

OBITUARY

# Chansonnier Raymond Lévesque wrote songs that were 'mythic' in Quebec

JAMES CULLINGHAM

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED MARCH 1, 2021



Quebec poet Raymond Lévesque with his fleur-de-lys chair, Oct. 25, 2005. IAN BARRETT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

An actor, humorist, musician, playwright, poet and champion of Quebec independence, Raymond Lévesque was a bridge between classic French chansonniers like Charles Trenet, whom he admired in his youth, and the politically engaged artists of 1960s and 70s Quebec, such as Pauline Julien and Robert Charlebois. Mr. Lévesque died of COVID-19 in Montreal on Feb. 15 at the age of 92.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau proclaimed Mr. Lévesque “one of our greatest songwriters,” adding, “his voice and words will always be with us.” Quebec Premier François Legault said Mr. Lévesque’s *Quand les hommes vivront d’amour* (When Men Live On Love) was one of “the most beautiful songs of all time.”

Raymond Lévesque was born in Montreal on Oct. 7, 1928. He was a diffident student who did not attend university. Taught piano by his grandmother, he was a teenager when he started writing the first of his approximately 500 compositions. He got his first break when the popular musician Fernand Robidoux began recording his songs. In the charming 1998 Radio-Canada documentary *Raymond Lévesque d’amour et d’amertume*, by Louis Fraser, Mr. Lévesque said “I owe everything to Fernand.”

In the period after the Second World War, Mr. Lévesque also made his first appearance on stage in *Zone*, by Quebec playwright Marcel Dubé.

In 1954, the young songwriter headed to Paris. It was a pilgrimage undertaken by other Quebec musicians including Félix Leclerc and Claude Léveillée, who wanted to get out from under *La grande noirceur* (“the great darkness”), as the conservative regime of Quebec premier Maurice Duplessis was known. Mr. Lévesque observed that the Québécois people of the time were listening mostly to original songs emanating from France or Belgium, so he decided to go where the songwriting action was.

Mr. Lévesque scuffed and scrambled, singing in Left Bank cabarets frequented by the likes of Jacques Brel, Barbara, Georges Brassens and others. In the 1998 documentary, he joked “I didn’t have an agent or a cent in my pockets. I had it all!”

In Paris, amid the throes of decolonization, he wrote what is arguably his most famous song, *Quand les hommes vivront d’amour*, because he was horrified by the Algerian war and attacks on Arab Parisians by right-wing French thugs. “Paris was my school,” he said. “I was there five years and that’s where I started to be engaged in political and social thought.”

Mr. Lévesque met some commercial success in Paris, particularly when Franco-American star Eddie Constantine recorded his *Les Trottoirs*. As with many of Mr. Lévesque’s compositions, the song carries a message of humanism and social justice along with a slightly jazzy melody and a dash of sardonic humour.

In 1959, Mr. Lévesque returned to Quebec just as the Quiet Revolution began to shuck off the dominance of right-wing politicians and the Catholic church. Singer-songwriter and actor Louise Forestier says the moment cannot be underestimated: “We were like a country under a dictatorship, only the dictator was the church.” Ms. Forestier believes Mr. Lévesque had the attributes to be a leader in the cultural revolution that swept Quebec.

In 1959, Mr. Lévesque, Clémence DesRochers, Mr. Léveillé, Jean-Pierre Ferland and Hervé Brousseau opened Les Bozos, a nightclub featuring original Quebec songs and comedy. It began a movement of such clubs, called boîtes à chansons, that sprang up around the province. Starting in 1961, Mr. Lévesque was associated for more than a decade with La Butte à Mathieu, a club in Val-David where he produced musical revues.

Mr. Lévesque composed hundreds of songs, published poetry and comedy, and appeared in films and TV dramas. His acting and recording output slowed as he became deaf in the 1980s, but he continued to write. His last published work, a book called Mensonges et conditionnement (Lies and Conditioning), came out in 2019, when he was 90.

Composer and musician François Dompierre credits Mr. Lévesque with about 10 “really important songs that cut through. They are almost mythic in stature.” That was underscored in 1974, when Gilles Vigneault, Mr. Leclerc and Mr. Charlebois performed Quand les hommes vivront d’amour together, giving the song an anthemic quality.

Ms. Julien recorded an album of Mr. Lévesque’s songs, including a version of Dans la tête des hommes that Ms. Forestier says flabbergasted her with its beauty and power. Like Mr. Dompierre, Ms. Forestier feels that although Mr. Lévesque was not a great singer, his work soars in the hands of great interpreters.

An unrepentant nationalist, Mr. Lévesque stated that he was “a separatist long before René Lévesque.” After the Parti Québécois came to power in 1976, Mr. Dompierre encountered Mr. Lévesque at a function in Paris and assumed his colleague would be delighted about the PQ victory. Instead, Mr. Lévesque said ruefully “politicians are all the same.”

Perhaps his most famous political song is Bozo les culottes, which comments on the first wave of bombings by the Front de libération du Québec in the 1960s. The song is a comic, affectionate yet satirical observation of a type of naive, undereducated, economically disadvantaged character who strikes out violently at oppression. Ms. Julien sang a rendition

of it that became a hit. In 1970, she was one of the nationalists arrested during the War Measures Act sweep of Montreal.

In 2005, Mr. Lévesque declined the Governor-General's Performing Arts Award and the \$15,000 bursary that went with it. The PQ started a fundraising campaign that raised more than twice that amount for the artist.

Mr. Lévesque received many honours, including Félix awards for his body of work in 1980 and Quebec's Prix Denise-Pelletier for the arts. He was made a chevalier of the Quebec National Order in 1997. A library named after him opened in Longueuil in 2011, and he received the Quebec National Assembly's Medal of Honour in 2012.

He leaves his children, Pascal, François, Frédéric, Marie-Marine and Jean-Vivier; grandchildren, Amélia, Élisabeth and Xavier; and sister, Mariette.