

# Pas d'accent

## Episode 1 : Excusez-là

**Excerpts from my endless trip through the universe of traditional Québécois music.**

This episode expands upon on articles I first wrote for German magazine Folker, updated for the magazine of the Country Music & Bluegrass Association of Italy, and adapted as a series for the bulletin of Folk Alliance International. It also appears in in a slightly different form on [Medium.com](https://medium.com).

Born and raised in New England, I never suspected that I would one day be an immigrant, a legal alien, living on foreign soil, speaking another language and (for all practical purposes) devoting my life to a form of traditional music that I hadn't heard of until the day I became best friends with the late, great Franco-American singer and cultural activist Martha Pellerin. Although I'd been a musician for most of my life, even while holding down day jobs, and had been active on the folk and bluegrass scenes for a good portion of that, somehow I had never crossed paths with Québécois music. Maybe because I was a guitarist and singer, rather than a fiddler. Maybe because I went to university in upstate New York and then moved to Atlanta, Georgia. Whatever the reason, my fate was sealed when Martha and I formed Jeter le Pont in the late 1980s. Not long thereafter, we made our first recording (a cassette), with help from musician friends in Québec. One thing led to another, and I eventually found myself married to Québec fiddler Claude Méthé (Martha introduced us, of course) and began what has become a lifelong trip through the unique culture and music just over the border from my Vermont home. Thank heavens for my eight years of

French in the American public school system, which finally came in handy.

In July 1997 I drove across the border (well, actually I made at least seven trips, one in a 32-foot truck with five-month old Béatrix), leaving behind my tiny, rural Vermont town and bringing along my three young children and an eclectic menagerie of farm animals plus one guinea pig, to a tiny, rural Québec town located about an hour and a half north of Montréal, in the Lanaudière region, an area famous for its living musical traditions. We moved here because we knew so quite a few local musicians already and had recorded several albums there in a studio famous for recording traditional music. Lanaudière is often referred to as the “nombril” (bellybutton) of Québec trad. Once you climb the hill to our village, except for the power lines, cars, snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles, life hasn’t visibly changed much over the last two centuries.

Québec might be the most homogeneous society in North America today. While there are francophone communities sprinkled throughout Canada (where 9.5 million people speak French), Québec is the largest, with about 7 million French-speakers, roughly 95% of the population. It is the only province where French is the official language. If you spend time here, you’ll discover that for French-speaking people of my age and younger (I was born in 1956), “French-Canadian” is a term that is rarely used. “Québécois” is how they think of themselves. Those older than I, on the other hand, might call themselves a Canadien, their way of saying that they are ethnically French-speaking Québécois. In Québec, the term “national” refers to the what you all know as the province of Québec rather than the entire country of Canada. We even use the expression “Rest Of Canada” (or ROC) on a regular basis. Confused

yet?

In case you didn't already know, many Québécois (there is even some evidence that it is a slight majority) are still hoping to separate from Canada and becoming a sovereign nation, and the province has long behaved as if this is already the case. There are Québec government offices, sort of "consulates", in at least twenty major foreign cities, I believe that there are six in the US alone). Lanaudière is purported to be the most separatist region of the province. The complex issues of language and sovereignty make life very interesting. While I'm not a highly political person and not sure if I can qualify myself as a full-on separatist, I was ready for the adventure of living in a newly-minted nation and held off applying for Canadian citizenship for an embarrassingly long time, but I finally resigned myself to the idea of swearing allegiance to the Queen of England (Canada is a Constitutional Monarchy). As a dyed-in-the-wool New Englander, I had to resist crossing my fingers behind my back, but the ceremony was actually very moving and I'm proud to be both Canadian and American... and Québécoise, in my own unique way.

As a newcomer to Québec, I was immediately struck by how useless a phonebook was unless you already knew the precise street address of the person you were searching for. It is not unusual for there to be five, ten or more pages of the same name in the "bottin" (phonebook). Nearly everyone is related either by blood or by marriage and both of us stand out like the proverbial sore thumb with our extremely unpronounceable foreign ("foring" in colloquial French) names. I am regularly addressed as Madame "White". Even my Québécois husband's last name inspires looks that tell him "You're obviously not from around here". At the local bank (recently closed) the slogan was "Ceci n'est pas une banque", which I

couldn't agree with more for lots of reasons I won't go into here but which inspired me to write a country song about my experiences there.

Here, most people went to public school, which unlike the U.S., is Catholic, thus they've all grown up sharing the same basic religious and moral upbringing. Everyone knows the same stories, confessed to the same sins, prayed to the same saints. My own three children didn't know much about religion until they went to their first Morals class, a relatively new alternative to Religion class for those who don't actually attend church, which is a lot of people these days, even here in the boonies. Until we built a new house on our small farm property, we lived in a tiny, 150-year old home that didn't have plumbing or electricity installed until 1964. Some friends of our generation actually lived in it during the hippie days of the 1970s. When we arrived, we could still choose to use the "bécosse" (outhouse or "backhouse") if desired, and we once had a visit from members of a family who had lived their (with ten children!) in the 1950s. They kept the butter suspended in a bucket in the (outdoor) well, It made me think twice the next time I complained about the house being too small for our family of five. At home and in town I don't hear much English from anybody but my immediate family. One of my children used to request that I not speak French in front of his friends while another, sometimes at the same moment, asked that I not speak English - it's apparently a common immigrant dilemma and one to which I never found a good solution except to shut up.

The up side of this profound homogeneousness and isolation is that the musical culture of rural Québec is vibrantly alive and remarkably preserved. A friend who works with elementary school children told me about the time he was taken by surprise on a field

trip with a group of young children from Saint-Côme, just north of here, a town know for its song heritage. As the bus left the schoolyard, they all began to sing a “chanson à répondre” (call-and-response song). Everybody knew the words, and the singing didn’t stop until they reached their destination. It was a similar story on my own kids’ daily schoolbus ride – they sang on the way there and back, traditional songs as well as modern ones learned at home or on recordings or pop radio. It was just what everybody did at social gatherings.

By comparison, when doing school workshops and performances in Vermont before moving north, we often asked children about the music that went on in their homes. While there were exceptions, most often the response was that nobody played or sang in the household. Kids were dying to touch our instruments. When asked, some couldn’t even think of a single song. This was equally true when we did workshops in greater Montréal schools. But here in little Sainte-Béatrix, I was involved in a folklore project at the local elementary school that required all who signed up to show up for singing practice with their favourite Québec song. Thirty-three kids signed up (out of 125 total school population) and almost all of them had a traditional song to sing! Québec is certainly the richer for having preserved so much. The demographic of large families, rural isolation, a small bank account and a lack of competition from other amusement certainly conspired to cultivate the musical soul. In the days before set-top boxes and cable, television reception here was much like in Vermont, e.g. basically none, until the advent of satellite TV. There is no cable on our road and we only recently acquired a DSL internet connection. Still, how much longer this cultural environment will last I don’t know. I was saddened to see the same school present a talent night with recorded music and lip-sync performances (not even karaoke!)

from the very same children who could stand up and sing a dozen traditional songs a cappella. Even sadder still, it was the music teacher's idea to take this approach. With art and music being cut left and right everywhere in North America, I fear for the health of all cultural heritage.

Despite the glaring lack of support for the arts in schools, there is currently a slowly growing appreciation of traditional music as the public everywhere becomes more and more "branché" (internet connected). Just search YouTube or Google "Québec trad" and you'll see. While we are behind our anglo counterparts in many ways, festivals and house concerts are finally coming into vogue and they introduce the public to music that they didn't know existed - including their own - and more often, in a listening-room setting, something very new to audiences who are used to rowdy, alcohol-fuelled soirées. For most Québec trad groups, like "ethnic" music everywhere, there are usually more gigs to be had outside of one's home region, in places where the music has an exotic appeal. The unofficial definition of "world" music is music from your hometown played elsewhere! It takes a certain amount of recognition "à l'étranger" - in another country - to get the attention of the folks back home (like presenters and arts funders), but it happens. So if you're a traditional musician, you want to get famous somewhere else first, if possible, which may embarrass your own people into supporting your art.

Québec is fond of claiming famous residents as theirs once they are noticed by the media - Zachary Richard, who suffered bad reviews in Louisiana but sold records and got on a TV show here; Kathy Reichs, of TV show "Bones" fame, who is a forensic specialist for the city of Montréal; Angelina Jolie, when she bought an apartment on the Plateau (Montréal's hipster neighbourhood); Madonna, is related to

pop singer Nicolas Ciccone via her father and to a whole lot of other folks via her mother, a Fortin (including my husband). Traditional Québécois called dance is also enjoying increased popularity due to eager urban fans. It has been ignited by a mixed audience of athletic young people, older folks who remember dancing in the kitchens of their youth as well as the well-established (mainly Anglo and somewhat granola-y) contradance scene, on both sides of the border.

As is true in many places that have strong musical traditions, we are just as proud - maybe even prouder - of the "kitchen" version of our music, the songs and tunes that happen naturally during parties. While many musicians today find their traditional inspiration on recordings, archival or commercial, as well as on the internet, live transmission is still an important part of local culture here. Musical repertoires, whether instrumental or vocal, are commonly attributed to specific families or individuals; this goes for different versions of songs, as well. Locally, many a group has been the beneficiary of selections from the magnificent repertoires of the families of this region. It would even be possible to record an entire album featuring songs by the same title, yet have each track sound completely different.

I'm proud of the fact that nearly all of the traditional songs I sing myself were learned directly from a living source - a visit to a friend's home, a party, a supper that ended up in song. But I think it's wonderful for all flavours of traditional music that people can learn it from a recording or an online source; it's the passing it on that counts in the end.

While still living in Vermont, I was lucky enough to spend a lot of time with family and acquaintances of my best friend and musical partner Martha Pellerin, who was the first child in her family born

outside of Québec. The family spoke French at home and nearly all of their friends were others who, like them, had come to Vermont for work during the mid-1950s, even before there was a true border crossing. Now, after many years in Québec playing catch-up on its popular culture, I recognize that their personal music repertoires were literally frozen in time once they left their culture behind. The music and social life they shared with us were all they had left of the deep roots that remained firmly embedded in Québec soil.

Martha and I had frequent private sessions with her mother and her mother's friends, women ranging from their early fifties to mid-eighties. We would sing our version of songs we'd collected from family and friends. The women, usually five or six of them, drinking coffee and some smoking cigarettes, would sit at the kitchen table, pencil and paper in hand, taking notes on our delivery. Sometimes, while we were still singing, they'd look at each other and begin shaking their heads disapprovingly. We continued on nervously but clearly we were doing it wrong. When we finished, instead of the criticism we were bracing ourselves for, they'd begin to argue among themselves about the lyrics or the refrain. Everybody had a different way of singing certain songs and each was certain that theirs was the definitive version. We also got gigs singing for tour bus loads of Québécois women on shopping trips to northern New Hampshire outlets. We were put up in the hotel for the night, the women would come to a hotel living room or lounge area after a day of buying Ralph Lauren or Gloria Vanderbilt at a discount, and we'd sing. Amazingly, the exact same scenario would reproduce itself. The looks. The head shaking. The arguments. Finally, they would begin to sing their version loudly over ours, drowning us out completely until we gave up and "assimilated". We knew when to throw in the towel. We carried with us seven enormous

three-ring binders filled with song lyrics that had been passed along or collected from Martha's family members, written down during parties or given to her by other families upon the passing of the person who had collected them. The songs were written in notebooks, on the backs of calendar pages, on pieces of cardboard that once had nylon stockings wrapped around them. I spent many hours comparing songs and loosely organizing those that had obvious connections, and when we performed somewhere that permitted it, we passed around "The Collection" in hopes of learning a melody from a member of the audience following the show. There were probably close to 1,000 songs in these binders, and we joked about "heavy" music.

In my tiny village, it sometimes seems as if time has stopped, During the holidays, on a cold winter day, the party might begin mid-morning. The livestock is in the barn, the fields lay dormant under four feet of snow, construction is halted until Spring, and the party builds up steam as the beer, "caribou" (100-proof alcohol) and music kick in, with a never-ending stream of homemade food set out on makeshift tables. It is a tradition, around one or two a.m. - probably originating with the "réveillon", the meal following midnight Mass - to be served a huge buffet of sandwiches, pickles, cheese, chips, cake, and other picnic-ish food, a brilliant idea considering the enormous quantity of spirits that have been consumed by then. Meanwhile, the music goes on non-stop "jusqu'aux petites heures" (until the wee hours). There might be twenty or thirty people playing and singing at once, with song after song arriving spontaneously from some inexhaustible source. If the song was particularly rowdy or "cochon" (dirty), the singer might end the song with "Excusez-là!" - like one might say "Pardon my French" (hmmm... maybe that's where the expression comes from). When the party is "chez-nous", at our house, after nodding off at

5:00 am to a trad orchestra going full-tilt in my living room, I can usually count on getting up to start the coffee, trip over beer bottles and find one of my musician neighbours snoring on the couch, fiddle or accordion nearby.

Instrumentally, Québec traditional music typically includes some or all of the following : fiddle, accordion, guitar, piano and foot percussion. While accordion was introduced after the fiddle, its popularity was quickly established and has made it symbolic of Québec music, especially for dances. As a backup instrument, the piano was on the scene before guitar, and is more common to dance music. As in other parts of North America, many homes had a piano, which was considered something of a status symbol. In reality, most instrumental music (fiddle, accordion) was played without accompaniment to get people up and dancing in - where else - the kitchen, with the musician on top of a table as everyone danced, tapping his feet to keep the dancers on beat. Today, you'll find mandolin, bouzouki, flute, bass, banjo, percussion and many other instruments being incorporated into the Québec tradition as musicians gather influences from other cultures and genres of music.

While considered a trademark of Québécois traditional music, the origins of foot percussion have never been definitively explained. Some say it comes from First Nations people, since the Métis (people of native and European intermingling) consider it part of their cultural practices; some say it was invented by Québec fiddlers to keep time while playing for dances, and still others say that it has European roots. There are even old Cajun recordings that appear to have similar foot percussion on them. We'll probably never know for sure. Whatever its origins, "podorythmie" is a handy tool and even some musicians outside of the the tradition have

learned the technique from Québec friends and YouTube videos. While in the past it was associated with fiddlers, today guitar players are more likely to be the band's designated foot-tappers. The typical rhythm sounds something like (tack-tacka-tack-tacka-tack).

There is also much debate about the origins of what is considered French fiddle repertoire, as many of the tunes that we think of as über-Québécois are identifiably Celtic-rooted. French, Irish and Scottish residents of Québec had a long and colourful history of working together in the "chantiers" (lumberjack camps) and crossed paths all across North America during the days of the "voyageur", fur traders who travelled the continent by canoe, leaving in their wake towns with French names that are horrifically pronounced today by Americans and Canadians alike. Many work songs (such as those sung while weaving or performing other repetitive tasks) were adapted to fit the new task of paddling for hours on end, the numerous verses refitted to match the geography and people encountered by the hardy voyageur. There are tunes shared with the Métis peoples and even Inuit fiddlers play some of the same tunes you'll hear at jams here. Some of the most important Cajun fiddlers and accordionists also perform tunes that share roots with Québec repertoire, including some recognizably Irish and Scottish tunes.

But the tunes played by the late Aimé Gagnon of Lotbinière county, Québec, fiddler Claude Méthé's mentor for many years, are not like any others you'll hear. I, too, had the pleasure of playing with him many times before his death, and always felt that his music seemed to come from some other time. It leads us to wonder whether if they are from a time in France before the fiddle was replaced by other instruments. There are similarities with dance tunes from the Poitou region, the original home of many early Acadian settlers and a place where fiddling held on. Perhaps these tunes were "lost"

when early colonists were busy trying to stay alive in cold, harsh Nouvelle-France, with less time to enjoy the pastimes that were part of life before they came to the frigid North. If an instrument broke it would be difficult to have it repaired; it may also have been left behind for the long crossing on a crowded ship. One of the ways tunes were passed on in Québec and the French maritimes was by way of the wandering “quéteurs”, a kind of handyman or tinker who would exchange work and music for a bed and a meal as he made his way across the province. Aimé Gagnon himself learned tunes from the renowned Quéteur Tremblay, who as an itinerant fiddler, composer and collector of tunes stopped by at the Gagnon home each year during his travels.

Whatever its genetic origins, there is an undeniably Québécois sound and swing that distinguishes the style and repertoire. It has a rhythmic intensity that is a thousand miles away from Irish music, which flows like water in a stream, all about the melody. In my mind, Québécois music invokes dance; it is music about moving, it can be competitive and fierce, even macho. It shares a tribal element with all Celtic-rooted music but the swing is so very North American and sets it solidly apart from its Celtic cousins. While I sometimes think it contains hints of Scottish colour, there are no Québécois slow airs; sorrow tends to be saved for songs - bluesy laments that are called “complaintes” in Québec vernacular. Traditional Québécois music may be intense, but is rarely serious or ominous. The expression “joie de vivre”, used over and over by presenters to describe it, tells the truth - this music seeks to be happy by default, a determined counter to the will of the Church that so controlled life during the province’s earlier days. The many songs that make fun of the priest give some validity to the theory.

While fiddlers from each region of Québec have their own style, there is always something that ties them together. The fiddle was what got people dancing (even though the Church disapproved of this). The sound of twenty fiddlers playing a Louis "Pitou" Boudreault tune like La Belle Catherine gives me goosebumps; there is nothing like it! And the sound of feet beating out an exquisite rhythm is also something that never fails to excite listeners. It is powerful music, powerful medicine, and the range of interpretative styles on the traditional music scene is vast.

In the 1970s, groups Le Rêve du Diable and La Bottine Souriante were among the first in the province to reacquaint Québécois audiences with their own musical heritage. These groups' take on the music of their forefathers and mothers was full of youthful spirit, urgently played fiddle tunes, rough-hewn vocals and minimal "arrangements" - considered by some to be practically a dirty word. The approach was natural, with most of the kitchen-y essence left intact, and this sound kickstarted a roots revival. Their reborn music was delivered into an era that followed closely on the heels of American folk music à la Dylan, Baez and company, and it fit well into the new nationalistic feeling that was developing as the province warmed up for the first referendum on independence in 1980.

But the rebirth was not long-lived. With the failure of this first bid to separate, sentiments toward Québec folklore quickly changed. With a loss of self-confidence in the value of their uniqueness as a society, few wanted Québec to be symbolized by a form of music that was often associated with uneducated ruralism. People who had no direct, personal connection to this profound heritage mocked and devalued it in important media interactions. Sadly, there is still fallout from this attitude today, encouraged by those who would

like to purge Québec of anything smacking of the “folklorique”, considered “quétaine” (corny) by some, despite the deep roots, natural beauty and timeless stories that traditional repertoires tell.

This attitude is not unique to Québec, though - it is typical of the fight everywhere for preservation of anything artisanal, the ongoing battle to recognize that “patrimoine immatériel” - intangible heritage - is important, as are all traditional arts and know-how - storytelling, weaving, cheesemaking, etc. Like nearly-extinct species, they may be protected for a brief period but as soon as they appear to be making a comeback, support fades away. The argument is often made that practitioners will keep doing it anyway, without support, and this might be true to some degree - but it is not an acceptable strategy for preserving cultural heritage. An analogy can be made with old-time music in the U.S. I’m sure that some folks, when they hear “old-time”, picture a long-bearded hillbilly in plaid shirt and suspenders, armed with a banjo. In Québec, we battle the image of traditional music as something that is reserved only for “le temps des Fêtes” - the Christmas holidays. The public at large seems to think that it doesn’t exist during the other eleven months of the year, but this couldn’t be farther from the truth!

Like all good folkies, marginal entities and underdogs everywhere, we find ourselves employing guerilla tactics - and today, social networks, of course - to aid our cause. Not long after I arrived in Québec, along with a handful of folk and trad music and dance peers, and encouraged by friends in the broader Canadian music industry, I co-founded L’Association Folquébec with the goal of developing a presence for Québec-made folk music on the international music scene. We received provincial funding to attend

our first international conference, and since the year 2000, Folquébec has presented countless showcases in Canada, the U.S. and Europe, establishing itself as a powerful brand for Québec folk and trad at the most important industry events, where, operating with a minuscule budget, hotel-room showcases, concerts and late-night jams continue to garner a lot of necessary buzz. Little did the sponsors in those early days know that we were sleeping five to a room and living on granola bars, peanuts and smuggled-in beer in order to promote and expose audiences to the greatest number of artists possible.

In 2012, Québec's National Assembly awarded a Medal of Honour to Le Rêve du Diable for their contribution to the preservation of Québec's musical heritage, and in the past few years, there has been a movement to reclaim and legitimize the word "folklore" in hopes of removing its pejorative status; something like the owning of the word "queer" by the LGBTQ community. Artist-musician-dancer Jean-François Berthiaume designed a black baseball cap embroidered with the word Folklore, produced a numbered edition, and sold hundreds of the hats worldwide. Wearers - fans and musicians - photograph themselves and post to social networks everywhere they go, and I believe that this exposure has succeeded in raising a lot of interest in Québec trad music.

Using public performance as a tool, a group of Montréal-based trad musicians started Commando Trad, a flash-mob-inspired project that has large numbers of musicians suddenly stepping out of the shadows, instrument in hand, and playing, stepdancing and singing in public locations across the province. The events have received media attention across North America and can be seen on YouTube. Created by Jean Desrochers and Véronique Plasse, the project also inspired French and German versions. Following this success,

another initiative was created by Montréal musician Catherine Planet. Known as La Chasse Balcon, the project brings trad concerts to Montréal balconies throughout the year. In 2015, video footage of both projects was key in convincing artistic directors at Disney World in Orlando, Florida to hire Québec trad musicians for the Epcot Center's Canada Pavilion stage.

As the saying goes, "C'est au fruit qu'on juge l'arbre". We judge the tree by its fruit. But we need to keep on watering that tree if we want to keep on eating the fruit.