QUÉBECOIS CONTRASTS

IN SEARCH OF A TRADITION

Philip Freeman meets highly-rated fiddler Lisa Ornstein

AS IN SO MANY OTHER cases, Martin Carthy had a lot to do with bringing Lisa Ornstein to British attention. On his 1988 album, *Right of Passage,* he recorded a wonderful tune by the name of *La Cardeuse* – 'a Québecois tune I learned from Lisa Ornstein, that most meticulous of fiddle players, whose steadiness is spiced with a dash that can take you out of your chair'.

The tune is a sparkling guitar *tour de force,* intriguing all who hear it. Yet there were, and are, no recordings of Lisa Ornstein available in Britain. So no more may have come of it, but for the fact that Martin interested Chris Wood in Lisa's work. Chris eventually went and sat at her feet.

Many would argue that Chris Wood and Andy Cutting's work was the beginning of a new departure for English folk music, paradoxically enough, since the first tunes were predominantly Québecois. But the impact is in that combination of accuracy and verve, as Chris was later to say of Eliza Carthy & Nancy Kerr: "the perfect balance between abandonment and control". Lisa's influence resulted in the second Wood & Cutting album being named after her.

Apart from the high respect she was held in by Carthy and Wood, and the approval of master fiddler Kevin Burke, I knew nothing about Lisa. When I heard she was coming to Cornwall Folk Festival, with her year-old baby, I was surprised. I had pictured her as at least eighty and living on a mountain. In fact she isn't even Canadian. Lisa was born in Connecticut and raised in Illinois and Ohio.

"It wasn't a normal household. My mother played renaissance music on the harpsichord, so I grew up to the sound of tunes from the *Fitzwilliam Virginal.* She would play with friends, in small groups, in each others houses, so that from an early age it seemed the natural way of making music. My sister took up fiddle at the age of nine and, after only two weeks, decided she would make a career as a violinist. She did, too. When I took up the fiddle, at the same age, I decided, after two weeks, that I didn't want to play in orchestras. I wasn't comfortable with that degree of regimentation."

At fifteen, with the confidence of youth, she joined a bluegrass band, without knowing any of the tunes. But she was helped by an uncle, who played her recordings of the real stuff – tunes from Grayson, Carroll County, Virginia. She describes the experience as like being struck by lightning. Coming from a musical family helped, because they supported in the exploration that followed. She started going to festivals and was introduced to a lot more American music by family friends.

Lisa's first exposure to Québecois music came from the playing of Louis Beaudoin, who was living in Burlington, Vermont. She was seventeen and had an Internship at the Library of Congress, where her director, also a fiddle player, introduced her to some of the riches of the collection. She heard Louis on a Philo recording, the label which also recorded Philippe Bruneau and Jean Carignan, the stars of Québec music, who were always engaged in ferocious rivalry.

Soon came one of those life-changing moments. She was at a festival where Louis Beaudoin was playing with his family band. One tune, a reel, she couldn't get out of her head and went off to try and figure it out. Beaudoin came by and helped her to get the hang of it and, for the first time, she experienced the passing on of tunes from one musician to another. It's clearly a precious experience for her, each time it happens.

It marked the first of many meetings; she became a frequent visitor to the Beaudoin household and her appetite for discovering more about the roots of Québecois music grew. Meanwhile, she'd decided the rarefied atmosphere of ethnomusicology was not for her.

"They seemed only interested in remote and exotic locations. I wanted to find out more about what was on our own doorstep."

The academic in Lisa only goes so far. She talks about the music, and plays the tunes, conscious of where each has come from and who she learned it from. That leads to an insistence on the exact way of fingering and bowing each fiddler uses. "Fiddle players sign their names with the bow", she says, the very meticulousness that attracted Chris Wood.

Such passion for accuracy is always drawn to scholarship, yet Lisa has a larger relationship with the music than that. As she plays, she engages with the moods, the faces, the very lives of the musicians. Such attitudes don't sit so well on campus – real life is more untidy than faculties usually allow. The next step was obvious. She went to Québec to find out more and the original year she'd planned stretched to thirteen.

"Québecois music is very regional," she says. "It's diversity is one of its most important characteristics. It varies from area to area, from family to family. I went to the Joliette area, where La Bottine Souriante are from."

This wonderful coincidence was beneficial all round.

"One day they heard me play and, the next, they asked me to join them. They

QUÉBECOIS CONTRASTS

needed a fiddle player. At the time, I was in French classes, but I just said yes. They were very rough in those days!"

La Bottine remained her French teachers for eight months, teaching her the local patois, without which she'd have had difficulty in making progress with the fiddle players. But, despite having a great time, she didn't want to be a performer. She preferred playing in the kitchen.

Early experiences, with her mother's friends, still form a model of how she thinks things should be. She had, though, to face the question, if not an ethnomusicologist what? At the time, Danielle Martineau was struggling to gain more public access for Québecois traditions, trying to revive the tunes, the songs, the dances. She set up social dances, held classes and began serious cultural lobbying.

As is often the case, the government didn't recognise its own tradition as something of value and went through the usual quadrilles of incomprehension. It wasn't recognised previously, so no apparatus for dealing with it existed, therefore they couldn't deal with it. In a wonderful touch, they tried to shunt them into a siding, by suggesting they try the Department of Hunting, Fishing and Recreation.

Lisa, by this time, had acquired a master's degree in folklore, with a study of player and dancer Louis Boudreaulet, and was supporting herself through teaching. She was learning tunes from fiddlers, despite it having always been a male tradition. She is surprised, and eternally grateful, that so many of them took time to teach her. It's something she feels she can never repay. Fortunately, she was around when Danielle burnt herself out with the frustrations of dealing with bureaucracy. Lisa took over and threw herself into the work.

Raising the profile of the organisation was paramount. They began organising prestigious concerts, to great success and acclaim, and concocted an impressive title, becoming the *Centre Valorisation du Patrimoine Vivant.* At last, the Government began to understand some of the importance. The battle isn't won, of course. It never is. Fiddle competitions forbidding the playing of Canadian tunes still exist.

"The winner usually plays one of those fake gypsy tunes, or *Orange Blossom Special,"* commented Lisa.

Under such pressure and against such odds, Lisa eventually became exhausted and gave the job up. "But we did some great work in that time. We really did."

She now lives in Maine with her husband and first child, Joshua, having landed a job as an archivist. Luckily, it gives her the opportunity for research and collecting. Although, technically, living in the USA, 80% of the population speak French and the nearest city is Québec. How does she feel now about La Bottine Souriante?

"I worry sometimes that the big sound can drive out the quieter music, but they're the only successful folk group in Québec. They've had an enormous impact and have legitimised the music for a lot of people, particularly the young. That's very important."

Of Chris Wood and Andy Cutting, she says: "I love their playing and musicianship, but, to me, it sounds very English!"

Lisa has no burning ambition to perform, but she does play with one of La Bottine's founders, André Marchand, an accomplished guitarist, with a lively, distinctive sound, and another former La Bottine member, Normand Miron, who comes from a long line of singers. He also plays diatonic accordion and harmonica and André too sings. They have recorded an album, but Lisa sees no urgency in getting it released. She's more interested in Joshua and the baby that's on the way.

Maybe, if you spend your life among fiddlers whose music comes from the most basic things in life, that's no great surprise.

THE BOOT WITH A FRIENDLY SMILE

Keith Hudson snatches a few moments with members of La Bottine Souriante

THERE WAS a buzz at this year's Pontardawe Festival. Not that there's anything unusual about that. It's a festival that regularly brings in top-notch and, inevitably, much talked about bands. But this year's buzz was louder and more persistent. It wasn't only the excellent Euro bands, like Le Gop and Cordas et Cannas, that were attracting attention. The name on everyone's lips was that of the legendary Québecois outfit, La Bottine Souriante.

The band were on a lightning, four-date visit to Britain. After Pontardawe they were at London's South Bank Centre and then had two gigs in Scotland, before jetting off to Denmark. They had, of course, played Pontardawe previously, five years ago, but then it was only a slimmed-down line-up. This time, we had the real thing, all nine of them, including the snazzy brass section.

It's the band's size – they also have a road crew of three – that is the reason for visits being so rare. Getting that many people and their gear across the Atlantic is a costly business and funding, being what it is in Britain, it's a price that can't be too readily met. And it's likely this year's visit wouldn't have been possibly without the intervention of Québec's Cultural Attaché in London.

"We get no financial aid from the authorities in Québec," explained Michel Bordeleau, who plays mandolin and fiddle and whose amazing, piston-like legs provide that unique ingredient of Québecois music, the driving, percussive feet. "Like many other parts of the world, we're experiencing a serious recession and one of the first things to get cut is money for the arts."

The music of Québec is, of course, a fascinating mélange, reflecting a turbulent history. The vocal tradition has its origins in Brittany and Normandy – the seafaring regions of France, where most of the early settlers came from. Their instrumental

QUÉBECOIS CONTRASTS

music, though, is much more of a mixture, comprising elements of French, Irish, Scottish and, doubtless, even other traditions.

Over the centuries, it's been slowly distilled into something different from all its component parts – something uniquely Québecois. And, when you hear La Bottine's fiddle and accordion, you'll sometimes hear echoes – that's really the wrong word, echoes follow the source – of the music that developed in that other major North American French settlement, Louisiana.

"The boot's for dancing, the smile for pleasure"

The band may not come to Britain that often, but they do work extensively in the United States, especially in New England, which is not so far from home, and they go down particularly well in the Irish communities.

The name La Bottine Souriante – it translates as 'the smiling boot' is just a bit of fun. "The boot's for dancing," says Michel, "and the smile for pleasure."

Having been in existence for around twenty years, the band is now something of an institution but, unlike other institutions, they were capable of a significant change in direction, a few years back. The addition of the brass section to the more conventional array of instruments gives them a sound not unlike a head on collision between traditional Québecois music and big-band jazz.

"Bands constantly evolve," says tenor sax player Jean Fréchette, who did come over with the band on their last tour. He's the man responsible for writing and arranging the brass parts, though he plays down his individual role. "It's a collective work," he says.

Why did they do it? They are disarmingly honest. "We wanted to give our music a broader appeal, without leaving our traditional roots behind us," says Michel. "One result is that a lot more people listen to folk music in Québec now, including many jazz musicians. It was also a big challenge for us, though some people with a more traditional outlook haven't been so impressed."

Judging by their concert at Pontardawe and their latest album, *La Mistrine* (the title derives from a 15th. century French tune commemorating an occasion when people, in an act of defiance, rebelled against religious oppression and had a party) they have succeeded in creating something vibrant and new, that is still identifiably Québecois, and which doesn't, in any way, compromise their older traditions.

A more amiable bunch of people you won't readily find. Doubtless, they would have gone on and on talking about their music. But, raise the question of Québecois independence – a question particularly pertinent, as they were in Wales – and you'll find them much less forthcoming and one senses that, maybe, there is no unanimity on this issue, within the band. Or perhaps it was a feeling that, as cultural ambassadors, discussion of politics was misplaced.

It was clearly a sensitive topic. "Perhaps you shouldn't write about that," commented pianist Denis Fréchette."

But it was the diplomatic Michel who had the last word. "The latest referendum vote may have been 50/50," he said, "but there are a lot of people in Québec who favour a united Canada. The last thing we would want is to go to war."

Oct /Nov 1996 #78