

Gramophones, Virtual and Real *or how your intrepid author's love of old records took him on a voyage of discovery of things cultural*

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When I was a little gaffer, my family had a floor model wind-up gramophone, my entry to the world of music. It housed my father's collection of old 78s, some so old they were only recorded on one side. I particularly remember the Frank Crumit records, the American comedian-singer who is now undergoing a revival of popularity, and who I and a few others feel was the first one to record folk songs with commercial success.

That gramophone, alas, is long gone, along with most, but not all, of my father's records. Not gone is my love of those old records with their hissing sound, and the unmistakable impression that the artist was singing into some vast megaphone. The sound haunts me still, and I collect modern CDs of these old recordings, which I love with an irrational love. An antique table-model gramophone now sits in my living room, complete with an old Dumbells record, which I happily play for astonished visitors. My grandchildren love it, and think it belongs to my wife – a grandma-phone, you understand.

You can imagine, then, my pleasure in discovering a website called The Virtual Gramophone – <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/gramophone/index-e.html>. This is part of the website of the Library and Archives of Canada, and is devoted to Canadian Historical Sound Recordings. It provides us with a comprehensive look at the 78 rpm era in Canada. There are thousands of recordings available; you can play them free on your computer (in their entirety) or download them as MP3 files. They are easily searchable by title and by performer. The collection is constantly growing, starting with recordings as early as 1909, going on to World War One, and now entering the twenties and thirties.

I was pleased to see innumerable recordings by Lewis James, an artist my father had in his collection, as well as Henry Burr (who recorded an incredible 12,000 records). Various members of the Dumbells, the famous World War One front-line entertainers, are represented. Charles Harrison was very popular. You can listen to great opera singers such as Edward Johnson and Mary Garden. No more cranking up the old

gramophone; you're just a mouse click away from that great, unmistakable sound.

Naturally, I started looking up old Canadian folk songs by title. There is a surprising number of them – all French. Well, "When You and I were Young, Maggie" might qualify as a Canadian folk song; there are no less than fourteen (!) versions available, mostly all sung by Henry Burr, along with a couple by Charles Harrison.

But the French folksongs! "Ah! Si mon moine", "Alouette", "Au clair de la lune" (by the famous Eva Gauthier, 1885-1958), "À Saint-Malo", "À la claire fontaine"... And that's just the A's. It started me thinking. How come so many French-Canadian folksongs were recorded, but no English-Canadian folk songs? No "Brave Wolfe"? No "Lady Franklin"? No "Red River Valley"? "Isabeau s'y promène" makes it, but no "Barbara Allen"? It does certainly seem that the French value their culture and their folk songs.

More hunting for old records of Canadian songs on the Internet led me to another discovery: *La Bonne Chanson*. To all you readers of the *Canadian Folk Song* who are familiar with Quebec's *La Bonne Chanson* movement, I humbly confess my ignorance hitherto of this matter. There are, I'm sure, others who can do a more scholarly job than I in describing this movement, but here is my attempt.

The 1937 French Language Congress in Quebec City emphasized the value of song in preserving language and culture. This struck a responsive chord (sorry, bad pun) with Father Charles-Émile Gadbois (1906-1981), a publisher and composer born near St-Hyacinthe who was ordained a priest in 1930. He promptly established *La Bonne Chanson* to collect and publish the best French-Canadian songs. 550 songs were soon published. Travels to France for material were stopped in 1939 because of the outbreak of war. That same year, however, he arranged with Bluebird, on the RCA Victor label, to record fifty discs of these songs.

The indefatigable l'abbé Gadbois founded a radio station in Montreal called CJMS; the call letters are from the motto carved on the Quebec

parliament buildings: *Je me souviens*. Now that he had a radio station he persuaded the government to make *La Bonne Chanson* part of the school curriculum. Into every school was beamed, via radio, *Le Quart d'heure de La Bonne Chanson*.

In 1955 l'abbé Gadbois and his son Raoul were relieved of their duties as heads of *La Bonne Chanson* by the Archbishop of St-Hyacinthe. The reason for this has never been determined, and remains a mystery to this day. The enterprise was then worth millions of dollars. But Québécois now knew their songs.

The 1937 Language Congress was right: songs are an important way of preserving your culture. Which is why I, and many Canadians, worry about Quebec and their separatist philosophy. The bonds of culture are strong. We Anglophones don't know our songs (see the Virtual Gramophone collection), and don't have the same strong culture. Bombarded as we are by American culture, and without a strong grasp of our own, I understand – though passionately disagree with – the philosophy of the right that wants to strengthen our ties to the USA, to become more like them. How I wish we had had a quarter hour of Canadian (anglo and franco) folk songs beamed into our schools!

One hundred of the *Bonne Chanson* songs have just been released (2003) on a four-CD album called *La Bonne Chanson* by Disques XXI Records (2-1438) at a very reasonable price. Artists include Albert Viau, Eva Gagnier, Jacques Lebreque, Charles Marchand, Raoul

Jobin, La Famille Brassard, and Le Quartuor Alouette. The original recordings (anywhere from the 1920s to the 1950s) include just about every French-Canadian traditional song you can think of, from "Isabeau s'y promène" to "Bonhomme! Bonhomme"! to "Le petit navire". It's a fascinating collection and well worth the few dollars they are charging.

Go to <http://www.xxi-21.com/> and while you're there, check out 2-1483: *Madame Bolduc, une fois pour toutes!*. The legendary Bolduc, née Mary Travers (1894-1941) – (no, not the Peter, Paul and Mary Mary Travers) – born into dire poverty in the Gaspé (her home town of Newport now has a museum of her life), recorded some 155 songs, mostly of her own composition. Her songs touched a chord (there I go again), and she had a radio program that just about everyone in Quebec listened to. On this album you can hear approximately seventy-five songs, originally recorded on the Starr label, at that time the only rival to RCA Victor. The Virtual Gramophone also carries many of her songs, plus an excellent biography.

Well, your intrepid author has reached the end of this particular journey. Who would guess that a love of old gramophone records could yield such interesting finds and spark such political/philosophical debates? While I go to crank up the handle of my old gramophone, I'll think of the CSTM and their valiant effort to make Canadians aware of our wonderful heritage of song. In all languages.



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