

MUSIC

by Jennifer Abel

Plus ça change...

The evolution of Quebec's La Bottine Souriante

PREVIEW

LA BOTTINE SOURIANTE

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It may seem odd that the most traditional musicians currently playing with legendary Québec ensemble La Bottine Souriante are also some of the youngest. Lead vocalist Pierre-Luc Dupuis and fiddler André Brunet are still in their 20s, while foot-tapper and stringed-instrument whiz Éric Beaudry is just past 30. Yet it's a rejuvenation that has been welcomed by the group's veteran players.

"It's good for the band – it's good for new ideas, new energy," bassist Régent Archambault says from his home near Montréal.

In fact, Dupuis and Beaudry have only just joined the 27-year-old ensemble. Their arrival was occasioned by the amicable departure last December of longtime members Yves Lambert and Michel Bordeleau, a shift that signalled the complete turnover of the band's membership.

"Yves was the only one left in the band that was an original member," explains Archambault, who's been with the group since 1987. "So it's a completely changed band. But there's been 15 different formations in La Bottine Souriante since the beginning, so there's been a lot of musicians that went in and out of the band."

The new Bottiniens only had a few months to learn complicated arrangements of traditional Québécois songs by heart – the band doesn't use sheet music – but Dupuis and Beaudry were up to the challenge.

"We told them that (it would be difficult), but they wanted so much to be part of the band," says Archambault. "For them, it's a real chance."

The new members have quickly become integral parts of the group – they'll be showcased on a new studio album to be released this fall, and are front and centre in the current live performances.

"The personality of the lead singer is something important in the band," explains Archambault. "(Dupuis) has a very strong personality – charismatic. He is a funny guy, and he has a very good sense of singing traditional songs.... When we (did) the auditions, he was the one that made us laugh the most.

"I think that he's the future of La Bottine."

Archambault also offers high praise for Beaudry's talents as a singer, foot-tapper (an essential part of the band's sound) and instrumentalist.

"He has a very good sense of playing strings. He plays bouzouki, banjo, mandolin, acoustic and electric guitar. This is new to La Bottine – electric guitar."

Electrification is only the latest step in the evolution of the band, which was started in 1976 by five men from the Lanaudière region north of Montréal. (La bottine souriante, or "the smiling boot," refers to worn-out workboot soles.) The rhythmic, Acadian-influenced songs quickly became popular with listeners both inside and outside Québec. Eleven albums, numerous awards and countless tours later, the group now encompasses nine musicians – including a four-piece horn section – and percussive dancer Sandy Silva, who adds a modern complement to Beaudry's traditional foot-tapping.

But for all the changes La Bottine Souriante has seen, there is a strong line running through its past, present and future.

"The essence you're talking about is the way of telling that music, that traditional music that was done by the (original) group," says Archambault. "We always kept that way of doing the music. And for the new generation of musicians that are playing right now in La Bottine, they grew up with that music. When they

were five years old, the music was playing in their houses all day long."

The changes that have been made – necessary ones in the small Québec market, where fans come to see the band again and again – have taken the group away from its strictly traditional roots and propelled it to stardom in the world music scene. Archambault doesn't mind that a Canadian group is labelled as "world music" within its own country.

"We do traditional music from here that is more modern – played in a modern way. (It's) a fusion with all other kinds of music, like so many artists do in world music right now."

Audiences from Spain to Norway and across North America continue to respond strongly to the band's lively, contagious music, however much it might have changed since 1976.

"It's a music that communicates very easily," Archambault says. "There's no category of people not being touched by that."