

OBITUARY

Incandescent singer Renée Claude was a superb interpreter of chanson

JAMES CULLINGHAM

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED MAY 26, 2020

An unlikely candidate for stardom, Renée Claude became one of the grandes dames of Quebec chanson, along with Diane Dufresne, Pauline Julien and Monique Leyrac. Ms. Claude, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease and lived in a long-term care facility, died of COVID-19 in Montreal on May 12 at the age of 80.

Renée Bélanger was born on July 3, 1939, in the family home in Montreal's Plateau Mont Royal district. (She later adopted Claude as her stage name because Bélanger was the name of a line of appliances when she started out.) Renée was the eldest of Cécile and Jean Bélanger's six children.

A nervous child with precocious piano skills, she did not glide easily to her eventual role as a celebrity. Her parents wanted to make sure she could earn a living, so they steered her to become a secretary at a school board office. After a short time, she became ill with anxiety and depression. Her father took her to see a doctor, who asked: "Well, what does the young lady want to do?" Mr. Bélanger said, "She wants to sing." The doctor replied, "So, let her sing." Young Renée was given wings.

Mario Girard, an arts journalist with the Montreal newspaper *La Presse*, recently published *Renée Claude: Donne-moi le temps*, a biography of Ms. Claude. Mr. Girard said she remained a shy person who was most confident when singing. In a television interview, Ms. Claude once said with a slight laugh, "I'd probably be in a psychiatric hospital if I couldn't do what I'm doing."

Between 1963 and 1973, Ms. Claude released an album each year with several major hits. She performed internationally and in addition to playing major Quebec venues regularly as a solo act, she toured the province to open for the internationally popular Belgian singer-songwriter Jacques Brel.

Ms. Claude also acted on stage and appeared in television series and films. In addition to her musical talents, she was an incandescent beauty. Her partner, Robert Langevin, said affectionately after her death, “I can’t complain. I got to spend 34 years with a woman most men in Quebec wanted.”

A supporter of Quebec sovereignty, Ms. Claude sometimes performed at Parti Québécois events. Her 1970 hit Le Début d’un temps nouveau, written by Stéphane Venne, became an unofficial PQ anthem.

In Mr. Girard’s estimation Ms. Claude incarnated, “the Quebec feminine ideal: beautiful, talented and independent.” Ms. Claude arrived on the scene as the Quiet Revolution took hold and the Catholic Church’s grip on social mores gave way.

Capturing the spirit of the era, the first verse of her song Le Début d’un temps nouveau translates to: “It’s the beginning of a new time/Earth is in year zero/Half of the population is under 30/Women make love freely/Men hardly work any more/Happiness is the only virtue.”

The Quebec singer and actor Louise Forestier said that when she heard Ms. Claude interpret the work of great songwriters, she thought, “Well, there’s no improving on that. I’d better learn how to write my own songs!” Ms. Forestier added, “She represented elegance in all its forms: her interpretations, her body, her clothes.” Ms. Forestier says the legacy of her friend must not be ignored, “I invite all young singers, women and men, to listen, listen, listen. She did not become a spectacle. She was the song.”

Composer François Dompierre who worked with Ms. Claude early in her career said, “she was demanding, meticulous, a perfectionist. She could be a bit anxious and nervous. But when she gained confidence in you, she was a lot of fun. Our best moments together were on the road. That’s when she relaxed.”

Ms. Claude was a superb interpreter, Mr. Dompierre says. “Like Juliette Gréco, she had a great sense of the text. She never missed a word in studio or on stage.” In addition to her work with Mr. Dompierre and Mr. Venne, Ms. Claude also collaborated with composer Luc Plamondon.

The Quebec singer Isabelle Boulay, who was born in the early 1970s, when Ms. Claude was at the height of her popularity, carefully observed her example. "She was almost an icon," Ms. Boulay said. "She had the gift of beauty and intelligence. From her, I learned about the correct manner of conduct and never straying from the path."

Mr. Girard believes Ms. Claude possessed a defining ability to make astute artistic choices. She emerged at a time when Quebecers admired the great French chansonniers and the pioneering figures of American rock. "These camps did not speak to each other," Mr. Girard said. "Like Robert Charlebois, Claude built a bridge."

By the 1980s, Ms. Claude found a new mode of expression, shifting her focus to the oeuvre of a few serious songwriters. She dedicated entire shows to Clémence DesRochers, Georges Brassens and Léo Ferré. Many think that Ms. Claude's Ferré spectacles and accompanying album are her greatest artistic achievement.

"Léo Ferré, c'est moi en homme" (Léo Ferré, that is me in male form), Ms. Claude famously said. Ms. Boulay emphasized, "few singers can be equally accomplished in pop and serious song."

After 2010, Ms. Claude began to experience the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. On one occasion, she asked who was singing in an archival video in which she herself was featured. Ms. Claude moved to a long-term care home in 2017.

In March, 2019, after news of her condition was made public, some of Quebec's greatest female singers including Céline Dion recorded a new version of Ms. Claude's hit Tu trouveras la paix, by Mr. Venne. Later that year, in honour of Ms. Claude's 80th birthday, a group of female singers joined by the Montreal Symphony Orchestra performed a benefit concert for Alzheimer's research and treatment. Ms. Forestier sang Avec le temps by Mr. Ferré, in homage to her friend. "It was like a religious experience," Ms. Forestier said. Ms. Boulay performed Mr. Plamondon's L'Hymne à la beauté du monde.

For Ms. Boulay, Ms. Claude was an inspiration. "She combined delicacy with an exacting nature. Culture is part of our identity. We are a young nation. Our slogan is, 'Je me souviens.' When an artist like Renée Claude dies, we share that memory."

Ms. Claude leaves her partner, Mr. Langevin; three siblings, Michel, Violette and Richard Bélanger; and extended family.