

Living by the Music: Cohesive Influences in the Song Repertoire of French-American New Englanders

by Deborah Waldman

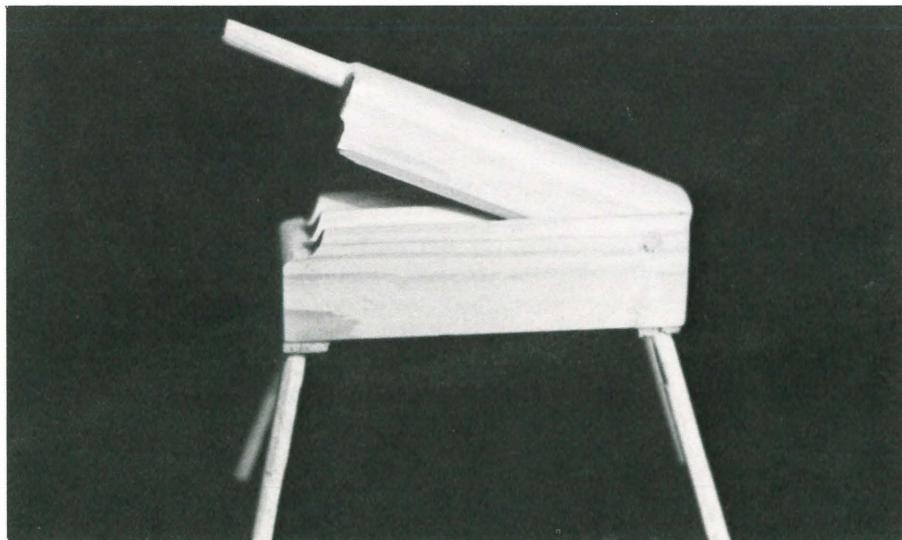
It has always been a traditional attitude among French-Canadian folk singers that “le bonheur vient en chantant” (happiness comes with singing). The fraternal cultural organization La Société Richelieu expresses this social philosophy in a similar way: “chanter, c'est fraterniser” (to sing is to be together in brotherhood).

French-Canadian folk song represents an oral heritage which originally played a crucial role in the everyday life of the rural Québécois. Social life in Quebec before World War II centered around the activities of the parish, family and neighbors. Communally shared musical gatherings, known as *veillées*, were nearly universal, for public concerts and other entertainments were rare in a small village, if they occurred at all. The *veillée* served both as a reunion for old friends and relatives, and as an opportunity for young people to survey and actively court potential mates. Held in the large kitchen of some farm house, the *veillée* included dancing, clogging, playing of fiddles, accordions and spoons, singing, eating and drinking. Some families had pianos, and an evening of family singing at home was a common and popular pastime for many of today's older French New Englanders who were raised in the villages and countryside of Quebec.

Traditional French-Canadian music addresses interpersonal themes. The two most prevalent types of songs are in fact structured in performance to demand human interaction: the lively *chanson à répondre* features a leader who sings a few lines and is answered musically with a refrain sung by a group. The *chanson à deux* is an often humorous dialogue between two people. Thematically, it is not surprising that traditional songs of this heritage portray the topics, attitudes and multiple roles which characterized the everyday life of the French-Canadian *habitant* (farmer), housewife, sailor, lover, *voyageur* (traveler), *courieur du bois* (lumberjack), and members of the clergy.

Although the American-born descendants of French-Canadians are the offspring of people whose lives were naturally tailored to a rural and agrarian tradition, they are actually the children of Industrial America. They were raised

A *Braye à lin* miniature carved by the late ballad singer, Romeo Berthiaume of Woonsocket, Rhode Island. The *Braye à lin* a traditional Quebec farm tool used to break the husk of the flax plant, is a potent symbol for the French-Canadian *habitant*, or small farmer. Photo by Carol Pendleton.



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Suggested reading

- Gladu, André. "La Musique Traditionnelle des Francophones de la Louisiane." *Revue de Louisiane* 1(1972): 53-58.
- Griggs, Mary Ann. *The Folk-Song in the Traditional Society of French Canada*. Sudbury, Ontario: La Société Historique du Nouvel-Ontario, University of Sudbury, 1969.
- Haag, William C. "The Artist as a Reflection of His Culture." In *Essays in the Science of Culture in Honor of Leslie A. White*, eds. Gertrude Dole and Robert Carneiro, pp. 216-30. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1960.
- Suggested recordings*
- Acadie et Québec: Documents d'enquêtes*. RCA/Gala CGP-139 (10K2PP-1062).
- Folk Songs of French Canada*. Folkways Special Series 3560.
- French-Canadian Folk Songs*. Folkways International Series 6929.
- Si Vous Avez Une Fille Qui Veut se Marier: La Bolduc*. Compo Company Ltd., Quebec. Carnaval C-505.
- Songs of French Canada*. Ethnic Folkways Library FE 4482.

not in small country villages or on self-sufficient farms, but in urban French-American enclaves located in the shadows of the smokestack and the time-clock. Whereas their parents faced the hardships of weather, soil, livestock, and isolation and thus depended upon networks of family and neighbors for material and social vitality, the immigrants' hardships included hostile church leaders, reliance upon a cash economy, subordination to a new type of daily schedule, separated families, appalling work environments and overcrowded living conditions. These new concerns created a generation of people with newly ordered lifestyles and priorities. With the birth of yet another generation now twice removed from the folkways of old Quebec, a diverse variety of groups emerged, only one of which continued to hold to the original social mores.

People of French-Canadian descent comprise the single largest minority in New England. As the French-Canadian has transformed himself and his successive generations into French-Americans, the old ways have undergone interesting changes and modifications.

At present, there is a great deal of intra-cultural diversity within such communities of French-Canadian Americans as Lewiston (Maine), Woonsocket (Rhode Island), Manchester (New Hampshire), and Lowell (Massachusetts). Where English had been the principal language of many of these cities, they became predominantly French-speaking between the years 1850-1900. Even today there are widely scattered "Petit Canada" neighborhoods throughout New England in which one can accomplish a day's errands totally in French.

The lingering affection for the old songs is apparent in the bookshelves and piano benches of many French-Canadian American homes. Throughout Canada and New England are to be found a great variety of editions of *chansonniers* (song books) which refer to *les bonnes chansons* ("the good old songs"), *chansons d'autrefois* (songs from long ago), or simply, *les vieilles chansons* (the old songs). Nor is it unusual to discover that a French-American family may possess a modest stack of handwritten notebooks, yellow through age and containing the texts of the old songs, often compiled in the singer's late teens.

The high value traditionally assigned to a tightly knit, self-contained community has remained in the hearts of many French-Americans. For them it provides comfort and insulation against the threat of mistrust and encroachment by outside social powers. Sociologist Mary Ann Griggs cites a French-Canadian priest, who stated that folklore serves as "a source of pride . . . a rampart against Anglicization and Americanization." Despite the pressure to Americanize, such cohesive facts as school projects and music activities within French-Catholic church groups have enabled some of the older traditions to survive. Additionally, there has been the support of State Heritage Commissions and the recent enthusiasm for tracing ones "roots." Interest in the Separatist movement in Quebec has led to purchases of Québécois recordings and the importing of Québécois artists for concerts and special performances, as well as the maintainance of such French-American fraternal organizations as L'Union St. Jean-Baptiste, an insurance company founded by French-Americans.

Concurrently, the curricula in the schools of traditionally French enclaves are gradually incorporating a creative, modern approach to bringing the European and Canadian French cultures back to their heirs. Student projects involve cooking traditional foods, arranging concerts by singers of traditional and contemporary French-Canadian music, translating American television themes and commercials into French, and performing these in concerts for local organizations and homes for the aged.

For some New Englanders, however, the desire to retain the French language is stronger than the motivation to perpetuate the traditional songs. For example, in certain amateur community-sponsored concerts and festivals, the program, although entirely in French, may in fact consist of popular American tunes, given such titles as "La Chanson de Lara" ("Lara's Theme"), "Combien des Larmes" ("You Only Hurt the One You Love"), or a version of "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree" in French translation. But the survival of the traditional music will continue to depend upon the presence of opportunities for its performance and enjoyment by the French-Americans themselves, whose primary objectives are the human values of a sense of community and the desire to be happy.