



Back to the blues

By Joel Ceausu - The Suburban

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FYi

Richard “Chard” Chénier first picked up a harmonica at age 13, at home in Saint-Boniface. “I was just playing around with it and developed quickly,” recalls the artist in his Snowdon home. “Maybe because there was a lot of musical talent in my family,” and he spent his time imitating his favourite artists like the iconic king of country blues Sonny Terry.

Six years later he met Terry in Montreal and played and sang a Skip James tune for him. “He didn’t want to hear that,” he laughs. “He said ‘Let me hear what you’ve done, one of your own songs,’ and so I played for him and he loved it.”

From those early days discovering music, growing up by Manitoba’s Red River, fast forward nearly 60 years and Chard hasn’t picked up a harp in six months, just off a nasty bout of bronchitis. But he goes for it, reaching into the case holding many of his four dozen instruments, and

pulling one out to share a quick tune. With a distinctive style born of virtuosity and innovation his sound is his own, but his early musical influences came from what he heard around him, and what he saw when he looked south at what was happening in the U.S. civil rights movement.

“The student protesters in the south, the death of the Freedom Riders, all that had a huge impact on me,” he told The Suburban. The soulful sounds that came from people and their struggle moved the young man from Manitoba. “That was also the time when Bob Dylan came out with his early folk stuff and I was incensed at what I saw happening to Black Americans.”

“The blues is a combination of things; there is just the beauty of the blues that is really a universal sound, but then it was mixed with R & B, and the sounds of Bo Diddley, Little Richard, that sound coming out of the South was a total shock to this French-Canadian kid living in a very white environment. It was not only the morality of the music, it was just so natural a feel...”

His first working gigs were in 1968 in coffee houses accompanying musicians like Beverly Glenn-Copeland on radio, tv, and in clubs, shuttling between New York, Toronto and here in Montreal. That year he drove to New York with American-born Copeland to audition for The Tonight Show in Greenwich Village but was stopped at the border.

“They thought we were part of the Black Panther movement so they sent me back. But I got through by train.” This time he made it but also witnessed firsthand what he had only heard about. “Some guy from Texas pushed ahead of us and said ‘There’s no way any nis going ahead of me’. And he just went on, it was Greenwich Village in 1968. I was from a small town in Manitoba. It was very shocking.”

They nailed the audition, but it didn't matter. "We played great, but they told us the public wouldn't get the music we were playing." Glenn-Copeland had an operatic background, and the pair sang a mix of folk, blues and classical influences, "stuff that became much more popular in the 1990s with more acceptance of 'multicultural' sound. It was world music ahead of its time."

Back in Vancouver he performed with various folk, country/western, R&B, electric and acoustic blues groups and his studio musician career, but took a long break when he fell ill with what was many years diagnosed (subsequently cured) as a rare blood disorder. For years music took a back seat while he devoted his attention to his first love, painting, becoming a prolific artist, his canvasses hanging in homes, galleries and shows around the world, his style heavily influenced by the natural environment of his youth and ubiquitous works by First Nations, Métis and Inuit artists.

In the 1980s he returned to Montreal, harmonicas in hand, and played with a variety of bands including the IOUs, Québécois rockers Les Pare Chocs, and over the last decade has performed with the Posa Blue band and The Hard Knocks, at NDG's own Café Mariposa and Wheel Club, the latter boasting Montreal's longest running open mic Hillbilly Night featuring country and bluegrass.

His most memorable gigs were when he performed with the Powder Blues at the 2000 Tremblant Blues Festival opening concert and his gig at the Harmonica Extravaganza Sherblues Festival in 2017.

He just launched his new website with his music, live performance clips and visual art projects. At 76 years young, he "never had plans to be a mega-star" he laughs, "but I do still play, and I decided to put it all out there." He's got five albums out now, and his latest, Blues in a Suitcase is getting good airplay.

And play he does: “all kinds of blues, jazz, bebop, everything.” In fact, he does a lot of recording at home, where he creates his art and invites fellow musicians to play. “People dropping in, I wish there was more of that happening. In the 60s every day we’d go to a different place and sit in. It’s changed a lot over the years and maybe it’s false nostalgia I don’t know, but there was a time when it was more usual to get together to play music just for the sake of playing music. It was a great thing.”

In the early days of 2024, Chard is still playing, painting and singing strong, and has a few gigs lined up for the new year, including at NDG’s own Café Mariposa in March.

Check out his albums, clips and more at: www.chardart.com