

A Breath of Fresh Air

Jo Frost speaks to the progressive French-Canadian folk group Le Vent du Nord about keeping Québécois traditions alive

A cold, northerly wind known as the Mistral had buffeted the streets of Marseille throughout the day but as it gradually subsides, another 'Wind of the North,' this time Le Vent du Nord, begin their showcase at Babel Med, France's world music expo. The unseasonal evening chill soon dissipates as the marquee fills up and the low, rasping drone of Nicolas Boulerice's hurdy-gurdy kicks in, joined by Olivier Demers' propulsive fiddle playing and perfectly in sync foot tapping, together with the strumming of Simon Beaudry's *bouzouki*, and the occasional twang of Réjean Brunet's Jew's harp. This is the first time the French-Canadian quartet have played in Marseille and the mainly local crowd edge closer to the stage as the infectious rhythms and call-and-response singing work up a pace.

The group have been together for 13 years and performed all over the world, becoming unofficial cultural ambassadors of French-speaking Canada. Québec is the second largest state in Canada and the only French-speaking one in North America with a population of just over 8 million. French is the official language and spoken by almost 80% of Québécois. The fact that the majority of the population is multilingual undoubtedly contributes to its cultural vitality, with origins tracing back to French, aboriginal, Anglo-Saxon and North American cultures. It's this background that gives Le Vent du Nord their USP – besides the fact that they are consummate entertainers on and off-stage, and top-class musicians.

"We're very much a cultural *mélange*," explains Demers. "We're sometimes described as 'protectors or guardians of the tradition' but also as 'innovators' – we're happy to have the two aspects. We feel very close to the tradition and have a profound respect for it, but we're not at all embarrassed to go completely the other way..." It's this inventive, modernistic approach to the tradition that has gained them fans around the world, especially on the festival circuit.

"Ninety-five per cent of the time we play outside of Québec, so we want to say who we are, because there are a lot of people who don't know there is a Francophone population in America."

"There are 350 million Anglophones around us," he continues, "so to survive, we have to sing loud, talk loud, eat loud..." he laughs. "We like to represent our people – their ways and cultures."

"One day, we will present ourselves as politicians!" quips Boulerice, although their role as charismatic promoters of Québécois music is undeniable and would surely win them the popular vote.

There's clearly a sense that Canada's Francophone culture is under threat from Anglophone domination – something Demers describes as being like the "big elephant in the room." The pride in their unique culture and society is evident, as is the threat of its existence. "This culture will disappear if we don't do something," he says. "Distinct societies need to survive... that's why we pursue and continue to play this great music that we have in Québec. To continue and to make this culture alive – this is what we want to present onstage, to show what we are."

The trademark elements of Le Vent du Nord's music are its dynamic mix of Celtic and French song and the call-and-response singing, "like in Brittany or Normandy," explains Boulerice, "it's a mixture of the French traditions from the West Coast and the Celtic tradition."

"The feet are also important," says Demers. Alain Lamontagne, a musician from Montréal, invented the rather grandiose sounding term, *podorythmie*, in the 70s – "*C'est chic, non?*" Boulerice smiles, "but it's also simply known as *tapper du pied* – to do rhythm with your feet – not so chic!"

The band's latest album, their eighth, is called *Têtu*. The most usual translation is 'Stubborn' but the band prefer to define it

as 'Headstrong.' "It has a lot of layers, this title," explains Demers. "The determined aspect of our band, our people... our music is *têtu*; the way we sing in French; traditional music in Québec is also *têtu*."

"We are like salmon!" interjects Boulerice, "we're *contre courant*... (against the flow). The fact of being determined – obstinate almost – to continue with this music. Some people say, 'but why don't you just speak English like everybody else? It would be so much simpler.' Of course, but it's not the point, we're very happy that we speak English and can communicate with everybody, but we want to show the positive side of *têtu*."

There's been a clear development in the group's sound over the years, largely

due to the fact that they perform so much together and are constantly challenging and stimulating each other. "If you take the first CD, it's closer to the traditional way, very purist," explains Demers. "It's not that we don't like purist music, but the sound has just evolved over numerous concerts, so we know where we can go, where we can push ourselves. We need to stimulate ourselves and go to another level. It would be boring to play that much and always be doing the same stuff."

"We probably create more in 2015 than at the beginning," continues Boulerice. "We still work with the traditional stuff, we still do research but we also create more songs but in the style of the traditions, so that's why sometimes ▶



Le Vent du Nord performing at Tønder Festival in Denmark in 2014

people call it 'progressive rock' – I mean folk!" The band all laugh. "And tonight we're doing a tribute to Genesis..." Boulerice jokes. "But we do have that rock attitude to bring the music a little bit further, make something different."

The songs on the album are a mixture of traditional repertoire, sourced by Simon Beaudry from a significant archive at the University of Laval in Québec, as well as their own compositions, dealing with love, politics and history. "We try to create new interpretations of traditional pieces that have never been recorded, in an original form. Also compose new songs but in a traditional style; we use the same historical themes, politics, to explain who we are," explains Boulerice. "The main thing is to keep the spirit of the tradition with a bit of exoticism!"

One standout, original track written by Boulerice is 'Confédération', referring to the formation of the nation of Canada in 1867. "It started when the prime

minister decided to have a party for the 150th anniversary of Confederation," says Boulerice. "It's weird, Québec City was founded in 1608 – how can Canada be younger than the city? For a French point of view, it's more than 400 years old, but for the native people it's a few thousand years old."

The song questions people's memories of this historic event and asks why Francophone people seem to have forgotten about it. "We try to bring a Francophone point of view in North America," says Demers. The band agree that they behave no differently onstage as to how they are when they discuss

politics offstage. "It's normal that we talk about this onstage. We're the same – we cannot do differently," says Demers. "But we have to take care to do it in a nice way, we don't want to be teachers of history, just to talk about our point of view and laugh about it too," Boulerice makes clear.

"Like the song 'Confédération' – it's not a directive; a lot of people don't talk about these things, so we just put a spotlight on things people have forgotten."

There was a staunch Québécois independence movement in the 60s and 70s, but since then the sovereigntists have lost two referendums, firstly in 1980, then in a much closer vote in 1995. In 2006 parliament declared Québec should be seen as a 'nation' within a united Canada and these days the province has a great deal of autonomy and control over its education, cultural and immigration policies. The current resurgence in interest about the question of Québec's status within Canada has possibly been brought back into the limelight with the recent Scottish Independence referendum. "We're getting older and we have kids, so we think a bit more about what we will give to our children," says Demers. "That brings a lot of questions about who we are, where we want to go. We have a chance to tour the world and see lots of great things and bring these things back home."

"Politics and history are really important," continues Boulerice, "we have to know where we are from to understand who we are." ♦

+ **DATES** *Le Vent du Nord* tour in July, see p93 for details

