

3 Quebecois 3

It's foot-tapping in all directions for music of the Canadian province. Tony Montague profiles three of the current hot outfits.



Photo: Stephane Najman

Le Vent Du Nord

It seems an unlikely place to tap the pulse of roots music in Quebec – a park wedged between the Trans-Canada Highway and the headquarters of Vancouver's Hell's Angels. But Maillardville is the only part of the city settled by pioneering Quebecois – nuns, lumberjacks, mill-workers – and where every year in March the Festival du Bois is held in a large heated tent.

And on reflection, it's not so hard to imagine the combined musicians of Le Vent Du Nord, Les Chauffeurs à Pied, and Bon Débarras – this year's three headliners – pulling off the highway in formation on gleaming Harley Davidsons with their instruments strapped to the back seat, and pausing on their way to admire the charming water-feature in the Angels' front yard, with its dragons, skulls, and small but perfect warthog's head.

For Le Vent Du Nord in particular it's been a wild ride in the fast lane. Earlier in the month the band played at Womad fes-

tivals in Adelaide, Australia and New Plymouth, New Zealand, and in February they were south of the line again to perform at Womad in Santiago, Chile. The big gigs highlight their increasing global reach and popularity.

"We haven't often been in the southern hemisphere," says hurdy-gurdy and keyboards player Nicolas Boulgerice, "and I think something interesting opened up for us in Santiago. We're starting to realise the huge possibilities of playing in Latin America, where there's a lot of interest in all kinds of music that gets people dancing. They're very curious, and really connect with music from Quebec."

The band has become a quintet with the addition of fiddler André Brunet – formerly with La Bottine Souriante and Kevin Burke's Celtic Fiddle Festival, and most recently with the trio De Temps Antan. The genial Brunet is a natural fit for Le Vent Du Nord, part of the same family in every sense. He joins fellow fiddler and foot-per-

cussionist Olivier Demers, guitarist and mandola player Simon Beaudry, and his own younger brother, accordionist and bassist Réjean Brunet (a shoo-in for any dramatisation of *The Three Musketeers*).

"For family reasons De Temps Antan had to cut back drastically on touring," says André. "But I can't afford to do that. For me music is a full-time occupation. My goal is to play around 100 shows a year, like Le Vent Du Nord. So I asked Geneviève [the agent for both bands, and Nicolas' partner] if they would be interested in acquiring a fifth member."

"We loved the idea," Olivier chips in. "I've been talking for some time about having another melody player and foot-percussionist. My ankles are starting to weaken a bit after all these years. André is a multi-instrumentalist – he also plays piano and guitar. He's the crème de la crème of musicians in Quebec, super positive and dynamic, and we share the same way of looking at things."

Rewind a few hours to Le Vent du Nord performing live. André and Olivier sit at opposite sides of the stage by the speakers, drumming their feet in sync while trading phrases on a reel, then stand up and head towards each other, meeting front and centre to face-off like friendly adversaries. Then André is in another of these musical dialogues with his sibling Réjean on accordion. Their moves are cleverly choreographed without feeling over-produced – a playful expression of the close relations in the band.

As a quintet everything about Le Vent Du Nord – sonic range, arrangements, vocal harmonies, visual impact, theatrics, and feelgood factor – is cranked up a significant notch. The humour too. They like occasionally hamming things up. André leads a brief outbreak of collective pogoing, and at one point Nicolas stands and wields his vielle like some ancient Telecaster to play a wailing, droning solo with all the grimaces and postures of a metal guitarist.

The Brunets have been making music together since they were young boys growing up in a village near the US border, twenty minutes from Plattsburg, New York. "There were uncles who played fiddle and

accordeon and who sang – on our dad's side in particular," says Réjean. "When André was ten he decided to pick up the fiddle. I was already playing the organ and learned piano to accompany him. The accordeon came a bit later. Pretty much as soon as we started to play traditional music we were in a duo together as Les Frères Brunet, generation 2 – our dad and uncle were generation 1. We put out three albums, then André joined La Bottine and I joined [quintet] La Volée de Castors."

The brothers were last seen together in the ironically-named outfit Solo – a seven-piece folk supergroup formed from the combined membership of Le Vent Du Nord and De Temps Antan. It includes another pair of siblings – Simon and Eric Beaudry, both of them guitarists, bouzouki players, and lead singers. The Solo project toured widely in 2017, performing material never previously released by either of the two bands. In December they went into the studio to cut the perversely-titled *Notre Album Solo*.

"The choreography and concept by Michel Faubert was based on that irony," says Olivier. "Each musician pretended it was his own solo project and that the others were accompanying him. Michel wanted to portray a kind of society where everybody wants to be the one with the solution, and forgets that they're part of a group – called society." Laughs all around.

Notre Album Solo will be released in early July at the Chants de Vieilles festival, and Le Vent Du Nord are hard at work creating material for their own next album. The band goes into the studio in September as a quintet for the first time. "We'll arrange and play all the new pieces in concert beforehand to give them a thorough road-testing," says Réjean. "We don't want to be working things out while in the recording process."

The rise of Le Vent Du Nord to become one of the top roots music bands anywhere reflects the vitality of the traditional and trad-based scene in Quebec. The situation isn't so rosy, however, when it comes to getting gigs back home. Unlike most of Anglo-Celtic Canada, Quebec lacks a strong network of folk clubs. Bands have to play in theatres and halls where they're in competition with artists from all the other performing arts, from stand-up comedy to circus. Groups need to display an exceptional calibre of musicianship and stagecraft.

Cue Les Chauffeurs à Pieds from Quebec City – whose name means both 'The Foot-warmers' and 'The Chauffeurs-on-foot'.

"As for the first sense, well, two of us are foot-percussionists and when people dance, their feet heat up," says Antoine Gauthier, founder of Les Chauffeurs, who have released eight albums. "That's why we have 'pieds' in the plural. As for the second, when we started out we were in our late teens and always had to ask people to take us to our out-of-town gigs, as you can't rent a car til you're twenty-five in Quebec!"

The repertoire of Les Chauffeurs is a mix of traditional songs, particularly chansons à répondre, and new songs in a broadly folk and usually humorous vein.

Traditional instrumental sets and tunes alternate with tunes composed by band members. In addition to music, their most recent album *De Ses Couteaux Microscopiques* features environmental soundscapes – the forest, a river, passing trains – as well as bursts of Antoine's spontaneous, free-association poetry.

The variety of sonic textures is impressive. Like the Brunet brothers, all the Chauffeurs are multi-instrumentalists, which gives them a huge palette of colours. Antoine plays fiddle and mandolin and drums his feet; Louis-Simon Lemieux likewise is a foot-percussionist, hot fiddler and harmonica ace; Olivier Soucy is a guitarist, fiddler, pianist and more; and Benoit Fortier plays various recorders and whistles, electric bass, piano, harmonica, and French horn. Like the members of Le Vent du Nord all are singers.

"We're constantly on the look-out for new sounds, and effects. "We love playing with these things. And there's an influence from classical music, as Benoit is conservatory-trained and brings new types of chords, modes, and combinations. It gives us a much better understanding of music, one that we like to explore. Traditional music for us is the base material that enables us to create without limitations. It's the language we know and love best, but we see it as a tool to express in a very free way whatever we have to say."

Les Chauffeurs' love of the old tunes doesn't mean approaching their arrangement with a po-faced reverence – far from it on the evidence of *Gigue Des Amoureux* [The Lovers' Tune] from their third album *III*, a jaunty tune from the repertoire of past-master fiddler Isidore Soucy [1899-1963]. The instrumentation listed in the sleeve notes includes *cris de jouissance*, or cries of sexual delight. Credited to a certain Ève Libido, they accompany the music in the background – subtly at first, then less so. "At first I wanted to bring a professional sex worker into the studio, but that didn't get approval from the lads because it was felt she probably wouldn't be able

to keep closely to the beat. So we asked a musician friend to help out, and she did a really fine job with the rhythm."

Unlike Le Vent du Nord, Les Chauffeurs are not endlessly on tour. All members that – for most of the year – restrict them to performing locally and on weekends. Olivier teaches, Benoit has several other musical projects, Louis-Simon owns the recording studio where Les Chauffeurs' albums are recorded on their Scorbut [scurvy] label. And for the past nine years Antoine has worked full-time as director of the grandly-titled Quebecois Council of Living Heritage [CQPV], which brings together ninety organisations, including thirty-three festivals. He's the right man to ask about the current state of homegrown music in Quebec.

"The CQPV is involved in its promotion through several activities. We organise things like training and workshops on fiddle or accordeon or traditional song, and publish *The Traditions Of Quebec In Numbers*, a series of socio-economic studies. We're very active at UNESCO in support of the Convention For The Safeguarding Of The Intangible Cultural Heritage. There's been a steady increase in the number of traditional music festivals in Quebec, but just as we don't have folk clubs so we don't really have folk festivals on the same model as the rest of North America with a broad spectrum of different genres."

Antoine is upbeat about the future, despite the all-too-familiar challenges. "Plenty of young people are getting into the traditions, and there are lots of music camps happening. But there's no financial support from government at any level, and we have an ongoing problem getting schools and colleges to include our living tradition in their curricula and the courses they offer. There's very little coverage on the radio. We're working hard to change that but, all things considered, the music is in pretty good shape now."

Les Chauffeurs à Pieds



More than forty years since the first renewal of popular interest in traditional music, fronted by bands such as La Bottine Souriante and Le Réve du Diable, the roots scene in Quebec has acquired the maturity to experiment and push constantly at boundaries of genre and style.

The artists of Montreal-based trio Bon Débarras have carved out a unique place for themselves with witty and verbally nimble songs, sharp musicianship, smart arrangements, and more than a touch of the variety show.

"I was born into a family of musicians, singers, storytellers, and step dancers and I fell into traditional music when I was a small kid," says Dominique Desrochers, who writes and sings, plays various instruments, and is an agile step dancer, or *gigueur*. "Like every teen I got into other stuff later – rock, heavy metal, and so on – but I also really connected with traditional gigue. I was in folklore ensembles and it's there I had my first classes in gigue from masters. At the same time I did international dances, and the ones that grabbed me the most involved using the body as a percussion instrument – such as South African gumboot dancing. At the same time I developed a career as a musician."

The different strands of Dominique's art as a performer came together after co-founding Bon Débarras [Good Riddance] with Jean-François Dumas ten years ago. A fellow multi-instrumentalist and songwriter, Jean-François picked up his skills in the course of travelling the world with his guitar for many years, entertaining people – and above all learning. "I was interested in every culture and tradition I encountered. Quebecois music came later. I started to play mandolin, then picked up banjo. I'd also heard Alain Lamontagne play harmonica when I was thirteen and it marked me for life. I longed to play like him and to tap my feet like a madman. Like Dominique I'm also influenced by American folk, Cajun, and country."

Bon Débarras's self-titled debut in 2009 was nominated for an ADISQ – the big music award in Quebec. They followed up in 2013 with *Errance*, moving more towards their own compositions. Fiddle and viola player Marie-Pierre Lecault joined three years ago to replace bassist Cédric Dind-Lavoie, adding a woman's voice to the singing and injecting new drive into the trio's sound. "I was born into a family of musicians, and I've been playing violin since I was two and majored in classical violin up to university. But at the same time I played traditional music."

La Grondeuse A Fille/Reel Bipolaire, the folk-instrumental set that opens Bon Débarras's third album *En Panne De Silence*, showcases Marie-Pierre's supple and spirited fiddling. She also sings lead on the hilarious *Rill Pour Rire* – an urban lowlife ditty that was a big hit forty years ago. You don't need to speak French to enjoy the rhymes and rhythms of this brilliant put-down of an aspiring bed companion. "The guys wanted to cover it for a long time but it needed a female interpreter," she says. "It's hard to see a man doing it! As



Bon Débarras

soon as I joined they asked if I was interested. We play it in a stripped-down acoustic way with repeating patterns. It's the only song on which I sing the lead."

Dominique contributes four compositions, and commands a range of different idioms from rural folk to slam poetry. "I dived into traditional music and research into songwriting. I put together a step-dancing spectacle for a dance company, and wrote a show around the poetry of Gaston Miron [1928-96], which made me want to work with that kind of popular language and approach. I like urban music a lot, and slam attracted me in particular. There's a strong community in Montreal."

"So I wrote some 'portraits', like *All You Can Beat* – the psychological sketch of a *tapageur* [roisterer] or step-dancer, all of it flavoured with traditional music and fragments of text. Bon Débarras is very percussive – as much in our words as our music. For the first album we took traditional texts from the archives and gave them new arrangements. Little by little we added our own material. Jean-François and I have our own distinctive styles, ways of talking, and delivery of a song, which gives colour to our show. We like playing with that."

Jean-François's contribution *Le Théâtre De La Ville* is a beautifully crafted short-story-in-song – a tale of childhood trauma. "It's something that happened to me, but I didn't want to put it in the first person. Everything in the song is true. I went back to the theatre and met the technicians who had worked there. They knew what I experienced, and told me that a child died there, and the theatre had a ghost – which I hadn't known at the time."

How do such relatively long, word-rich songs go over with English-speaking audiences? "We play a lot for Anglophones in the US and Canada, and came to the UK in 2014 for three weeks," says Jean-François. "People may not understand all the words but they appreciate the rhythmic aspects and recognise the Anglo-Celtic side of our music. It's in the jigs and reels of course, but there are other close links and resonances – those between Dominique's danc-

ing and English clogging for instance."

With solo dance and body percussion, frequent instrumental changes, and of course the audience animation that's such a strong feature of Quebecois bands, Bon Débarras's live performance carries echoes of the old-time variety show. "The first thing that our US agent said to me when we met was, 'there's something about the circus in what you do'," recalls Jean-François.

Le Vent Du Nord, Les Chauffeurs A Pieds, and Bon Débarras embrace a growing awareness and respect for North America's First Nations and their culture. Le Vent Du Nord were inspired to write *La Marche Des Iroquois* for their current album *Têtu*; Les Chauffeurs' 400-km canoe trip downriver for the book and album *De Ses Couteaux Microscopiques* is interspersed with reference and allusion to 'les autochtones' and their knowledge of the natural world; and Bon Débarras end *En Panne De Silence* with *Makushami/Nitassinan*, a traditional dance of the Innu or Montagnais from north-east Quebec.

"Makushami is a gathering, a feast and celebration to the rhythm of the Innu's traditional drum the *teueikan*, and Nitassinan means 'our land' in Innu-aimun," explains Jean-François. "We've added a reel and some *turlutte* [mouth music] to it. I've got a job outside of Bon Débarras, working for Wapikomi Mobile, an organisation that brings cinema to autochtone communities. It's a great project and has taken me all over Quebec – which is home to eleven First Nations. Dominique has also been to these communities, and it made us want to write a song as a homage. Quebecois folk and roots music is often identified with particular places and regions, and there's a nationalistic side to that. We want to see things from a wider perspective, and draw attention to the people who were here so long before us and that we love so much."

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