

Le Bon Vent

Chicago Tribune – Le Bon Vent is inspired by French connections

By Aaron Cohen – Special to the Tribune
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When accordionist Jeremiah McLane and clarinetist James Falzone talk about an early tour of their group, Le Bon Vent, both bring up a minor act of vandalism that turned out to be somewhat defining.

“We played at this historic hippie club in Cambridge, Mass.,” Falzone said. “Our sign said, ‘Playing the music of France and lands touched by French culture.’ And somebody crossed it out and wrote, ‘Veiled euphemism for imperialism.’ That’s actually right, but music itself goes back to colonialism from Day One.”

Le Bon Vent (meaning “The Good Wind”) has been researching traditional French music and creatively reworking this source material, for the past three years. The mostly New England-based sextet will perform at the Chicago Cultural Center Nov. 5 and recently released its disc “Goodnight Marc Chagall” (Epcat). While McLane and Falzone have immersed themselves in the musical and lyrical dialects from different French regions, they also take into account how French music has reached, and responded to, the wider world.

At the same time, Le Bon Vent is part of an international movement of musicians who are drawing from Gallic inspiration. Guitarist Dominique Cravic’s Les Primitifs Du Futur take cues from classic Paris cabarets. Paris Combo has been touring the world with its version of traditional chanson. Every November, New York’s Birdland jazz club hosts a tribute to French Gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt, while Alfonso Ponticelli pays homage to him Wednesdays at Chicago’s Green Mill. American singers ranging from Madeleine Peyroux to Cat Power are covering the laconically lewd Serge Gainsbourg.

Still, Le Bon Vent and its contemporaries are facing a somewhat uphill climb in the United States. All cinephiles are expected to know the works of French directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut. Students and art lovers constantly stream into the Art Institute of Chicago to look at Claude Monet’s paintings. Compared with the French impact in those areas, its music does not receive such recognition in the U.S.

“French classical music did have a huge influence here through composers Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy,” McLane said. “But that ended maybe 100 years ago.”

In his blood

McLane, an American who lives in Vermont, has been connected to French music since he was growing up. His father worked with the French resistance during World War II and McLane spent his childhood in rural central France. Later on, he focused on jazz piano and classical music as a graduate student at Boston’s New England Conservatory.

“I dropped out of the jazz scene and was looking for something that connected to me,” McLane said. “So I started playing accordion and immediately got introduced to accordion music from France.”

A few years later, McLane received a grant from the Vermont Arts Council to present his interpretation of the connections that link France to New England. For instance, this American area’s Celtic population also thrived in the French region of Brittany — along with their bagpipes.

Falzone, who McLane knew at the conservatory, transposed lines from the traditional French bombarde (a kind of oboe) to his instrument for *Le Bon Vent*. Vocalist Cristi Catt became versed in old dialects from the Limousin and Auvergne regions. Violinist Ruthie Dornfeld specializes in the fiddle traditions from across Europe while guitarist Adam Larrabee and percussionist Taki Masuko plays rhythms that echo France's thriving Moroccan and Algerian communities.

Yet while McLane researched written texts and field recordings, he insists, "Le Bon Vent is not a traditional version of French music. Some of what we're doing was to take a composed piece and improvise to make it sound less classical. I'm not in the business of preservation."

What's also notable is that for more than seven centuries, most traditional French music has been built around short melodies, each with a limited number of notes. For Falzone, who does not face such rigid guidelines when he performs regularly in Chicago open-ended jazz groups, classic French restrictions are a welcome challenge.

"I enjoy it when the intrigue is what kind of variations you can spin on a main melody," Falzone said. "Where the whole idea is to be as inventive as you can with those eight bars."

Redefining During the time that McLane? was studying in 1970s France, the country was going through a revival of interest in its folkloric music — taking cues from their folkie American counterparts. McLane? credits a mix of French academic and governmental missions for this preservation. Yet just as much as France itself has always been made up of different regions and waves of immigrants, newer arrivals are permanently changing how French music is defined.

"If you were to hear a bagpipe band with a drummer from Senegal, that would be vaguely cool or interesting in the U.S.," McLane? said. "In France, that's a matter of course."

Norah Delaney, director of cultural programming for Chicago's Alliance Francaise, also marvels at the constantly evolving diversity within French music. She also describes French government initiatives to promote these changes, such as sponsoring international Fete De La Musique music festivals. But Delaney says that resources are key for organizations such as hers to make Chicagoans more aware of contemporary French musicians.

"There's more music coming to my door than from any other media," Delaney said. "It's not that there's a lack of artists out there, it's just that we don't have the funding to do it all."

McLane? contends it's only a matter of time until Americans will hear these artists.

"People can present this music a lot of different ways," McLane? said. "We're just beginning to see where it can go."

The sounds of France

French music is evolving as rapidly as its changing population. Sure, a few CDs can't cover the folk and popular songs of 61 million people, but these offer solid and accessible introductions to the current scene and some historical landmarks.

Various Artists, "The Rough Guide to the Music of France" (World Music Network): This wide-ranging single-disc overview touches on A Filetta's polyphonic Corsican singing, guitarists Romane and Angelo Debarre's Gypsy swing, and Massilia Sound System's rap from the Mediterranean Coast.

Jean-Francois Dutertre, “Chansons Traditionnelles De Normandy” (Buda): Singer/hurdy-gurdy player Dutertre collected and arranged this compilation of fascinating folk ballads from Normandy. Young maids and wandering sailors are recurring characters.

Michel Esbelin, “La Valse Des Hommes” (Buda): Esbelin specializes in traditional Auvergne cabrette (bagpipe) melodies, which have been rediscovered in France since the 1970s.

Serge Gainsbourg, “Histoire De Melody Nelson” (Philips): This sparse and deeply funky 1971 album epitomized Gainsbourg’s subversive take on sexuality. Beck, his biggest American fan, couldn’t have made “Sea Change” without it.

Souad Massi, “Honeysuckle (Mesk Elil)” (Wrasse): Contemporary Algerian-born, Paris based songwriter Massi’s alluring lyricism never hides the painful lyrics about her homeland, lost love and life in exile.

Les Primitifs Du Futur, “World Musette” (Sunnyside): Guitarist Dominique Cravic’s group mixes his own tunes with original takes on musette waltzes from the 1930s. Expatriate American cartoonist Robert Crumb is on mandolin.

Edith Piaf, “The Voice of the Sparrow” (Capitol): The iconic French chanson singer sounds heartbreakingly beautiful on this definitive collection. Unfortunately, the disc lacks thorough liner notes.

For travelers planning a music-seeking trip to France, a first-stop resource is the bilingual Web site of the Association Francaise d’Action Artistique (culturesfrance.com).

— Aaron Cohen

When I first saw this CD, I was not quite sure of what to expect. The album cover — a picture of bare trees on a hillside — gives no clue as to what lies ahead. A photo of the artist holding his accordion was the only indication of its contents.

But Freetown by Jeremiah McLane is far from what might be expected on an album of accordion music. The 14 tracks of mostly original tunes are works of inspiration and musical mastery and not the polkas and oompah-styled pieces usually associated with the instrument.

McLane was born in New Hampshire, traveled and lived all over the world, and now makes his home in Vermont. This album — his third solo work — is named for one of the places he lived as a child. Freetown is also the capitol of Sierra Leone.

Along the way Jeremiah earned a master’s degree in contemporary improvisation. Now this award-winning teacher, performer and composer puts his talents to work on this collection of tunes that vary in tempo and styles from slow, thought-provoking works of art to lively dance tunes and jazz pieces. McLane also demonstrates his talents as a pianist.

Accordion enthusiasts will find that Freetown is a must-have for their collection. But anyone who enjoys good music or music with influences from other cultures will also want to own it as well. The album was a pleasant surprise and one that I am glad I chose to hear.

by Sherrill Fulghum Rambles.NET 2 June 2007

Nightingale ‘Three’

Nightingale is a Vermont-based trio comprising fiddler Becky Tracy, guitarist/vocalist Keith Murphy and accordionist Jeremiah McLane, and Three is, aptly, their third recording together – not including various combinations of them in other bands. (McLane, for example, is a co-founder of The Clayfoot Strutters with Vermont folk hero Pete Sutherland.) Each is a consummate musician known throughout the Northeast on the contra-dance and traditional music circuit. The passion they share for sounds from Quebec, Newfoundland, France, Ireland and other northern climes is palpable in their playing. Accordingly, fans will surely find their expectations exceeded on Three, while a newcomer is likely to be happily blown away.

You don't need a pedigree in traditional music to recognize the gorgeous craftsmanship in Nightingale's playing and arrangements, on both standards and originals. While the songs themselves often call for round-like, overlapping melody lines, these players weave around and through each other with a graceful precision that preserves the integrity of every single note. Murphy's spirited percussion with feet or guitar will make contra dancers haul out their shoes for a spontaneous frolic in the living room; the more timid might simply collapse on the couch and bob their heads. Either way, listening to Three is an uplifting pleasure from start to finish.

The disc begins with the beautiful, mid-tempo "Hills" (lyrics by former Vermont poet laureate Arthur Guiterman, music by Sutherland); while Murphy sings in a resonant, slightly mournful tenor and keeps up a stepping rhythm, McLane's accordion and Tracy's fiddle dance around each other as if performing an intimate mating ritual.

The dance tunes here manage to sound joyful even when the melody is bittersweet and in a minor key, such as McLane's instrumental romp "Eric and the Angels" and the Gilles Chabernat "Mazurka". Tempos are insistent, driving, and typically vary within the same tune; a Nightingale trademark is creating excitement by upping the pace and intensity. The closer, Murphy's lovely piano instrumental "The Waiting Game" (piano played by McLane), is slow and elegiac. Yet the other players increase the number of notes, giving the tune a faster feel even as the piano remains steady. It's a bit of sonic architecture that Nightingale uses to stunning effect.

Recorded at Soundesign Studio in Brattleboro, Three sounds superb. But Nightingale is even better live; they perform a benefit concert for the Champlain Valley Folk Festival this Saturday at the College Street Congregational Church in Burlington. Amen.

Pamela Polston 7 Days

Fans of the Vermont-based trio Nightingale have had to wait a long time for Three, the band's third CD. It has been eight years since the last recording (Sometimes When the Moon is High; the first CD was entitled The Coming Dawn). Three is worth the wait. Bottom line, here's what you should know about this CD: it is a musical feast, full of thoughtfully crafted medleys, excellently played. Becky Tracy's fiddling is strong and expressive, whether she's singing out a melody, weaving in a harmony or providing a rhythmic riff. In Jeremiah McLane's inspired accordion and piano playing, you can hear evidence of his study of styles such as Quebecois and French music, as well as his master's degree in Contemporary Improvisation. Keith Murphy not only plays superbly on mandolin, guitar, piano, and on his feet (providing foot percussion); he also has a fine singing voice.

Nightingale is an extremely popular contradance band, and their CD is likely to get listeners moving. However, contradance tunes make up less than half of the recording. There's also a Swedish polska, a French mazurka, a strathspey and two schottisches; there are a number of different dance tunes from Brittany. Similarly, there is variety in the tunes Keith sings. The opening song is about Vermont's hills; the words were written in 1935 by Arthur Guiterman, who became Poet Laureate of Vermont, and set more recently to music by Vermonter Pete Sutherland. There are traditional songs from Newfoundland, Quebec, and Louisiana; the lovely "Psalm of Life" combines a traditional tune with words by Longfellow.

Uniting the material on Three is a quality of rhythmic strength. It's not that the tunes are rhythmically similar to one another; some are lyrical and flowing, some meditative, others lively, or driving and intense. Tunes are in meters of two, three, four, five or six. But it's consistently evident that the band has worked out the rhythmic character for each part of the tunes, and each player is solidly within the right groove. An example: one medley starts in a meditative mood, developing into a lilting strathspey (iBattle of Naskeagi), composed by Jeremiah. The next tune, another of Jeremiah's, is played first as a strathspey and then as a reel which gets continually faster. The medley is feeling very Cape Breton-esque, when there's an abrupt change: the band tears into iThe Flying Tent,i a tune composed by Keith after gale-force winds ripped apart a tent being used for a dance event in the Caribbean. Listening to the power and intensity of the rhythms, I can almost feel the whipping of the wind. On another cut, Nightingale took iThe Green Bushes,i folk song in simple waltz time, and composed an exciting, complex accompaniment using interweaving notes of the piano, mandolin, and fiddle to create a rich rhythmic texture with a three-against-two feel. Keith's piano accompaniment to his waltz, iPeregrination,i is highly syncopated and would infuse the most exhausted dancer with energy.

Nightingale's harmonic approach is creative and intriguing. The song iHillsi is played with two lines of harmony, one original and one the tune of the Irish reel iMulqueens,i played in a different key from usual but melding perfectly with the song. In the first section of Jeremiah's composition iRaoul's,i he uses every note of the chromatic scale, while the second part is based on a Middle Eastern scale. This is stimulating stuff to listen to.

Nancy MacMillan of Los Angeles, CA in Folk Works Magazine

'Hummingbird' Jeremiah McLane and Ruthie Dornfeld

Dirty Linen:

With a mix of courtly and spirited dance numbers, the depth and skill of these two players is matched only by their obvious love and respect for the traditional music they play. Both world-renowned virtuosos on their respective instruments, accordionist Jeremiah McLane and fiddler Ruthie Dornfeld can play anythingofrom French Musette, Irish reels, Argentine tangos, to Cajun two stepsoit makes no difference. Each style and composition is approached with the same fire and passion, often with the vigor evident as a hummingbird flaps it's wings (the inspiration for the title perhaps?). Unless you've access to a time machine, you're not likely to find more satisfying renditions of these beautiful traditional tunes.

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Victory Music:

Though Hummingbird was created by two people playing a total of four instruments I find myself piling on the adjectives when writing about it-exciting, uplifting, varied, precise, happy even when played in a minor key. Jeremiah McLane and Ruthie Dornfeld are an incredible blend of energy, musicianship and writing talent. They even look happy. Other than three traditional tunes and contributions by Patrick Desaunay, Frederic Paris and Jean Blanchard, the music is original, but there's an old world flavor of tradition and location held within each tune. Hummingbird takes me into many moods, countries, colors and rhythms. It's like watching people of many cultures celebrate and dance. When reviewing music I feel obligated to listen carefully at least three times. After hearing Hummingbird twelve or more times I still want to listen again.

—Barbara Metcalf for Victory Music.

Trad Magazine:

Accordionist Jeremiah McLane from Vermont, well known at the stages of St Chartiers and Gennetines (France) has produced a duo CD iHummingbirdi with the brilliant fiddler Ruthie Dornfeld. My friends the chemistry is magic from the first note. The exploration of styles and of music: Irish, Old Time, Cajun, Quebecois, French (center and musette) Danish and Hungarian, where the improvisations and the jazzy colors blend with a joyousness and force, with a resonant sound and rare emotionO.and just like the Hummingbird they collect the nectar in all the music they enjoy, a repertoire that is eclectic yet always coherent. They give dance music an esthetic sensibility without distorting it. The majority of selections are compositions from McLane and Dornfeld. There are also three traditional selections: Vals a Lienver (Frederic Paris), La Coulemelle (Jean Blanchard) and Argenteuil (Patrick Desauaney). All in all a stirring and beautiful tribute from across the Atlantic.

—Patrick Plouchart, Trad Magazine

A review of Ruthie

Fiddler Magazine:

Ruthie Dornfeld is a wide-ranging fiddler, described in a recent issue of this magazine (Winter 2002/03) as playing in ia dazzling array of styles, all with the fattest tone imaginable, not to mention beautifully perfect intonation.i Her latest outing, Hummingbird, pairs her with the equally wide-ranging and imaginative Jeremiah McLane on accordion, piano, and Hammond B3 organ. Though both are veterans of the contra dance circuit and adept at the common coin of the realmthat blend of Irish and Quebecois tunesothis new album features a blend of original material and traditional French tunes. The originals, comprising over half of the material, have a French accent, and the result is fresh and relaxing.

The album is a true duetono additional musicians sneak in on the sideobut with just these two instruments and what sounds like a minimum of overdubs and studio trickery, these consummate musicians create a full and enveloping sound, switching between unison playing. trading leads and searching harmonies. Most listeners will be less than familiar with the French repertoire, it being not as easy to find as Irish or old-timey tunesothe rhythms are subtle, not like the in-your-face drive of fast reels, and the melodies twisting, their charms becoming more apparent with each listen. All in all, it seems like the perfect soundtrack for a sunny summer afternoon, sitting in a comfortable chair beneath the shade of a tree, gin and tonic in hand.

It almost goes without saying, though I'll say it anyways, that Ruthie's playing is superb, as is Jeremiah's. Her tone is, indeed, fat, her stylings and variations creative and always adding to the music, never calling undue attention to herself. Jeremiah has fantastic control over his (piano) accordion, playing with a sprightliness like Shakespeare's Puck. If you prefer staying on familiar ground, this album may not be the thing for you but it offers substantial rewards for the adventurous.

A review of Going Elsewhere

Rambles:

What's a classically trained musician such as myself supposed to make of a band that describes its music-making process as a deconstruction of Irish tunes followed by a reassembling "with the aid of second-and-third-world blueprints?" When the little blurb that accompanied the CD went on to say that contra dancers' hips were observed swaying in response to the music on this disk, I wasn't sure whether to push the play button or run for the hills. Therefore, it's with a mixture of relief, appreciation and amusement that I report that the Clayfoot Strutters do indeed know how to strut their stuff, and in a way that is guaranteed to make you sit up and take notice. Contra dancing, in case you're like me and haven't a clue, turns out to be a bit like square dancing except that it's done in lines. As the dance progresses, each couple dances with every other pair in the group. The music that accompanies these dances is based on Irish, Celtic, old English and

early American tunes that tend to feature the fiddle. The movements and steps are determined by a caller, who chooses the difficulty of the steps and combinations based on the skills of the dancers. Though contra dance music (also known as “groove” music) is intended for dancing, it is also a delightful listening experience in the hands of the Clayfoot Strutters. Unlike a lot of dance music, which tends to sacrifice complexity and musical interest for catchy tunes and repetitious, hurried rhythms, the work of the Clayfoot Strutters is precise, intricate and playful. In addition, due to the musicians’ extraordinary skill, every note and every line of phrasing is delectably clear. A piece can be flying along at breakneck speed and you still have the wonderful sense that the musicians are taking their time, making sure that every note and every line is clearly and meaningfully articulated. Impressive. But what really caught and held my attention was the range and diversity of the music, and the way pieces from seemingly incompatible genres were combined. Ballads, jigs, reels, waltzes and folk songs with swing, pop, reggae, jazz and Cajun overtones were all present from countries such as Scotland, Brazil, Canada, North America, Africa and Ireland. The piece “Kotu,” for example, merges a big-band tune with an Afro-pop piece. Likewise, “Pikes Peak/Cherry River Rag” brings together traditional Texas and traditional West Virginia tunes. Sound improbable? That’s what I thought until I found myself playing tracks again and again to discover how certain lines were played and by what instruments. My personal favorites include “Honey Bee,” in which the electric guitar, flute, fiddle and piano take turns playing with the melody against a solid backbeat, and “Neil on the Floor,” a sultry little jazz piece that pits the clarinet against the accordion in a series of variations on a theme. Needless to say, Going Elsewhere is a real a step outside the ordinary, but that’s what makes it both entertaining and valuable. We all need to be reminded that the final word (or rather note) has not been written on what is possible in the hands of talented musicians.

—written by Jena Ball – published 6 April 2003