick... (Trodec, “Exclaim”, 142).

There are, in addition, a number of “transatlantic” singers who are worth mentioning, that is, those who started or developed their career on the *other* francophone side of the Atlantic. We’ve mentioned Aznavour and Pauline Julien. The Belgian diva, Lara Fabian, found her first success in Quebec in 1991 with a platinum record and many awards, before returning to Belgium in 1997 with increasing success. By 1999 she had sold six million records in Europe, and Polydor decided to republish her earlier records from Quebec, as well. Serge Lama, too, had his

first success in Quebec. Others move back and forth. Nicolas Peyrac returned to France after fifteen years in Quebec and toured France in spring 2009 with his new album, his seventeenth, *Case de départ*, having returned not only to his country but to the acoustic guitar of his beginnings.<sup>15</sup> Michel Rivard<sup>16</sup>, though based in Quebec, stayed on in Belgium after a European tour with his classic group, Beau Dommage, writing ten songs in a couple of months: “it’s as if I discovered a new style there” (Normand 159). After a final tour in France, the group dissolved, Rivard again stayed behind, with material help, including housing, from Maxime LeForestier, with whom he collaborated (including the song “Bille de verre”)<sup>17</sup>, but found the row tough to hoe: a month-long show in Paris ended up *costing* him \$10,000. Vigneault and Pauline Julien encouraged him, but told him it would take ten years to really penetrate the French market. As Rivard told Pascal Normand:

there it’s a sort of jungle and when one doesn’t want to give in to facility, you have to expect that. . . . There are so many people there who want to sing, there are so many shows to see. . . . I think that if you do not agree to make that kind of investment, you won’t find your place . . . unless you arrive by chance with a "hit" that is going to be played everywhere and persuade a producer to take the risk of renting a venue, paying for the musicians and all the PR. (Normand 160)<sup>18</sup>

Among the major contributors to exchanges between Quebec and Europe, over the last couple of decades, in particular, have been the numerous festivals on both side of the Atlantic. Some have established specific transatlantic collaborations. Quebec provided the example over forty years ago with the Festival d’été de Québec. The Coup de cœur francophone in Montreal celebrated its twenty-second edition in 2008. Over the years it has developed a network of, now, thirty-six cities across Canada in addition to the festival proper in Montreal, allowing artists to

constitute a tour instead of a being limited to single venue.<sup>19</sup> Jean-Pierre Foulquier was so impressed with the Quebec festivals that he started Les FrancoFolies de La Rochelle in 1985: “If they can do it, we can too!” (<http://www.francofolies.fr/accueil/index.html>). Sister festivals in Spa, Belgium (<http://www.francofolies.be/>) and Montreal ([http://www.francofolies.com/Francos2008/accueil\\_en.aspx](http://www.francofolies.com/Francos2008/accueil_en.aspx)) have since developed. The 20<sup>th</sup> edition of the FrancoFolies de Montréal in 2008 was specifically centered on *Nouvelles scènes du Québec et de France*, bringing together established and up-and-coming artists from both countries. French artists were paired with Québécois counterparts. Some twenty-five French singers or groups were invited to celebrate and strengthen transatlantic exchanges, which in recent years have rather favored the Québécois.

“Les Déferlantes francophones” festival ([www.deferlantes-francophones.com/2008/index2.html](http://www.deferlantes-francophones.com/2008/index2.html)) has promoted North American francophone artists--mostly from Quebec, but also New Brunswick, Manitoba or Louisiana--for the past eleven years in Cap Breton on the French coast. Unfortunately, given the economic situation on both sides of the ocean, the founding director, Maurice Segall, negotiated a one-year hiatus, suspending the festival for summer 2009 while maintaining occasional concerts throughout the year, “Les Quatre Saisons”.<sup>20</sup> The July 2008 Festival Chansons de Parole in Barjac ([www.chansonsdeparole.com/](http://www.chansonsdeparole.com/)) was a collective homage to Quebec by a varied assortment of French and Québécois artists, notably Anne Sylvestre singing songs by Pauline Julien.

Other festivals have sprung up in many locations in both France and Quebec and have had a major impact on the transatlantic careers of several artists. Two examples will illustrate the process. In 1989, Linda Lemay (1966- ) won the song contest at the Festival International de la Chanson de Granby ([www.ficg.qc.ca/](http://www.ficg.qc.ca/)), which held its fortieth edition in 2008. Her award

included an opening act for Claude Lèveillée at a festival in St. Malo on the French coast, “Québec chante à St. Malo” (now defunct, unfortunately), and a workshop with French singer-songwriter, Romain Didier (1949- ) in Digne. Totally unknown in France, she wowed the crowd and the press: a lead article in *Ouest France* was entitled “Lynda Lemay triomphe” (Troadec, 2004, 87).<sup>21</sup> Her second French success was at the FrancoFolies de la Rochelle in July 1995, where she won the Prix du Sentier des Halles, a five-night engagement in the well-known Paris song club for May 1996. In April 1996 she also won two prizes at yet another festival, Le Tremplin de la Chanson des Hauts de Seine, just outside Paris. Invited in July 1996 to the famous Montreux Jazz Festival for an homage to Charles Trenet<sup>22</sup>, she “blew away” Trenet, Aznavour and Gérard Davoust who sought her out to congratulate her. Davoust became her publisher, and Aznavour took her under his wing, advised her on her third album, and gave her support he has given no other artist, praising her in interviews and writing a “blurb” for her new album, recorded in France: “Original ideas, fertile and very personal imagination, writing of rare quality, a special personality, full of freshness. Astonishing, surprising, exceptional! Listen to her.” Her French supporters rented L’Européen in Paris for two months in November-December 1998; largely through word of mouth, the final weeks were completely sold out. Invited by twenty-eight promoters for the following fall, all her shows sold out before the posters even went up. Her 2000 album sold over half a million copies, and she did over one hundred concerts in France in 2002-2003. “In fact,” she says, “my credibility came by way of France” (105). She was back in France in spring 2009 for twenty-five concerts, including four at the legendary Olympia where she has sung some forty times. Michel Troadec calls her a “transatlantic woman. Québécois in her flesh, her voice, her song. French in her language, her career, her loves” (86).

A more recent arrival, Pierre Lapointe (1981-) also got his start by winning first prize at Granby in 2001. He sang in France each of the next three years, as well as at the Festival Pully Lavaux in Switzerland (Prix du Jury). His Prix Félix Leclerc at the 2004 FrancoFolies de Montréal assured him of a trip back to France in 2005. In May of that year he won the Prix Coup de Cœur de l'Académie Charles-Cros, was a hit at the "Alors chante..." Festival in Montauban, then won the Grand Prix du Disque in November for his self-titled album, and, back in Quebec, no fewer than five Félix awards. In April 2007 he sang at the major Printemps de Bourges festival as well as at La Cigale in Paris, then won the Prix Rapsat-Lelièvre, a specifically transatlantic prize awarded each year to a Belgian singer at the FrancoFolies de Montréal and to a Québécois singer at the sister festival in Spa. It is clear that contests, prizes, and festivals with transatlantic connections are playing a major role in artists' becoming known and even garnering major transatlantic success.

There are also some new structures in place, like the Québécois label, Exclaim--now known as Archambault Musique--established in Paris in 2005. It is a subsidiary of a major international communications conglomerate, Québecor. The director, Hervé Deplasse, with whom I met at length, sees his role as one of developing Québécois artists in Europe over the long term: distribution, promotion, accompaniment. Among their artists: Florence K, Dumas, Zachary Richard (Québécois by adoption), as well as a few French or even Franco-Swiss artists like Edouard Desyon. One of the groups they represent illustrates another recent phenomenon. When Les Cowboys fringants, a lively group marrying traditional Québécois folk and country music sounds with very up-to-date social and political concerns, first arrived in Paris in April 2004 after several years of growing notoriety back in Quebec, they played--to their astonishment--to a packed house at L'Elysée Montmartre, with the entire (largely French)

audience singing along in *québécois*. It seems they were already known both through their web site ([www.cowboysfringants.com](http://www.cowboysfringants.com)), records brought back to France by tourists, and through email and phone networking among their French/European fans, known as “Cousins fringants,” who can pretty much assure a full house anywhere by sharing rides, housing, etc. (Lévesque 31). As I write they have just added a third show in Paris (February 2009). One interesting footnote: one of their members, Jérôme Dupras, stated in an interview about their current record and tour, *L’Expédition*: “we have managed to *erase our Canadian side*, without disowning it of course, and to offer something homogeneous and universal, at least in the choice of texts” [...] (Supervielle 17, emphasis mine). This seems to fly in the face of what the sole woman in the group, Marie-Annick Lépine (also a solo artist with Exclaim), has said in another recent interview: “[...] I love shows that make me travel, that show me cultures other than my own” (Lévesque 31). Perhaps they’ll be able to do both...

It’s true that Céline Dion has erased any trace of a Québécois accent, and her French records (after her early collaboration with Eddy Marney), like many of Isabelle Boulay’s, are essentially “made in France” without much Québécois residue. Québécois singer-songwriter Pierre Lapointe, too, is sometimes criticized for not singing in *québécois*, preferring what he calls “normative French” (Legras 125-27). There are still some kinks to be ironed out in the question of cultural “identity” as song, like many other things, becomes more transatlantic and transcultural. Could it be that occasionally Québécois song *is* the same old French song? Stay tuned.

[My thanks to Robert Thérien, Hélène Hazéra, Cécile Prévost-Thomas, Denis Mouton, Hervé Deplasse, Maurice Segall, and others whose erudition, suggestions and advice proved invaluable.]

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 1845 La Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste chose “A la claire fontaine” as the national hymn; it was not replaced until July 1, 1980 by “O Canada” by Calixte Lavallée and Adolphe-Basile Routhier (Norman 25).

<sup>2</sup> All translations from the French are mine.

<sup>3</sup> In Quebec, a *chansonnier* is a singer-songwriter, whereas in France the term designates, typically, a satirical or humorous monologist, a kind of stand-up comic.

<sup>4</sup> Serge Lama, who invited Lemay to open for one of his concerts at the festival Chorus des Hauts de Seine in April 1996 as she was just beginning her career in France, there’s a “before” and an “after” Lemay: “She arrived and smashed the barriers of modesty that certain women have. She took off the locks. Many women recognized themselves in Aznavour’s songs. Today, they recognize themselves in what Lynda sings because she expresses exactly what women are thinking” (Trodec 2004, 94).

<sup>5</sup> The whole show is captured on the classic double album, *J’ai vu le loup, le renard, le lion*. Years later, they still didn’t know which of them was the wolf, which the fox, which the lion! (Vigneault 235)

<sup>6</sup> It’s worth noting that Vigneault had heard Leclerc sing at the seminary in Rimouski back in 1948 and had said to himself that he hoped one day to write and sing songs like that (Vigneault 229).

<sup>7</sup> *Perspective*, 9 novembre 1968, by Denise Boucher, cited by Normand 93.

<sup>8</sup> My friend, Bruno Roy, poet, novelist and essayist, has recently published an entire book analyzing the show and its importance: *L’Osstidcho ou le désordre libérateur*. Montreal. XYZ. 2008.

---

<sup>9</sup> Lucien Rioux, *Robert Charlebois*, collection “Poésie et chansons”, Seghers, 1973, cited by Norman, 96.

<sup>10</sup> Notably, in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Yvette Guilbert, the libertine, and Théodore Botrel, the ultra-reactionary. Many French stars sang in Montreal, in particular, during the 1950’s and 1960’s (Hélène Hazéra, in an email notation to the author, February 2, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Desjardins, on the other hand, although successful for a number of years, was unceremoniously dumped by his French record company when his latest record didn’t meet sales expectations (Desjardins). He is held in high esteem by critics and fellow songwriters: Cabrel sang “Quand j’aime une fois j’aime pour toujours” on a compilation--something he never did for anybody; Renaud fought for his recognition in France. His original career between song and documentary filmmaking marked him as an outsider (Hélène Hazéra, in an email notation to the author, 2 February, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Luc Plamondon on the Quebec-France connection: “Even in France, they wonder how it is that French song is created in Quebec [...] I was asked why the two most important francophone singers (Diane [Dufresne] and Robert Charlebois) were Québécois. In twenty years, Québécois song has gone from the Middle Ages to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. . . . I don’t think there are authors in France whose father and grandfather didn’t even know how to write . . . which is my case. We aren’t crushed by our culture, but we have the instinct for the beautiful, for the discovery of things which have value, a creative instinct” (Normand 137).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Rudent, Catherine, « La Télévision française et les 'voix québécoises' populaires: le trompe-l’œil d’un étiquetage médiatique », *Intersections. Canadian Journal of Music/Revue canadienne de musique*, 27.1 (2006) 75-99, cited by Prévost-Thomas 167.

<sup>14</sup> Hélène Hazéra, in an email notation to the author, 2 February, 2009.

---

<sup>15</sup> Interview on the “Cinq dernières minutes” segment of the 1pm *Journal télévisée*, France 2, 30 January, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. a hilarious video by Rivard, not without relevance here:

<http://fr.youtube.com/watch?v=q3zBPnIYavI>

<sup>17</sup> My friend Denis Mouton points out that Rivard plays a similarly supportive role for Pierre Barouh every time he comes to Quebec, and often joins him on stage.

<sup>18</sup> Fabienne Thibeault had better luck, but recognized it for what it was. Her comparison between Paris and Quebec is worth noting: “Over there, once you’re accepted, it’s less hard than here where you always have to be absolutely the best. Because of the size of the population, in Europe, there’s room for almost everyone who’s ready to work. Here they ask you to be different each year, but, at the same time, not to change. . . . Still, in Paris, it’s *Starmania* that opened doors for me. The critics were more favorable to the Québécois than to the French: maybe we’re more ‘musical’ than they are!” (Normand 156).

<sup>19</sup> The festival I organized in the Boston area from 1993 through 1998, “L’Air du temps,” changed its dates from March to November to collaborate with the Coup de cœur in Montreal and share certain artists.

<sup>20</sup> Conversation with the author, 22 January, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Article by Michel Troadec, author of the in-depth “Chorusgraphie” of Lemay which I follow here, indicating pages parenthetically.

---

## Works Cited

- Blain, François. "Le baromètre du temps qui passe." *Chorus* 64 (été 2008): 137-44.
- Canetti, Jacques. *Mes 50 ans de chansons françaises*. Paris: Flammarion, 2008.
- Cormier, Sylvain. "L'Osstidcho—Le mythe retrouvé." *Le Devoir* (8-9 février 2003). Web. 29 January 2009. <<http://www.ledevoir.com/2003/02/08/20096.html>>.
- Desjardins, Richard. "Le livre de ma vie." *Chorus* 64 (été 2008): 140-41.
- Deplasse, Hervé. Conversation with author. Disques Archambault, Paris. 19 January 2009.
- Hazéra, Hélène. Conversation with author. Radio-France. 19 January 2009.
- Hidalgo, Fred. "Je me souviens..." *Chorus* 64 (été 2008): 116-17.
- Legras, Marc. "Chanter au Québec." *Chorus* 64 (été 2008): 118-34.
- Normand, Pascal. *La Chanson québécoise: Miroir d'un peuple*. Montréal: Editions France-Amérique, 1981.
- Prévost-Thomas, Cécile. "Céline, Isabelle, Lynda, Pierre et les autres?: Les raisons du succès international d'une certaine chanson québécoise." In *A la rencontre d'un Québec qui bouge: Introduction générale au Québec*. Ed. Robert Laliberté. Paris: Les éditions du CTHS, 2009. 167-86.
- Roy, Raoul. *Le Chant de l'alouette. Sainte-Foy, Québec: Les Presses de l'Université de Laval and Ici Radio-Canada, 1969.*

---

Sylvain, Jean-Paul. *Félix Leclerc*. Montréal. Editions de l'Homme, 1968. As cited in Normand, 43-45.

Supervielle, Thierry. "Les Cowboys fringants: L'Expédition verte." *XRoads* (décembre 2008): 16-17.

Thérien, Robert. *Félix Leclerc: Chansons perdues, chansons retrouvées*. CD booklet. Expériences, 2004.

---. Personal emails to author. December 2008-January 2009.

Trodec, Michel. "Exclaim, un label québécois en France." *Chorus* 64 (été 2008): 142.

---. "Lynda Lemay: La scène est son royaume." *Chorus* 46 (hiver 2003-04): 86-108.

Vigneault, Gilles. "La Chanson québécoise, c'est le miroir de poche qui nous a permis de nous regarder en face." Interview with Jean Sarrazin. In *Dossier Québec*. Ed. Jean Sarrazin. Paris: Stock, 1979. 223-38.

Weber, Albert. "Gaële: Cockpit franco-québécois." *Chorus* 64 (été 2008): 156.

<sup>22</sup> Denis Mouton notes that it was a Québécois, Gilbert Rozon, who brought Trenet, as it were, out of retirement, persuaded him to sing and record again, and became his last impresario (email to the author).