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), coureur 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...
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Suggested reading


Suggested recordings

Acadie et Québec: Documents d’enquêtes. RCA/Gala CGP-139 (10K2PP-1062).

Folk Songs of French Canada. Folkways Special Series 3560.


Si Vous Avez Une Fille Qui Veut se Marier: La Bolduc. Compo Company Ltd., Quebec. Carnival C-505.

Songs of French Canada. Ethnic Folkways Library FE 4482.

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