

MATAPAT

Singing...and Playing!

BY STEVE WINICK

Blame Canada for the latest invasion: Matapat, the trio of Benoit Bourque, Simon Lepage, and Gaston Bernard. Armed with accordions, fiddles, and rocking electric bass, their take-no-prisoners approach is leaving many Americans breathless and confused. With recent performances on National Public Radio, the renowned syndicated radio show "Mountain Stage," and even the Smithsonian, this insidious group from north of the border is infiltrating the very fabric of our lives.

Seriously, now. Matapat's profile in folk circles on both sides of the U.S./Canada border is rising, and they continue to distinguish themselves as excellent and innovative performers of French-Canadian music. How do they differentiate between their approach and that of other similar

groups? "We have a particular sound," Bourque explained in an April 2000 interview. "There's a very big emphasis on the rhythm and the bass, as much as on the melody and the vocal. And we have dancing as part of the show; I wouldn't miss that!"

The members of Matapat all have different musical backgrounds, and since there are only three of them, everyone's influences show much more than in a larger band. Bourque, for example, came from a family where traditional music and singing were common, and as lead singer and melodeon player on many songs, his traditional background is

right to the fore. As the group's only dancer, he stands out even more, performing intricate displays of stepping and clogging in each show. Most recently, the dance they have favored features Bourque taking a shaving-cup, brush, soap, strop, and straight razor and shaving an audience member while dancing around him — certainly a spectacle you won't see anywhere else!

Interestingly, despite his family's interest in traditional music, Bourque's parents did not teach him to dance. He instead picked up his dancing abilities later in school. "When I turned 13, in school, one of my friends — another boy — asked me to join him, and to join the folk dance troupe. So at first I said,

photo courtesy of J. Bernegger/Relative Work Studio



Gaston Bernard, Benoit Bourque, and Simon Lepage

'Dance? Come on, this is for girls!' And he said, 'Yes! That's why I'm starting! To meet girls!' But before he parlayed the dance troupe into a love affair, Bourque fell in love with dance itself, especially step dancing. After school, he joined another folk dance group, in which he also played bones and called dances. He already could play the accordion and sing, and eventually he was tapped to join the successful folk band Eritage, from Montreal.

Bourque learned a few long-lasting lessons from Eritage. He recalled a conversation with Stan Rogers the great Canadian folksinger and songwriter, who produced Eritage's last album. "Stan told us when we were recording, 'Guys, never do a live album.' I said, 'Why not?' He said, 'I have done one.' And he [recorded] for that four, five shows in a row. By the last evening he had only two good tunes for the album, the rest was scrapped. And it was the last show, so he was extremely nervous!" Rogers' album, *Between the Breaks...Live!* is a classic, but Bourque hasn't forgotten the great one's advice; he's never done a live album yet.

Eritage played all over Canada, and had a few gigs on the east coast of the U.S. After the band folded, Bourque continued singing, dancing, and playing, until he had the opportunity to join Ad Vielle Que Pourra, a Québec-based quartet with both French and Québécois roots. It was in the fold of Ad Vielle Que Pourra that Bourque met Bernard. With the ability to sing and play fiddle, guitar, bouzouki, and mandolin, Bernard was a formidable part of Ad Vielle Que Pourra's sound.

Bernard's family is not Québécois but Acadian, from Rogersville, New Brunswick. "We played the Miramichi Festival last summer," he said, "and that's only about 20 miles from Rogersville, and a lot of great musicians were coming out of there." How does an Acadian musical background differ from a Québécois one? Both are French-Canadian, of course, but there are musical differences. "The Acadian style has more American influence," Bernard explained. "There's a big country influence. A lot of the traditional players in New Brunswick also play country music. That's not the case in Québec...most of them have Celtic influence." Bernard's American and international influences include not only country but bluegrass and rock, as well; during our interview he expressed admiration for Nickel Creek as well as The Police and Rush.

Both of them, and Bernard in particular, look back on their days in Ad Vielle, as the band is commonly known, with fondness. "I had a great experience with Ad Vielle," he remembered. "It was hard because of the culture and the personalities and all that, but that was my first real touring band. I'd been in a lot of bands before, but not real touring bands. And it introduced me to the bigger North American market. I'd never really been in the States before that." Another highlight for Bernard was meeting musical heroes. "We met

"And it was totally different, what they had done!" Bourque interjected. "It was sort of singer/songwriter stuff."

Being mislabeled as French language singer/songwriters must have been frustrating for the new traditional duo. "In hindsight it wasn't," Bernard said. "Because now we're doing what we want to do, and it's great."

The band's happy ending, or at least its happy beginning, couldn't have happened until they met Simon Lepage, the bassist and singer who makes up the other third of Matapat.

Before Matapat, he had played in all kinds of music: orchestras, jazz bands, cabarets, and the like. "In Québec if you want to work in music, you have to know many styles because you need a day job if you can't do different things. So [I played] classical, African music, Martinique, jazz, salsa. I play also upright bass, string bass, in a classical style, but we travel always in a car. So I made a compromise with the bass."

Lepage's first experience in traditional music was with André Lejeune, a well-known folksinger who has been performing for many years. "In the beginning, it was great, because he was the idol of my father," Lepage recounted. "So my first gig with him I said, 'Oh, if my father were alive, this would be really happy for me.' But after *two* gigs, I realized...it's good my dad is dead! Because I was a backup

musician, at the back of the stage. Kind of a background musician, actually." Lepage also played with a band called Clapotis, from the Îles de la Madeleine.

"These guys are lobster fishermen, two brothers," Bourque explained. "It's amazing, they have these big hands, but they play like angels, very light. But the fiddle smelled like lobsters!"

It was in 1997 that the duo of Bourque and Bernard first brought Lepage into the fold. "We did a demo, a three-song demo as a duo," Bernard remembered. "I was playing with Simon in a different group, so we hired Simon to come in and play some bass tracks as a 'background musician.' It just sounded so good, we decided to continue."

The trio was originally just called Bourque, Bernard, and Lepage. But they were soon known informally as Matapat. "When we did



Bourque shaves a volunteer from the audience, dancing around him all the while

Pierre Imbert, who's my favorite hurdy-gurdy player in the world, and one of my favorite people also. If he didn't live in Vancouver, he'd probably be in our band."

The trouble started for Bourque and Bernard after they left Ad Vielle. "We joined Ad Vielle when two of the members [Alain Leroux and Jean-Louis Cros] had left the group," Bernard explained. "We joined and we did our time there for about three years. Meanwhile, the two people who had left the band had formed a duo [Alter Ego]. I'm not sure that it went over that well. But what happened was, when we left Ad Vielle, after three years, me and Benoit started a duo. The two old members came back into Ad Vielle, and [Alter Ego] didn't exist anymore. We became 'the duo that came out of Ad Vielle Que Pourra.' So people were referring to us as [Alter Ego]."

the album,” Bernard explained, “ ‘Matapat’ was one of the songs on the album. And you need a title for the album, so we chose *Matapat*. When people would call our agent to hire the band, rather than calling us Bourque, Bernard, and Lepage, they would just ask for Matapat. So we decided not to fight the wave and just go with it. It was much easier to be called Matapat.”

Fine and dandy, but what does “matapat” mean? Nothing, really. It’s a group of words from the nonsense refrain of a song popularized by Alan Mills, a well-known Canadian folksinger. “They were more phonetic than anything else,” Bourque elucidated. “We just switched a little bit and it means something. In French, ‘mets ta patte.’ Patte is the animal’s foot, and it can mean by extension the human foot or the human hand. So in this case, the song says ‘put your paw.’ And it really represents us well, because we use hands as well as feet, so Matapat is just good for us.”

Since their official debut as a trio, the watchword for Matapat has been originality. “Since the beginning of the 1990s, there’s a lot of young musicians getting involved in traditional music in Québec,” Bourque explained. “They want to jam, they want to play. But when you start doing anything, you do covers. It’s the same in traditional music. So these young people will cover La Bottine Souriante’s tunes, or Michel Faubert’s. In our case, we’ve

never tried to cover anybody else. Because with all the background we have, each one of us, we wanted to have our own sound, our own arrangements, our own tunes.”

This has led the band into difficulties occasionally, as Bourque explained. “Sometimes when you meet minorities like Franco-Americans living outside of Québec, they remember the old time when their grandparents lived, and they want to hear well-known songs. [They say] ‘Well, you don’t sing “Alouette!”’ Well, we can sing it at parties, you know. We can sing a lot of traditional songs. But when we do a show we want to do a real original thing.”

Once they pick lesser-known traditional songs to perform, they have the challenge of arranging them for the trio. Both Bernard and Lepage are used to being sidemen or backup players in large bands, and it took some adjustment to play in so small a formation. But it’s been rewarding for everybody. Bourque recalls some confusion about audience expectations and band dynamics in the beginning. “One of the first concerts we did with Simon was in the Dance Flurry, just north of Albany, New York. And that’s a wonderful weekend of dance, you get like a huge crowd of dancers from all around the U.S. and Canada. We had done a dance workshop with some of the people there. I said, ‘Let’s play “Le casse-reel.”’ And that’s the one where Simon plays slap-bass. So we start the tune, and he just plays like standard,

without the slap. And I said, ‘What are you doing? You don’t play your part?’ And he said, ‘Well, you know, it’s purists here.’ I said, ‘Never mind purists, I’m a dancer. Just do it!’ And he tried to do it, and you just felt this energy from the dancers, they went ‘Ooohhhh!’ And right after that dance, they all gave us a standing ovation.”

For the most part, the musicians had fun adapting to the trio. Lepage enjoys the freedom of being a lead bass player in a genre where that’s a novelty. Bernard simply enjoys being able to play. “I used to be in pop bands, where they ask you to not play, pretty much,” he explained. “Especially violin. I did a tour in Ireland with a guy named Daniel Weaver, who’s kind of like John Cougar, that kind of stuff. So the violin player just looks good. And you’re asked to play that little line every 40 bars or whatever. It was kind of boring, you know, whereas with this I get to actually play. And sweat a bit, you know.”

Everybody sweats at a Matapat gig — especially the guy who’s under the razor! But the rest of the audience, too, can end up being caught up in the music and dancing. “The big difference with us is that the show is very interactive with the audience. We like to get the audience with us in the show,” Bourque explained. “We have done eastern Maryland

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Matapat - (left to right) Gaston Bernard, Benoit Bourque, and Simon Lepage

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last week. We didn't get a really big crowd. We said, 'Well, they were kind of difficult at the beginning.' But I talked to one woman who had been to many shows there, and she said they hardly applaud there, normally. She was totally impressed. She said, 'You had them dancing and singing and moving and clapping!' She was totally amazed."

In addition to regular concerts, Matapat ventures into schools and nursing homes, bringing their music to the youngest and oldest members of the community. When playing for schools, they make minor adjustments for their new audience. "There's some differences in the repertoire we do," Bernard said, "and we don't do medleys as long. We explain things, we present the instruments."

Lepage added, "We don't do the dirty songs!"

"We make them dance, too," Bourque interjected. "We have different shows for every age, and we make dancing a part of it. My experience is, that's actually what they remember the most. 'Oh, we had a good time, we danced! We played the spoons!'"

"At this school in the west," he continued, "these two young boys were dancing together. Normally, we make a boy dance with a girl,

but sometimes we don't care. So I show them how to swing, you know, put your hand on his shoulder. But instead, they put their hands on each other's necks! They were like wrestling each other! So if we do another video, we'll hire two sumo wrestlers who will swing in a contra dance!"

"A whole line of sumo wrestlers would be even better." Lepage suggested.

As enjoyable as their school shows have been, some of their most moving and humorous stories come from the nursing home circuit. "We were in Maine," Lepage remembered, "playing for very old people. And one of the guys there, he buys the cassette. They don't buy the CD, they buy cassettes. He tried to put the cassette in the car, it doesn't work. So he said to Benoit, 'Hey, can you try to get it working?'" So Benoit goes in the car, puts the tape, and the volume was at maximum. And the album starts with the big bass, boom, boom, boom. And you saw the car shaking, you know, boom, boom! And of course, the men were in the front, and the women in the back. And in the back, the woman was moving back and forth, very lightly. It was surreal! Totally surreal. She was dancing. And the car pulls away, and you hear the music blasting."

"A beautiful thing happened also in Maine," Bourque continued. "They said to us, just go and play

anywhere you want in the home. We go in there, we play and play and play. We go in one room, and while we're playing jigs and reels there, one guy is dying in the bed. So we said, 'Whoops!' We went outside. We felt stupid to be there. After that the woman came to us and she thanked us. She said while we were playing there, he just smiled. It's a magic moment. Music is amazing. It's a beautiful way to communicate. There was another guy who hadn't spoken for five years. And he started singing! We had him singing. It's amazing."

In between amazing appearances, Matapat are gearing up for another album. They are selecting material, some of which was simply not ready for the first CD. After performing songs and tunes onstage for several years, the group feels far more confident in the studio. A lot of the tracks on *Matapat*, Bernard confided, "We put together in the studio and never played live. We learned them from the record afterwards."

"And the next one is the opposite," Bourque continued. "The two ways are done in music. Some people put a record out and then they will learn to play that stuff. I prefer the other way. We really play these tunes in the show. The arrangements change because we find new ideas, and with the energy from the audience, we can feel how they react to it. So we have a better idea how we want to do the tunes."

They also plan to have several guests appearing on the new disc, Bernard said. "We've been talking about Chris Thile, the mandolin player from Nickel Creek, because we've been jamming a lot with him in festivals and stuff, 'cause he's so cool and I think he's so good. And also probably a tabla player and some mouth music from India. Do the George Harrison trip."

"Who is George Harrison?" Bourque quipped.

The band members are similarly jocular about the next album's title. They've considered *Tapatam*, which is their name backwards, and also *Ma patate*. The latter name would allow them to cover an old Québec song, "lâche pas la patate," transposing it into "lache-pas ma patate," or "Don't Drop My Potato." They even kicked around *Son of Matapat* for a while, laughing at its tackiness.

That playful, joking attitude is one of the defining qualities of Matapat, and it's sometimes quite conscious. "When I was young I was afraid of one thing," Bourque confided. "I said, 'When I'll be an adult, I won't play anymore.' [Adults] don't play games, and I was afraid of it. So maybe I found a way to play!"



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