

La Bottine Souriante in Concert: Quebec's Greatest Band Renews Itself Again

October 30, 2003



"It was like Cajun music on steroids," remarked one audience member in the wake of La Bottine Souriante's (LBS) September 27 two-hour concert at the

Hopkins Center at Dartmouth College. With cut-rate prescription drugs increasingly flowing from Canada to the US, the cascade of endorphins dispensed by Quebec's premier world music ensemble to a grateful American audience was yet more life-saving medicine from Canada. In truth, though, appearances by the nonet are too infrequent this side of the border. So are La Bottine's recordings on its independent Mille-Pattes label. You can't find them across the street from the Hopkins at the Dartmouth Book Store, nor can you buy them at the well-stocked shops at my Amherst/Northampton, Massachusetts haunting grounds. (No trouble in Amherst to buy new releases by a half dozen etoiles from land-locked Mali, but the latest release from nearby Quebec's best band?—let's just say that NAFTA hasn't yet made a difference.)

Fifteen minutes before showtime, I was perplexed to discover program notes with no mention of group founder, Yves Lambert, who I later learned had performed his final gig with LBS during its annual New Years Eve concert in Montreal. More than anyone else, the avuncular, mustachioed lead singer/accordionist had been synonymous with the 26-year-old ensemble. Founded in 1977, La Bottine Souriante was for its first dozen years entirely acoustic, featuring fiddle, guitar, mandolin, harmonica, and Yves' three-row accordion. And of course, the group always brought along its perpetual foot percussion—hence, the band's name [in English], *The Smiling Boot*. During its first decade, LBS established a repertoire that emphasized reels, jigs, an occasional ballad, and irreverent, call-and response burlesques lampooning everything from men of the cloth to couples under the sheets. It wasn't until the end of the 1980s though that the

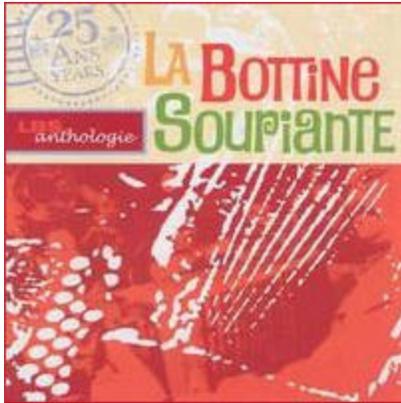


band began to move toward its current configuration, with the arrival of jazz bassist Reginald Archambault and jazz pianist, saxophonist, and arranger, Jean Frechette. By 1990, Frechette had moved full-time to saxophone and the group had added a jazz pianist, two trombones and a trumpet. It was the beginning of an entirely new genre—the planet's first synthesis of traditional Quebec-Celtic music with jazz-based horn arrangements. Now, thirteen years later, with Archambault and Jean Frechette as the band's

elder statesmen, a single question loomed large: would the tail (the horn arrangements) decisively wag the dog of tradition? The answer during the two-hour, 24-number concert was both yes and no. The evening began with *La grondeuse* (The Grumbling Woman), a spirited reel which opened with an acoustic trio of guitar, fiddle, and percussive feet stating the chorus. Behind the band's front line of acoustic virtuosos in their twenties, stood the brass players—a full generation older—poised to play. Next, the saxophonist joined the acoustic musicians in restating the chorus, adding a few extracurricular riffs of his own. Then, the electric bass, electric piano, and the remaining horns weighed in, serving up a funky interlude that set the table for the full nonet—now including Lambert's young successor, Pierre-Luc Dupuis, on button box. That cranked-up climax thoroughly won the audience over, immersing them both physically and emotionally in the music.

In its build-up of instrumental fire power, *La grandiose* mirrored *La Bottine*'s own evolution from a spirited acoustic ménage to a high-octane, musical hybrid. That synthesis, in truth, owes more than a little to the impeccable, inventive ensemble arrangements of the band's saxophonist, Jean Frechette. Throughout the two-hour concert, the horns, electronic keyboard, and electric bass never obscured the acoustic instruments. You could always hear each voice and instrument distinctly—a testament to Frechette's (and the LBS soundman's) mastery of ensemble balance and dynamics. Unlike jazz and musette ensembles, LBS seldom swings. Instead, like much rock music, the band drives forcefully and at considerable volume on the beat. But this was no rock concert—especially with the band's traditional acoustic instruments and their indefatigable traditional dance rhythms always front and center. (A further nod to the band's roots in dance was the addition of Sandy Silva, a percussive dancer with fluency in Celtic, jazz, and flamenco forms. In the up-tempo offerings, her lithe, mercurial stage presence consistently goosed up the players and their audience to higher energy levels.)

All night long, Frechette's horn arrangements conveyed an eclectic bag of tricks. The horns periodically laid down a feel-good, dynamically controlled harmonic bed behind



the other instruments. They reinforced melodic statements and forward momentum with their collective syncopations and drive. Frequently, the horns divided forces, unleashing polyrhythms against one another and the rhythm section. On one occasion, they shadowed one another canonically; on another they separated into four separate voices, conversing with New Orleans brio. Seven numbers into the concert, La Bottine revealed its mastery of dynamics with La reel des soucoupes volantes (The Flying Saucer Reel). The horns' sinuous slides up and down the chromatic scale coupled with elastic crescendi and diminuendi (continuous increases and decreases of

volume) created soaring, swooping effects that defied garden variety musical gravity.

La Bottine Souriate was far more than the sum of its reels. Cadenced between most of them were irreverent, call-and-response vocals about dissolute clerics; picaresque, amorous trysts; binges with the bottle; and other manifestations of la joie de vivre. Two of those offerings were fascinating world-music hybrids: Le plus beau jour (The Most Beautiful Day) combined an edgy Latin piano motif against traditional Celtic cadences; Dans Paris y'a t'une brune (The Brunette from Paris) married French Celtic influences to a brass-propelled figure straight out of a Cairo recording studio. To keep things in proper perspective, the band staked out musical turf for the Devil and his minions, especially in Le demon sort de l'enfer (The Devil Comes out of Hell), a litmus for the vocal and theatrical talents of young Pierre-Luc Dupuis. In the song, the Devil turns up in town, fingering in separate verses its respectable members-its doctor, banker, lawyer, priest, etc.-for the one-way trip of a lifetime. Dupuis, as the Devil, handled his satanic portfolio with relish, investing his expressive baritone, facial gestures, and body language with just the right brew of sinister smugness. On stage, he made a point to visit a different band member with each verse, booking them all for southward passage. At the song's end, the four horns gathered at stage center for a cacophonous coda to downward mobility, with horn bells and slides thrusting downward, downward, downward

After the concert, bassist Reginald Archambault and dancer Sandy Silva met briefly with audience members to answer questions. Yves Lambert, noted Archambault, had founded the band 26 years ago with fellow traditionalist musicians from the general vicinity of Joliette, a town 130 miles north of Montreal near the St. Lawrence. The band's young acoustic musicians, he continued, hail from the same area, a hotbed of traditional Quebec-Celtic music that has assimilated French Canadian and Maritime province influences. "When we're overseas in places like Scotland, we can hear the kinship between their reels and ours," he remarked. When an audience member asked if the band played any differently for French Canadian versus American audiences, the bassist replied that they did not, adding, though, that understanding the band's French lyrics was bound to enhance the listening experience. Then again, offered Ms. Silva, "you should join us for our annual concerts around New Years at the Spectrum in Montreal. They are absolutely wild." Having just survived a frequently wild two-hour concert in Hanover, I could only imagine what an absolutely wild New Years Eve

experience with La Bottine Souriante in Montreal might entail.

The group's most recent releases are Cordial and Anthologie, the latter a 16-track retrospective of the band's entire career. You can order both indispensable discs and check out the band's concert schedule at www.millepattes.com
