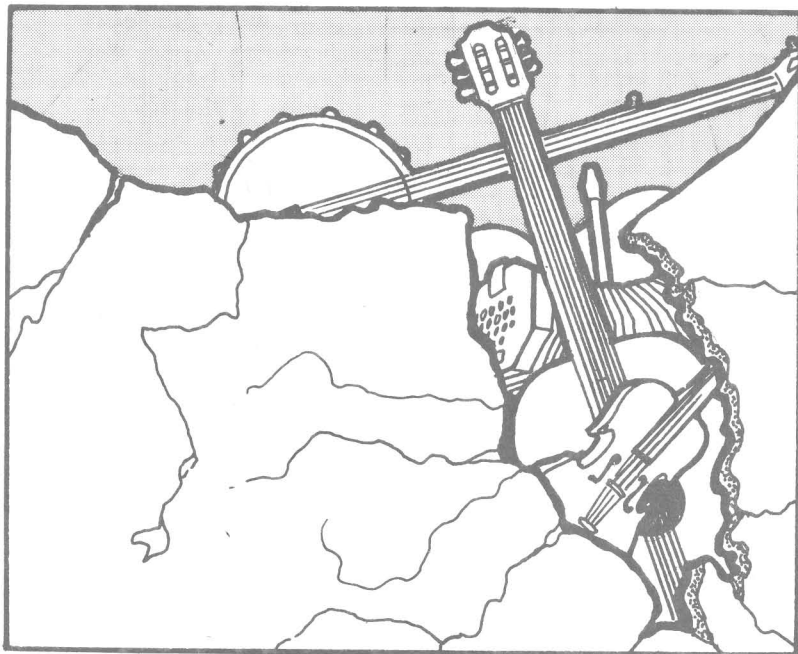


LE NOUVEL ONTARIO

INTERVIEW: PIERRE GERMAIN AND JOAN KUYEK



In July, 1978, Jon Bartlett and I participated in the 7th annual Northern Lights Festival Boréal, a music festival in Sudbury, Ontario (see "Retrospectives" column, CFB, Vol. 1, No. 5, Sept./Oct. '78). What struck us was the high percentage of francophone participation both among performers and audience. We also found out that there is a distinct sense of cultural and geographic identity among people from Northern Ontario. The region is distinct from the southern part of the province in that, since it is on the Canadian Shield, its two main industries are mining and logging. It also has a very substantial francophone population, Sudbury being one of the most bilingual towns in the country. These "franco-Ontariens" see themselves as quite distinct from the French in

Quebec, and the beginnings of a cultural upsurge are taking place. This phenomenon is often referred to as "le Nouvel-Ontario" (new-Ontario). To find out more about this movement and its relationship to what is happening among the anglophones, we interviewed Pierre Germain and Joan Kuyek of Sudbury, both of whom are heavily involved in the local cultural-political scene. Pierre used to perform with Robert Paquette, a well-known Sudbury performer of traditional and original material who has since made a big name for himself in Quebec. At the time of the interview, Pierre was working with Robert Dickson on "La Cuisine de la Poésie", a group which combines poetry, music and politics.

Rika Ruebsaat

CFB: When people refer to Franco-Ontario, what region do they mean by this?

PG: It's the region from North Bay and Sudbury north, right up through Chapleau, and towns like Hearst, Earlton, and so on. There are some 200,000 or 250,000 Francophones in that area.

CFB: Where do most of the Francophones come from, and how long have they been here?

PG: A lot of them came from Quebec, and the Maritimes, especially New Brunswick. They came here for jobs. Sudbury used to be quite a big lumber town. Both the English and the French came when the logging camps opened up. There was also farming. Now, there's the big industry.

CFB: Has the population always been a fairly even balance between English and French?

PG: There are supposedly more Francophones here than any other ethnic group. Francophones represent about 33 or 35 per cent of the population in Sudbury, although it doesn't show that much.

CFB: What kind of music, or other types of community culture existed in these places?

PG: Well, every little community around here had its fiddlers and its callers, as well as good dancers. There was a lot of New Brunswick music, and a lot of the old Quebec songs were brought here and have been transformed over a long period of time. We're a melting pot really. In that sense, I don't know exactly what Franco-Ontarien culture is.

CFB: Would you say that in the smaller, more rural communities the culture is much stronger?

PG: Oh yes, in the communities that are still organic, like Earlton. They have a leadership in that community that doesn't want to see the town get dispersed. They have enough work in that community to keep them all there, to keep even the young people there. They have co-operatives and government projects, and they've started small manufacturing companies. There are four or five main investors, a local elite, but it's still much better than Inco or Falconbridge. Earlton is a privileged community in the sense that they've kept that organic link. But radio has spoiled it. A lot of the old musicians aren't considered good enough to be on radio. Take St. Germain, a fiddler from around here. He sent a tape in to the radio, but from what I heard he wasn't good enough, but he was full of a lot of the old tunes. That's the kind of thing that's been going on. There has not been too much of an effort to revive that older culture because the younger generation does not seem to get into it that much. We've really been out of contact.

CFB: What kind of music did you have at home when you were growing up?

PG: My folks didn't really participate in any cultural things. I have the feeling, because of people like my folks, that there's a whole generation that really was robbed of their culture. My parents won't even recognize that I do music. Like I'll play music, and they won't even hear it because it's been blocked out.

Their country is not “Le Nouvel Ontario”; for them, it’s Ontar-i-ar-i-ar-io.

CFB: When we meet people from Quebec, they all know their own traditional songs and they can all sing them; they all know the traditional reels and jigs. If they can’t play them, they know them to hear them. In Quebec, that has never been lost. Would you say then that the Franco-Ontarien local indigenous culture is not as strong as in Quebec?

PG: Of course not. I think it’s a question of geography. The distance implies that your roots have been stretched and you’re forgetting about them. Your day to day life is less and less impregnated by that culture, the basic culture you used to be part of. I went to Quebec recently and I met so many people who were doing traditional music, it boggled my mind. It’s so beautiful, I say, “I have to end up here.” But then I come back home, and I see that this is where I have to work, and it’s very important.

CFB: What about the general population. Is there a sense of being Franco-Ontarien?

PG: There is an awareness of the need for a cultural identity, but not that much among the general population. We’re a minority. We relate to the whole thing with the psychology of a minority. There was a series of programmes on Radio Canada, one-hour shows on the French minorities outside Quebec. The one that was done on Sudbury was very good. One thing it showed was the racism that used to exist between the English and French—you’d change sidewalks just like in the States between black and white. We sort of laugh at it now but even

when I was in school, you’d have an English baseball team and a French baseball team. There’s still some of that.

CFB: Did you attend a French public school?

PG: There weren’t any at all really, in Ontario. You got French classes in high school, but the language of instruction was English. I went to a private school, Collège Sacré Coeur. You had to pay extra to go there. Most French-speaking Catholics didn’t make it past grade 9 because their parents couldn’t afford to send them to high school. Now, of course, there are five or six French public schools in the Sudbury area, but still what’s happening in the schools is that when you’re in the classroom, you talk French; when you’re outside, everybody’s talking English. Even when you have French schools, the predominant influence of the society is English. When you get into the towns with the big industry, there’s hardly a chance in hell of living in a francophone environment.

CFB: How did the sense of being Franco-Ontarien, and the consciousness of that culture, come about?

PG: Well, it all arose in the 60s, when the young people started creating things in their own language. We started a theatre group called Theatre du Nouvel Ontario. We started writing plays in our language, and putting them on in Northern Ontario. The first thing we did, called *Moi je viens du nord, l’hostie!* (loosely translated “I’m from the north for Christ’s sake!”) annoyed a lot of people, because the clergy were still very strong. We brought

this play around, and it was boycotted in some cities, some villages. So what we'd do is go around to pool halls and restaurants and get a crowd and bring them in, and we'd do the play. There was a certain vision as far as the language and the question of identity went, but it was just exploration. By our second play, we were really beginning to be more specific. We were asking for our schools, our French schools. The Theatre du Nouvel Ontario went down and strategized to take over the school in Sturgeon Falls, with the students. We put on the play outside, and at a given moment everybody just surged into the school before the police could even stop us. The pressure was there. CBC came down. It was enough to get the French school.

JK: I come from a French-Canadian line, my mother's side. We've been singing those old French songs at get-togethers since I was a kid. But we only sang that in the family. It was private. It's only become public since the Theatre du Nouvel Ontario. And now they make a big thing of St. Jean Baptiste Day, and the other things. It started in Sudbury; ever since that started it's brought it out into the open. And now we're trying to get other people that have been doing it privately to come out of the closet.

CFB: What about groups like Cano*? Do they consider themselves to be Franco-Ontarien, to reflect that kind of pride?

PG: Well, the person that brought it all together was André Paiement. He's an incredible playwright, as well as a musician. They started out as a co-operative, and decided to use French as the vehicle to carry across what they were talking about. You could say they're Franco-Ontarien, but half of them are not, they're just from Northern Ontario. They do a lot of songs about the region. But they're not really political. They know what sells.

CFB: Are they culture heroes for northern Ontario?

JK: Yes. Except you can't turn on your radio and hear them. To us they're culture heroes, but to the majority of people in Sudbury, well, nobody's heard their music.

PG: The people in Cano are aware of what quality or creative music is all about. But in their music they don't really identify with this specific region.

JK: Cano is going through a major change right now; with André gone they have to decide where they're going. They don't have those roots any more that André provided them with. Those were his roots, and they're what make the music interesting and ensure the blend of all the musical elements. The music itself is much more out of jazz roots and such.

CFB: Tell us about François Lemieux.**

**Cano is an eight-member, northern Ontario-based group which combines rock, jazz, folk and classical styles into a high-powered, stagey performance. They sing mainly in French. Their logo is a man paddling a birchbark canoe and they are strongly identified by a lot of people as part of the emergence of Franco- and Northern-*

Ontarian talent and culture. They record on A&M Records.

***François Lemieux, from Blind River, Ontario, is a regular at the Northern Lights festival and sings traditional and original songs in a unique energetic style.*

PG: François Lemieux, as far as I'm concerned, is a fellow who is really aware of his roots. He comes from a big family in Blind River, and he can string you out traditional songs like you wouldn't believe. He's an 'animateur' too. He gets in front of the people, and he has so much to offer—a capella songs or anything else—that he's very powerful. He's about the only one that I can see who's really identifying—like in his guts—with this part of the country.

CFB: And is he quite well known up here?

PG: Oh yes. People around here identify with him. It's the language that my neighbour speaks. In his music, he has the traditional power to phrase things, like the very fast jig phrasing.

CFB: Does he write any political songs?

PG: Yes. They talk about people's lives and the quality of them. It's not propaganda. He identifies the processes that are assimilating the people who used to have organic communities.

CFB: What about Robert Paquette, how does he fit in?

PG: He's the one that was the pioneer, the local boy who made it. He made it in music, but with good music, music that people respected. Robert started with rock bands in the city for a long time, and then went into pure acoustic music and started composing his own material. He switched from English into French when he went on his own. And when he does traditional music, he does it well. He's our singer; he's from here.


CFB: Is he conscious of that role?

PG: He is conscious of that role, and he comes back every year. He'll play for nothing. But what's really destroying it, is what's happening in Montreal. The media there is putting him out as a Québécois.

CFB: What's his relationship to being from Northern Ontario, besides the fact that he comes back here for a visit? Did he grow up with traditional music?

PG: He comes from a very culturally conscious, Franco-Ontarien family. But it's 'la Culture', high art, whereas with François Lemieux who comes from a family of eighteen, they don't talk about culture, they talk about having a good time. And that's why Robert is a lot less political than François in a sense.

CFB: So you have a Franco-Ontarien community that's growing and becoming conscious of itself as a



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cultural community. Does that provide any encouragement at all for people working in English in this area? At the Northern Lights Festival in Sudbury, which is both French and English, is there any degree of co-operation between the two groups, or is there a French audience for the French singers, and an English audience for the English singers, with no interchange?

PG: There's a lot of interchange. Everybody knows each other and we really like what the other people are doing.

JK: Yes, but on the other hand, Pierre, when English musicians play with you, you have a lot of English songs you never can play with them because the audience you're playing to is Francophone. There might be three English musicians playing with you, but all the songs are going to be French. The opposite also happens where you get four Francophone musicians playing with an Anglophone rock band on Friday nights. But what usually happens if a Francophone singer sings in English at a Francophone workshop at the Festival, or sings in English almost anywhere, is that he's in trouble with his audience.

PG: Wait a second. You can put in the odd English song if you're playing for a French audience and they'll like it.

JK: But they always apologize. They always apologize.

CFB: So there's no real interface? You're not really allowed to cross the boundaries?

PG: Well, there is, in the sense that we all adopt certain styles; they're all North American styles.

CFB: In the English community, have you come across any political singers, who identify themselves as Northern Ontarians?

JK: It's important to understand what happened at Mine, Mill (*ed. the Mine, Mill and Smelter Worker's Union*). When the union was organized in 1944, it was a very militant union that actually organized almost the whole working class in town. In 1952 they hired a man named Weir Reed who became the education director for Mine, Mill, and really made an effort to bring culture out of the realms of the mystified into the lives of ordinary working people. They had theatre and they had ballet classes and all sorts of folk dancing and things like that at the Mine Mill hall. They had community halls all over the place. But a number of things utterly des-

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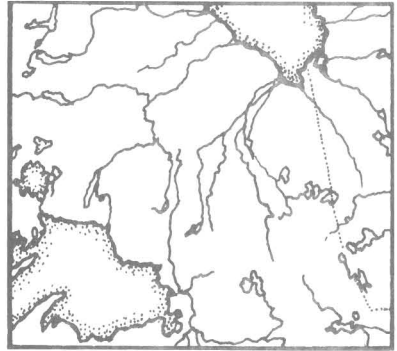
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troyed that. One was the raids that took place between 1958 and 1962 by the Steelworkers, and the red-baiting that went along with the raids. The other thing that happened was the advent of television in the community which killed the chance that Mine, Mill and organizations like that had to build an indigenous culture. What also happened is that there's not the encouragement from English Canadians that there is for Franco-Ontarians, because the environment they're moving in is so inundated with American pop, and it's more intimidating.

CFB: Do you feel that this developing Franco-Ontarien culture has had much of an effect in the community?

PG: Yes, there is a certain amount of identification in the community, undoubtedly. We never would have gotten this far if there wasn't. But Le Theatre du Nouvel Ontario is slowly going more and more into repertoire, because they have to. They're losing their identification slowly. Robert Paquette is a Québécois now. He's still known and loved here, but he is a Québécois. And Cano is not really Franco-Ontarien any more, although certainly they do good music. But we need another type of thing happening.

JK: There's also still a huge gap between the Francophone culture that's exhibited in the music and songs and plays, and most of the Francophones in this region who are embarrassed even to talk French. They're working class people who aren't allowed to speak French on the job; most of them speak English everywhere except at home. They've been so inundated with correct



French and all that kind of crap, they're embarrassed because they think that language is something you have to know the rules for. It shows that they don't have the right kind of education. They feel like they're uncultured when they're face to face with that. And so all this cultural activity goes on in a world that they don't even touch.

* * *

CFB: Who is "La Cuisine de la Poesie" that you're currently involved with?

PG: La Cuisine de la Poesie is myself and Robert Dickson, as well as other people who work with us occasionally. Robert Dickson started it up, and I put music behind his poetry. Essentially it's a political tool that uses experimentation with poetry and music.

CFB: Is it consciously northern Ontarian?

PG: La Cuisine as far as I'm concerned is the tool that I use to help create an identity for myself and the people here. The basic idea of La Cuisine is to go anywhere and sing for anybody who wants some music and wants to talk about who we are as Franco-Ontarians. It's political.

We name specific political figures, and we sing about pollution and education. We talk about certain values. That's the whole idea of it. We talk about alternatives.

CFB: Where do you play?

PG: We play all over, for example in the university residences or anywhere else. But as far as who brings us in and who puts the money in our pockets, it's the university.

CFB: I'd like to hear a bit about what you think the future holds in terms of Franco-Ontarien culture and music. What directions do you see it going in?

PG: Well, I'll always identify myself as a Franco-Ontarien. What that means is trying to operate in a community and to rebuild that community, because I want to be in that community. There's no way out of it except community. But there's this whole propaganda that's serving to take away people's guts. I'll give you an idea of what I'm talking about. I was at a concert in Ottawa. There was a group of French musicians that had done an album co-operatively, there were songs by a number of different groups. When they put on the concert, because they were unknowns and they felt inferior, they asked an American rock band to do a set so that people would get their money's worth. The Ottawa groups did their music and it was beautiful. Then this fellow and his band came on. He was from Hull originally, but had no roots anywhere—talked about Los Angeles like he'd talk about Florida, or Sudbury, exactly the same thing. Well, the radicals booed him, although they were just a handful. But other people that I thought would take a stand

didn't know what to do, saying, "What are we doing? We have to respect." I said, "Respect what? If I want American music, I'll turn on the radio on an American station, but not here, not now. This is a cultural event; we can't let this go unnoticed." There is a lot of confusion there.

CFB: They're so inundated with the American culture, they're afraid to say it doesn't belong to them.

PG: The confusion about music is that the musical styles are international. You can do a traditional type of American guitar playing and completely identify your area in what you're saying. You can do that. It's a question of what you're saying, the content is so important.

CFB: Yes, but in Quebec, for example, they understand that the form and the content are in the long run culturally and politically inseparable. On the other hand, you get Robert Paquette doing basically American style music, not Franco-Ontarien, even though he might be saying things that are Franco-Ontarien. It's not a question of good or bad music. Because American music is so predominant, it can too easily take over. Our own indigenous culture is very fragile.

PG: I see the music as a tool to communicate ideas. And I think that any style of music if it's well done can be acceptable in a socio-political context. As long as people can relate to who you are very clearly.

CFB: Well, look at someone like François Lemieux. François Lemieux could be a culture hero in the real indigenous sense of the word, like Gilles Vigneault in Quebec. And the

reason is, that because of his roots, not only is the content Franco-Ontarien, but the form is also. People see themselves in him not only content-wise, but musically also.

PG: But do you know he's starting into jazz? He's not a jazz musician, but he's taking his roots, and the rythmical content of who he is and what his tradition is, and he's going beyond it. It's a mixture.

JK: A new culture has to be a synthesis. There's what was there before, which isn't going to be revived, and there's the thing that exists now, and something else is going to come out of that. If you say I'm only going to do the things the way they were before, you become a reactionary. And it doesn't have any more

meaning. I think the crux of the thing is to what extent people are not intimidated by it. For me that question of intimidation is so important. The sense that it's a popular form that makes people feel that they're growing inside. Most of the things you hear on the radio are the antithesis of that.

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