



by Tony Montague
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You won't get far into traditional Quebecois culture without tripping over the tail of the devil. Le yab', as he's popularly known, is lurking everywhere - hiding in the shadows, creeping around the barn, waiting at the crossroads for unsuspecting passers-by. He's a familiar presence in songs, jokes, stories, and legends. And he loves music and dancing.

Five years ago a group of young musicians decided to give the prince of darkness his due. They named their band Belzébuth, the French variant of Beelzebub (another of Old Nick's many monikers), and titled their excellent debut *Les Péchés du Diable*, or The Devil's Sins. On the album's cover is the black silhouette of a winged devil, violin in hand.

"People outside of Quebec often think we're satanic in some way but that's not how it is at all," explains Jean-Benoit Landry, the frontman for Belzébuth, with a laugh. "We pick up on his folkloric aspect, which is usually more comic than sinister."

"The legend that inspires us in particular is one where he appears at a house-party as a mysterious visitor, disguised with a big hat, and starts playing fiddle," continues Landry, who just happens to be a fiddler himself as well as the percussionist and lead singer of Belzébuth. "He's a fantastic musician and everyone starts dancing wildly, especially the girls. You can imagine the rest. That's the devil we relate to, the one who adds something boisterous to the evening - or as we say in French *qui endiable la veillée*."

On a Saturday night in July 2005 I caught Belzébuth 'endevilling' the Mémoire et Racines music festival outside Joliette, an hour's drive north of Montreal in the region of Lanaudière. At the front of the crowd, fired up by the band's high-octane performance of songs and tunes, a group of madly gyrating dancers created a kind of folk mosh-pit.

Belzébuth is the latest addition to the long list of musicians and groups who've sprung from Lanaudière's fertile soil, including La Bottine Souriante, La Volée de Castors, Les Charbonniers de l'Enfer, André Marchand, and Yves Lambert.

"The tradition is very much alive," says Landry. "During the Christmas holidays you can find folk bands playing in several bars in Joliette on the same night, and there are regular jam sessions here just like in Irish pubs. And in the small town of Saint-Jean-de-Matha. since September 2002 we have Le CRAPO."

CRAPO stands for 'Centre Régional d'Animation du Patrimoine Oral' [Regional Centre for Oral Tradition Activities] - a phrase that doesn't exactly trip off the tongue. The acronym is a wordplay on the French for toad - *un crapaud* - the emblem for the centre.

"There are extensive archival resources for the music, songs, stories, and folklore of this region," says Landry. "But CRAPO is more than that. Some people have been hired to collect material in the community, and there's a café-bistro there with concerts and special presentations of traditional music and world music on weekends in particular."

The archives contain many tunes of Scottish and Irish origin, and *Les Péchés du Diable* includes a number of familiar jigs and reels - the Swallow's Tail, The Broken Pledge, Out On

The Ocean, The Tarbolton, and more. It's not just that the members of Belzébuth draw inspiration from bands such as Lunasa or Solas. Mainly Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Scotland brought their music to Lanaudière in the 19th century. The established settlers, or *habitants*, quickly adopted and adapted the new tunes, often providing them with French names, and always giving them a distinctive Quebecois swing.

As for the songs, Belzébuth's members rely on the extensive repertoires of friends and family, materials from CRAPO and other centres, collections in print like those of the great Marius Barbeau [1883-1969] – and newly available resources on the Internet.

“People and organizations in Quebec and France are posting much archival material on the net now. That's where we found “Corsaires” for instance - a song on our album that's about a famous 17th century buccaneer from Dunkirk who preyed on English shipping.”

Another of the many highlights of *Les Péchés du Diable* is “Le Père la Débauche” [Father of the Debauchery], a lively song with a whiff of brimstone that came from Landry's grandfather.

“There are many singers in my family, and at our gatherings everyone would do ‘their’ song. Some people like my granddad had many, and “Le Père la Débauche” was associated with him. I'm particularly proud of it because I've never come across a version anywhere else. The song starts out with the narrator running into three young women, and it highlights - shall we say - the cheeky side of what people got up to in the old days. ”

But the music of Belzébuth is not confined to its Quebecois and related French and Anglo-Celtic roots. On *Les Péchés du Diable* the arrangement of the traditional song “La Fille Soldat” [The Soldier Girl] incorporates an original instrumental “Feuille d'Arabe” with a distinctively Middle Eastern form and flavour.

“We're very open towards the music that we hear at the various festivals, and we absorb it all,” says Landry. “So when we come to creating our own arrangements of songs we sometimes like to let ourselves go a bit, extend our horizons, and create hybrids with different genres. On our second album – which we're finishing for release this spring – we bring together an old French song and a klezmer tune. It permits us to add other instruments, and vary the textures and colours.”

Le yab' is after all a worldly kind of a guy, one who readily crosses cultures. Landry and his colleagues in Belzébuth prove that he's still an inspirational figure in Quebecois society today.

Belzébuth's website is at www.bzb.qc.ca

Le CRAPO is at www.crapo.qc.ca