

OBITUARY

Veteran Quebec crooner Michel Louvain was a teen idol in the 1950s

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED MAY 6, 2021



Singer Michel Louvain performs at the Festival d'été de Quebec on July 12, 2017. FRANCIS VACHON/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Michel Louvain, Quebec's first teen idol of the television age, died in Montreal on April 14 at the age of 83 of cancer of the esophagus, which was diagnosed in the weeks prior to his death. In a career spanning six decades, Mr. Louvain recorded more than 30 albums, toured frequently and hosted *De bonne humeur*, a daily variety show on the TVA network, for five years and *Louvain à la carte*, a daily show on Radio-Canada, for two years.

Daniel Piché, Mr. Louvain's musical director for more than 30 years, regarded him as, "a pioneer of popular music in Quebec, a performer who opened the path for stars who were to follow."

Mr. Louvain was born Michel Poulin in Thetford Mines, Que., on July 12, 1937. His father was an asbestos miner. Mr. Louvain was one of seven children: three boys and four girls. The family was musical. The father sang in church. Michel joined his brother in singing at parish events and at regional community events.

By the time he was 20, Mr. Louvain was engaged as master of ceremonies at a club in Laval. He chose his stage name when he saw “Louvain” on a restaurant sign near the Montreal train station. In 1958 he recorded *Buenas noches mi amor* and became an overnight pop sensation. The extremely handsome young man was the francophone equivalent of English-language teen heartthrobs such as Paul Anka. “Quebec had never seen such an idol,” singer Renée Martel said. “He was the first to achieve that kind of stardom and the first and only to experience that kind of idolization by young women.”

Mr. Louvain’s early shows often became chaotic, with teenage girls screaming and trying get hold of their idol. On one occasion, police had to escort him out of a venue by a fire escape via a rooftop.

Continued success allowed Mr. Louvain to move beyond constant gigs at small-sized smoky cabarets such as Chez Gérard in Quebec City and Le Mocambo in Montreal to larger halls throughout the province. Doing close to 100 shows a year Mr. Louvain toured Quebec’s concert halls and summer festivals for decades. “He was always fretting that the people would stop coming,” said Johanne de Maisonneuve, his agent for almost 40 years. “I said, ‘Don’t worry, Michel,’ and they never did.”

Those close to him laud Mr. Louvain’s professionalism and keen sense of organization. As he aged and his youthful good looks began to fade, he maintained rigorous discipline over his presentation. His music director, Mr. Piché, recalls that Mr. Louvain would not sit down in his dressing room out of concern of creasing his clothing. In fact, he often would not put his pants and jacket on until five minutes before a performance. Ms. de Maisonneuve says he stayed in good shape by walking and bicycling, particularly near his second home in Annandale, Fla., where he spent most of each winter.

It was in Florida where Quebec country-music star Ms. Martel first met Mr. Louvain in the 1970s. Their friendship began at a restaurant with other artists when Ms. Martel instructed Mr. Louvain on the art of dipping strawberries in Champagne. It was a habit Mr. Louvain

embraced for the remainder of his life. Ms. Martel believes her friend modelled himself on his own idols, French stars Charles Aznavour, Charles Trenet and American singers such as Perry Como, Frank Sinatra and, above all, Tony Bennett.

Despite their differences in style, Mr. Louvain the crooner and Ms. Martel the country singer frequently toured together and appeared on stage at festivals for duets. Ms. Martel recounts that Mr. Louvain liked country music and was happy to join her on Quebec country-music favourites. She also said her friend was a perfectionist who paid great attention to stage preparation and could be demanding of his colleagues. Ms. Martel recalled that he could be a “bit of a grumpy bear” until things were just right, but that Mr. Louvain was extremely respectful of his co-workers and fans.

In 1976, just as some might have thought the singer would begin a slow fade, he recorded *La Dame en bleu*. Irish singer Joe Dolan had had a hit with the English-language version of the song, *Lady in Blue*.

“Michel was hesitant at first to record it because it’s a tango and not part of his established style. He had to be convinced,” recalled his agent, Ms. de Maisonneuve. The song became Mr. Louvain’s biggest hit and further established his status among Quebec musicians. In 2009, he performed his unexpected hit with jazz artists the Lost Fingers at Quebec City’s Festival d’Été. “[Charles] Trenet has *La Mer*. I have *la Dame en bleu*,” Mr. Louvain said.

Mr. Louvain’s uncanny crossover appeal was further underscored in 2013 when he went through rigorous rehearsals with a dance troupe to perform a charmingly hilarious version of the South Korean pop singer Psy’s hit song *Gangnam Style* for the *Juste pour rire* festival. Producer Martin LeClerc said that younger Quebec artists lobbied to collaborate with Mr. Louvain. A bevy of diverse talents did so in 2017 in Quebec City for a concert celebrating Mr. Louvain’s 80th birthday and his 60th year in show business.

Those who worked with him for decades think that Mr. Louvain’s longevity can be attributed to his professionalism, dedication to his craft, his decency with others and his desire to maintain sound business relations and friendships with a small group of musical and industry partners who surrounded him for decades. Mr. Louvain had a simpler explanation,

“Singing is my drug. It’s my life.”

Mr. Louvain's extraordinary relationship with his fan base became the subject of *Les Dames en bleu*, a 2009 documentary film by Claude Demers. Mr. Demers focused on a small group of loyal fans whom he selected from hundreds of volunteers. Some had been fans since the 1950s and others had come aboard in later years, particularly with the success of *la Dame en bleu*. The delightful and incisive film makes stars of the fans – they even formed a small choir – and puts Mr. Louvain in the background.

The documentary was selected as the opening night film for Montreal's Festival du nouveau cinéma. It furnished further testimony to the aging performer's hold on popular imagination in Quebec. Mr. Louvain said, "I'm married with my public. It's a good marriage. I'm part of the family." Mr. Demers thinks that for his devoted fans, Mr. Louvain, "represented a romantic ideal. Some remember him as a gorgeous young star, a prince. He never changed. He never left or disappointed them."

Until his sudden fatal illness, Mr. Louvain appeared to be indefatigable. His team had a full slate of engagements planned for a presumed end of the pandemic in 2022. Mr. Louvain had ambitions to carry on in his 80s just as his role model Charles Aznavour had done. Ms. Martel was "shocked," to learn of his illness and quick death, saying, "I thought Michel was eternal."

Mr. Louvain won his first Félix Award in 2008 for an anthology of his music and won several MétroStar awards for his television work. In 2014, the Quebec music industry feted him with a gala. He received the Quebec Medal of Honour in 2009 and was named a member of the Order of Canada in 2015. Mr. Louvain leaves his husband, Mario Théberge, and his sisters, Ginette, Lucie and Thérèse.