

SOUNDING OUT...

MONTRÉAL

Lucinda Chodan reports from Montréal, the capital of French North America, a city where joie de vivre comes with a distinctive French-Canadian accent

It's been called a little bit of Europe in North America, a bustling New World metropolis with an Old World feel. In fact, Montréal is the second-largest French-speaking city in the world, with almost 70% of its three million-plus residents claiming French as their mother tongue. The fact that many of those francophones come from other parts of the world colours the musical flavour of this vibrant city on the shores of the St Lawrence River. But don't worry if you don't speak French; the city is highly bilingual, and there's always a friendly English speaker nearby.

Montréal is located in the province of Québec, home to most of Canada's French-speaking residents. Québec's French culture has its roots in the waves of colonists from Normandy, Brittany and other parts of north-west France who began arriving in the early 1600s. Their lingua franca was the French spoken in the French court. Over the centuries, it became the basis of a distinctive Québec French called *joual* – the way Québécois pronounce *cheval* (horse). Among the largest group of French speakers are Haitians, most of whom began arriving in the 1960s, and North Africans, although citizens from all parts of la francophonie have made a home here.

The music of the early settlers derived from the songs of Normandy and Brittany. But as the colonists mingled with Irish and Scots settlers, the music morphed to reflect life in the New World, and include Celtic influences. The result: lively, fiddle-driven dance music, punctuated by tapping feet and clacking spoons or bones, often sung with multipart harmonies. In many circles, that music was considered *kétaine* (kitsch), but the Quiet Revolution of the 60s saw francophones take new pride in their language and culture. The late 70s and early 80s saw a wave of interest in traditional Québécois music, with La Bottine Souriante (The Smiling Boot) – leading the way. This nine-piece band added brass and world influences to traditional jigs, reels and *chansons à répondre* (call-and-response songs).

Now, more than 25 years later, La Bottine remain at the forefront of a new wave of tradition-based groups. They sometimes perform in clubs but more frequently in Montréal's Maisons de la Culture. Admission at these community cultural centres is free, although you have to book tickets in advance. For information about what's on, go to the website www2.ville.Montréal.qc.ca/maisons/maisons.htm. The site is in French only, but much of the information is comprehensible to English speakers.

LISTINGS

There are four alternative weekly newspapers: two published in English – *Hour* and *Mirror*; two in French – *Voir* and *Ici* – all come out on Thursdays. They're available at most Metro stations, as well as clubs and record and convenience stores.

The English-language newspaper *The Montreal Gazette* has daily listings, with a weekly music round-up in the Friday paper.

TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND DANCE

You can find out more about traditional music at the bilingual website *Trente Sous Zéro/Thirty Below*, www.clic.net/~thirtybe/, where you'll find a list of concerts, dances and festivals as well as information about new releases.

There are also *vendredis trad-lib* – encounters between professional and amateur traditional musicians – every Friday until June 25 at 911 rue Jean-Talon St Est (entry is by the back door on rue St André). Early French colonists brought with them the dances of the French court: *quadrilles*, *branles* and *gavottes*. But, as with music, those dances loosened up when they collided with the early Irish settlers. The result: *réels* and *gigues* (reels and gigs) became key to the Québécois tradition.

These days in traditional circles, step dancing, 'called' dances such as contradances and square dances, quadrilles and cotillons are all popular. You can see traditionally called dances at the *Veillées du*



Plateau on the third Saturday of every month between September and April. (Centre du Plateau, 2275 Blvd St Joseph Est, +1 514 273 0880).

There are also *Veillées-Trad* (Tradition Nights) with Québécois dancing, songs and music. They're held the first Friday of every month at the Place à Côté, 4571 Papineau St.

For more about traditional dance, check out the website of the Société pour la Promotion de la Danse Traditionnelle Québécoise, www.spdtq.qc.ca. The site is in French and English.

FESTIVALS

La Grande Rencontre

The only traditional dance and music festival in Montréal at a club in the trendy Plateau Mont Royal district. Some of the most respected Québec traditional artists played the festival last year, including Le Vent du Nord, Le Rêve du Diable, La Volée d'Castors and Genticorum. (May 27-30 2004, +1 514 273 0880, www.spdtq.qc.ca).

Montréal International Jazz Festival 'The best jazz festival in the world', according to the *Chicago Tribune*. Last year's line-up included everything from electronica and jazz stalwarts like Elvis Costello and Herbie Hancock to artists such as Lucky Dubé, Gaia from Brazil and the Spanish Harlem



MAIN: *The marina at the old port* (Tourisme Montréal, Stéphan Poulin)
 LEFT: *Les Francololies festival* (François Leblanc)
 BELOW: *Le Club Balattou*



Orchestra who added a party flavour to the event. Several blocks of downtown Montréal close to traffic, and the street-party atmosphere is a blast. (June 30-July 11 2004, +1 514 871 1881, www.montréaljazzfest.com).

Festival Nuits d'Afrique

A celebration of the latest in African and world music, especially from French-speaking countries. Last year featured artists such as Alpha Blondy, Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited and Natacha Atlas. There's also a street market with crafts and foods near festival headquarters. (July 15-25 2004, +1 514 499 9239, www.festivalnuitsdafrique.com).

Festival Mémoire et Racines

This annual festival takes place about an hour's drive from Montréal, but it's worth the trip. The name translates as 'memory and roots', and the programme focuses on traditional Québec music, dance and storytelling. There were more than 100 performers last year, with such heavyweights of the Québec trad scene as

Entourloupe, Les Batinsés and Les Langues Fourchues headlining. (July 23-25 2004, Joliette, about 80km north-east of Montréal, +1 450 752 6798, www.memoireracines.qc.ca).

Les Francololies

This is the largest gathering of francophone artists in the world, with more than 1,000 performers last year, including Salif Keita and Souad Massi. As is the case for the jazz festival, downtown streets close for ten days to accommodate daily free concerts between noon and 11pm. (July 29-August 7 2004, +1 514 875 8989, www.francololies.com).

CLUBS

Montréal doesn't have a lot of clubs that present mostly traditional or world music.

Le Club Balattou on the hip boulevard St Laurent is one of the exceptions. It specialises in African and Caribbean music and is a contact point for the city's Haitian community. (4372 blvd St Laurent, +1 514 845 5447).

Kola Note is a frequent site for off-season shows presented by the Festival Nuits d'Afrique. It also functions as the site of such events as the two-night Festival de Musique du Maghreb. (5240 Ave du Parc, www.kolanote.com, +1 514 274 9339).

Cabaret Music Hall presents a wide range of artists, but it's one of the venues of choice for traditional Québécois artists such as Les Charbonniers de l'Enfer and La Volée d'Castors when it comes to album launches. (2111 blvd St Laurent, +1 514 845 2014).

Watch for listings for venues such as **Club Soda**, (1225 blvd St Laurent), and the **Spectrum**, (318 rue Ste Catherine Ouest), when it comes to higher-profile concerts. |