

REVIEW

Review of Les Cowboys fringants musical and album *Pub Royal*

2023 (musical), 2h, La Tribu/Les sept doigts de la main
 2024 (album), 42:44, 13 tracks, La Tribu

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When beloved Québécois musical legend Karl Tremblay left us far too soon on 15 November 2023, aged only 47 years, many fans of Les Cowboys fringants feared they had heard his incomparable voice for the last time. (In fact, French rock icon Renaud, in his own May 2024 tour of Québec, would proclaim Tremblay’s as “the veritable voice of Québec.”) However, with the April/May 2024 release of *Pub Royal*, the LP to accompany the band’s “anti-musical comedy” (more on that below), nearly six months after his death to prostate cancer, Tremblay’s voice resonated once again across six new songs of the thirteen that compose the album.

Of the tracks featuring Tremblay’s vocals, one – the longest of the album, clocking in at 7:17 – stands out for the hauntingly autobiographical elements of the song, which was recorded as the star was dying, “La Fin du show” (The End of the show). It includes reflection: “J’ai chanté dans les plus grandes salles / De Paris jusqu’à Montréal” [I sang in the biggest venues, from Paris to Montreal.] It also includes first-person introspection: “Est-ce qu’on est à la fin du show? / Je pense ben que c’est la fin du show. / Karl, sais-tu la fin du show?” [Are we at the end of the show? I really think it’s the end of the show. Karl, do you know the end of the show?] At the same time, he does not seek pity for his fate as his star is fading [“Mon étoile se meurt”]:

J’veux pas d’votre pitié ni rien d’autre
 Ma vie fut bien plus cool qu’la vôtre [...]
 Ce soir, c’est l’ombre de moi-même,
 Qui, sans bruit, va quitter la scène
 Pour passer d’l’aut’bord du rideau.

[I don’t want your pity or anything else
 My life has been so much cooler than yours [...]
 Tonight, it’s a shadow of myself,
 Who, without sound, is going to leave the stage
 To go to the other side of the curtain.]

And, remaining on this same Villonesque acceptance of death as the prescribed ending of life, regardless of when it comes, Tremblay’s vocals capture the fact that his brief life was one lived to its fullest (partially in his signature *franglais*): “Je pourrais dire avec un sourire, / Okay, all right, j’ai eu une ben ride” [I could say with a smile, ‘Ok, all right, I’ve had a really nice ride.’] And later:

Qu’elle soit extra ou ordinaire,
 Chaque vie finit de la même manière;
 C’est la seule justice sur la Terre:
 Tous égaux dans le cimetière.

[Whether it was extra or ordinary,
Every life ends in the same way;
It's the only justice that exists on Earth:
All are equal in the cemetery.]

It is with this acceptance of death and a fate that others might find unfair that Tremblay simply sees passing on as a mere universal part of existence, which justifies the chorus he repeats across the anthem:

Ferme le follow, pis les lumières.
Non, je n'ai plus besoin qu'on m'éclaire,
Je sors par la porte d'en arrière
Sur la pointe des pieds, je me jette dans l'Univers/Por que m'avale l'Univers.

[Turn off the follow (vocals), then the lights
No, there is no longer any reason for me to be lit,
I'm leaving through the back door
On my tiptoes, throwing myself into the Universe/To be swallowed by the Universe.]

An emotional goodbye to fans, this song (by Cowboys fringants guitarist and chief lyricist Jean-François Pauzé) embodies and puts to verse Tremblay's feelings on impending death. However, justifying the injustice of young death is something that the combination of Pauzé and Tremblay had done since their earliest days as performers. For example, "La Tête haute" (from the 2008 album *L'Expédition*) treats the feelings concerning death from the viewpoint of a 19-year-old with terminal cancer. Perhaps their biggest hit, "Les Étoiles filantes" (*La Grand-Messe*, 2004) includes the lyrics, "Les bonheurs et les peines, les bons coups et les échecs / Travailler, faire de son mieux, s'arracher, s'en sortir / Et espérer être heureux, un peu avant de mourir" [Joys and sorrows, successes and failures / Working, doing your best, tearing away, getting through / And hoping to be happy, at least a little before we die.] Finally, from "Ici bas" (*Les Antipodes*, 2019):

Tant que mes yeux s'ouvriront,
Je chercherai dans l'horizon
La brèche qui s'ouvre sur les décombres
La lueur dans les jours plus sombres.
Tant que mes pieds marcheront,
J'avancerai comme un con,
Avec l'espoir dans chaque pas,
Et ce, jusqu'à mon dernier souffle
Ici-bas.

[As long as my eyes will open,
I will search across the horizon
For that gap that opens amid the ruins
Giving light to the darkest of days.
As long as my feet will walk,
I'll move along like an idiot,
With hope in every footstep

And this, until my last breath
Here below.]

As such, hearing the departed Tremblay wax poetic on such a common theme for the Cowboys, with the realization that he had, personally, reached that zenith, establishes “La Fin du show” as a true highlight of the album.

In addition to writing death and its acceptance so well, Pauzé has also always written women, particularly the downtrodden women of Montreal – in a way not dissimilar to another Tremblay, the quintessential Montreal playwright Michel – in exceptionally tender and meaningful ways (often cross-checked by bandmate and Tremblay’s now-widow Marie-Annick Lépine). Take, for example, “La Reine” (*La Grand-Messe*, 2005), “La Catherine” (*L’Expédition*, 2008), “Sous-sol” (*Les nuits de Repentigny*, 2020) and even the song “Pub Royal” (*Octobre*, 2015), the track that also gives this album and musical its title. In *Pub Royal*, we meet Loulou, a barmaid whose sad existence and lack of luck with men has led her to seek to take her own life. In the song “Loulou vs Loulou,” Lépine vocalizes the female half of an internal dialogue between poor Loulou and her conscience, with the imperative anaphora, “Rappelle-moi...,” “Redis-moi...,” “Parle-moi...,” “Raconte-moi...,” “Assure-moi...,” etc., seeking to find reasons in the past to continue forward and the refrain “Trop souvent...” recalling times that she has failed. For one example of many:

Trop souvent, les mauvais choix aussi
M’ont jeté dans les méandres des plus sales romances.
Trop souvent, j’ai préféré la fuite
Au lieu de voir la suite.

Rappelle-moi pourquoi je me sens autant brisée...

[Too often, poor choices as well
Have flung me into the ebbs and flows of the filthiest romances.
Too often, I preferred to flee
Instead of seeing what’s next.

Remind me why I feel so broken...]

It is a remarkably beautiful song and an affective look at someone, who might be questioning her own impetuous decision to end her life. And we see that her life matters, as much as that of another character from the *Pub Royal* (album) universe introduced in “Vie et mort de Gina Pinaud,” who “a pataugé dans les pires bas-fonds” [wallowed in the worst of slums].

The story of Loulou offers an ideal segue to transition from the album to the musical. Directed by Sébastien Soldevila, the musical narrative begins with a character Jonathan Doyer walking from “a minor accident” in his car to seek help in the only illuminated business he could see, Pub Royal. He is greeted by a motley crew of two barmaids, an aging rockstar, an unemployed worker, an also unemployed truck driver, along with a cast of dancers, background singers and circus performers. As Jonathan contemplates why his cell phone was taken from him and why this bar is populated by such a strangely diverse crowd, finally, a mystic, leather-clad and bearded figure Siriso, the Great Manitou, arrives on the scene to offer clarity, albeit enigmatically.

Launching into the musical with a lively “Bienvenue chez Nous,” with acrobats performing Cirque du Soleil-worthy stunts and others dancing, singing the chorus or otherwise participating in revelry, Jonathan grows increasingly aware that this is no normal bar. As becomes increasingly clear, Jonathan’s accident has left him, as well as the overdoses or accidents (the unemployed truck driver and worker were in the truck he crashed into) of the other bar patrons, in a state of limbo between life and death. Progressively, we learn their stories between song, dance and dialogue.

While the *Pub Royal* album is a concept album, whose thirteen tracks all focus on a similar theme and include characters (such as the aforementioned Gina Pinard) who do not appear in the musical, the songs actually draw on the catalogue, even the greatest hits, of the Cowboys fringants recorded discography. Here is a helpful chart between album and musical (with common tracks indicated in bold and the original recordings of songs in the musical to the right):

<i>Pub Royal</i> (album)	<i>Pub Royal</i> (musical)	Original album
A Side	Acte 1	
1. “Des Espoirs de cause”	1. “ Bienvenue chez nous ”	<i>Pub Royal</i> (2024)
2. “ Bienvenue chez nous ”	2. “D’une tristesse”	<i>Les Antipodes</i> (2019)
3. “ Loulou vs Loulou ”	3. “Joyeux calvaire!”	<i>Break Syndical</i> (2002)
4. “Y’est 3 heures on ferme !”	4. “Shooters”	<i>Que du vent</i> (2011)
5. “ La Fin du show ”	5. “Les maisons toutes pareilles”	<i>L’Amérique pleure</i> (2019)
6. “On fait quoi maintenant ?”	6. “L’Amérique pleure”	<i>L’Amérique pleure</i> (2019)
	7. “Si la vie vous intéresse”	<i>La Grand-Messe</i> (2004)
B Side	Acte 2	
7. “Questions sans réponses”	8. “La Traversée”	<i>Les Antipodes</i> (2019)
8. “Vie et mort de Gina Pinard”	9. “Pub Royal”	<i>Octobre</i> (2015)
9. “Loulou (partie II)”	10. “ Loulou vs Loulou ”	<i>Pub Royal</i> (2024)
10. “ (Re)bienvenue chez vous ”	11. “ Questions sans réponses ”	<i>Pub Royal</i> (2024)
11. “Les Cheveux blancs”	12. “ La Fin du show ”	<i>Pub Royal</i> (2024)
12. “Merci ben !”	13. “Plus Rien”	<i>La Grand-Messe</i> (2004)
13. “Les Bonnes Continuations”	14. “ (Re)bienvenue chez vous ”	<i>Pub Royal</i> (2024)

Of course, the original *Pub Royal*, it merits repeating, is an actual establishment in Chibougamau in the Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean region of northern Québec, which inspired the eponymous 2015 song that imagines yet another barmaid who moves from Montreal to a remote region in the north of the province, changing her hair color and name and wearing long sleeves all summer, to start her life anew: “Elle voulait faire la paix / Avec son lourd passé” [She wanted to make peace with her heavy past]. This thematic is revisited throughout the musical, with one character even named La Catherine. Themes of finding peace in one’s fate (the aging rocker singing “La Fin du show”) or the waste and environmental pricetag of today’s global economy (the trucker singing “L’Amérique pleure”) make the musical a retrospective of the band’s music, as well as a celebration of their vision for Québec.

Having caught the opening night performance at the Cogeco Amphitheatre in Trois-Rivières on 29 May 2024, I was deeply moved at how Pauzé’s “anti-musical” hit every note and filled every void created by Karl Tremblay’s passing. I was not alone. Thousands of us sang along in unison to familiar tunes and there was nary a dry eye in the venue when the concluding image was a black-and-white promotional photo of the band, with a proud, lively Karl with a popped collar and his long hair cascading, staring back at us through black sunglasses.