

Vincent Ierfino—*Ave atque vale*

All too frequently we hear of famous entertainers being killed in violent accidents at too young an age, at a time when they have produced so much but still have a lot to offer. Except for a tragic turn of fate, their creative lives might have gone on for many years. As public figures, widely known for their musical artistry, their deaths are publicized in all the media, and they are mourned by fans throughout the world.

An equal loss, on a local scale, was felt by the community of Hemmingford, Quebec, when Vincent Ierfino, a talented singer/songwriter, was killed in a car accident on October 11, 1997. Vincent was not only a well known amateur entertainer, singing his own songs at local functions, but also a gifted playwright, director, actor, and teacher. His sudden death came as a shock to his students, his theatre fans, his many friends throughout the Chateauguay Valley and the Montreal area, and of course to his family. He left his wife Barbara and his two children in Hemmingford and his mother and brother and other relations in Montreal.

When his parents left Italy for Canada in 1954, Vincent was only two years old, so Canada became the only homeland he ever knew. The family settled in the Pointe St-Charles district of Montreal, where Vincent and his brother and sister spent their formative years. Early on, Vincent showed a gift for writing and a passion for music. He taught himself to play the guitar, inspired by his love for the TV shows current at the time, Tommy Hunter from Toronto and Don Messer and his Islanders from the Maritimes. As an indication of how deeply this music affected him, I recall one Saturday going over to his place for an afternoon of picking and singing, taking along a tape copied from an LP of Dan Joe MacInnis, one of Cape Breton's greatest fiddlers. I made the comment to Vincent that he might not be familiar with this kind of music, but I hoped he would like it. As soon as he heard the first strains of the fiddle and piano, he leaped to his feet in great excitement, yelling, "These are my roots! My musical roots!"

In his early teens, he formed a rock and roll band and had modest success playing at school dances and community centres. With his growing interest in the North American folk music revival, Vincent later said, his musical roots were complete. These various types of music permeate his own creations, influences apparent in the more than 200 songs he wrote over a period of 30 years, the steady beat of country music, the hard driv-

ing sound of rock and roll, echoes of the high wailing traditional Cape Breton fiddle, and the sparse and direct story line of the traditional English ballad. But there was something more that formed a foundation for these musical influences, the intensity of emotion and the pathos of his Italian heritage were plainly evident when he sang.



Vincent and Stanley Triggs, August 1996.

Vincent had an unconventional singing style. His high pitched tenor was at times hard edged, but it could be intimate and soft as well. His was not the type of voice to be appreciated on a car stereo in competition with the roar of the engine or when blasted out of a boombox. The appeal of his voice and music needed the intimate setting of a gathering of friends on the lawn of his farm on a summer evening, a small house party on a cold winter night, or a singsong at the old folks' home to celebrate the birthday of one of the residents. In these settings, the listeners were always captivated by Vincent's personality, at times

vibrant, at others melancholic, yet always endearing, and by the integrity of his stories told in song. But he could also stand up in front of a crowd at a festival or celebration and really belt them out, not only holding everyone's attention, but getting them to sing along, too.

Pointe St-Charles, when Vincent was living there, was a friendly place, more of a small town community than a city suburb, and Vincent's life was a happy one, with family activities, visits to neighbors, and the pursuit of his musical and theatrical interests. Nevertheless, he never did really like city environment, the noise, the smell, and the isolation from the world of nature. He longed to live in the country, on a farm perhaps, some quiet corner of the world more in tune with his sensitive feelings and poetic perception of life. But the realization of this dream was not to come for many years.

After graduating from James Ling High School in 1969, Vincent left for Toronto, looking for an acting job at the CBC studio. Recognizing his serious intent but lack of training or experience, they advised him to attend the Medhurst Acting School, which he did; while studying there, he also studied and performed at the Studio Lab Theatre. A few years later, he returned to Montreal and enrolled in the Fine Arts course at Dawson College, majoring in theatre. In his last year there, he formed the *Once Upon A Time Theatre Company* and began to present plays for children in the Montreal area and eastern On-

tario. He continued studying theatre in evening courses at Concordia University, working in the daytime, and earned a Fine Arts and Teaching degree.

After teaching theatre at the high school level for a few years, Vincent accepted a position as childcare worker at Shawbridge, an institution designed to help troubled young people, situated about 15 miles northwest of Montreal. During his time there, he used music and theatre to reach out to the teenagers in an attempt to give them confidence and insight into their own lives. He often composed a song to try to ease a boy or girl over the residual pain or anger from a recent traumatic incident or one from the distant past. *The Shawbridge Theatre Group*, which Vincent formed, staged some very successful plays at the institute, including David Fennario's *Balconville*. In 1986, after six productive years, he left Shawbridge to return to teaching theatre in public schools.

In the late 1970s, Vincent had bought a small farm in Hemmingford township, a dairy and apple growing area in southwestern Quebec, close to the US border. His father and mother lived there year round, and Vincent came on weekends and in summer as it was too far to commute to Shawbridge and other places where he worked during that time. Together they tended a large garden and raised chickens and a few calves, rabbits, and goats. In 1990, he and his wife Barbara and two year old Nicholas made it their year round home, finally realizing a dream now shared with his young family.

Vincent's unquenchable delight in creativity soon had him discussing the formation of a local amateur theatre group with Don McMahon, another area resident with extensive theatrical experience. *The Shoestring Theatre** was formed in the fall of 1990, drawing potential actors and backstage personnel from the Hemmingford and neighbouring communities. The group's first play opened in June 1991. It and subsequent productions made frequent use of music, often using some of Vincent's own compositions.

Though Vincent had numerous careers (at one time he even had a health food store in Hemmingford), the one constant element in his life was music. Wherever Vincent worked or lived,

music was an essential part of his life. He continued writing songs and making music on a wide variety of themes. He wrote happy songs, sad songs, songs about work and about play, and songs celebrating the wonder of love or the anguish of parting. Some songs were intentionally cathartic to help a friend through a difficult time, a death in the family, or a broken heart. He wrote songs for his parents, his daughter Emma and son Nicholas, and many songs for his wife Barbara. There are songs for dancing and others for crying; some look backward nostalgically, others point hopefully to the future, but all express Vincent's positive view of people, their foibles gently revealed, their strengths triumphantly declared.

In his music, Vincent was essentially an amateur (using the word in its strictest sense). He loved to write songs, and he got joy from sharing them with others, expecting no return. The act of sharing was the reward. For years, he never even recorded his songs. Songwriting was just something he did, like breathing. And those that he did put on tape were done on inferior machines borrowed



Vincent and boys recording some of Vincent's songs at Shawbridge, 1985.

from friends. It was not a question of money so much although that was often in short supply; it was more a sense that the creation and the sharing were the total act. Anything beyond that, especially if it involved things mechanical, was not part of Vincent's realm. The possibility that his songs might be marketable never occurred to him until the last year of his life. Then he made the mistake of going to a studio where they thought his voice needed "improvement," so with electronic gimmickry, Vincent's voice was distorted out of all recognition.

This experience put him in a quiet state of depression, but not for long. His ebullient spirit soon brought him bouncing back as active and creative as ever. Vincent had a strong sense of the importance of community, of the need for people to join together in creative efforts, whether it be an economic endeavour, artistic activity, or something just plain fun. The energy he threw into these community projects and the love he projected touched all who met him.

—Stanley G. Triggs

*On August 1, 1998, The Shoestring Theatre presented a tribute to Vincent Ierfino, at which Stan, his daughter Emily, and some 23 others performed.