



MIKE RUD
Notes on Montréal

It's a mythic place to me, Montreal. You can walk its ramshackle alleys at 3:00 am and feel surprisingly safe. There's a feeling here that I hope you'll recognize in this music. I've lived all over Canada, but I made my home in Montreal. This city is rich in everything good. The mix of cultures, the history, the architecture, all make it a perfect dreamscape for a moving literature that intensifies my sense of place, here. Captivated, I decided to make Montreal the focus of years of work. The resulting music is *my* reaction to these texts, and the way they made me feel about the city. It is not in any way meant to represent, or speak for, that literature.

The Format: Sienna and Strings

One overcast day in 1997 as I sat on the curb in front of Restaurant Santropol, Sienna Dahlen came down St-Urbain Street, and I called out to her. Would she, I asked, help me by singing an arrangement for strings I had to submit for a class at McGill University? She said yes, and I spent years afterwards haunted by the effect of this woman's clear, powerful voice, especially set to strings.

Finally in 2009 I decided that Montreal's literature was a fitting subject for this musical palette, and I set about the somewhat monkish, years-long task of reading the books and writing the songs and arrangements. What I never could have anticipated was just how much I'd be asking of everyone around me. Sienna and producer Paul Johnston were endlessly patient with me, giving generously of their time and bottomless expertise (itself cooked up in the artistic cauldron of Montreal). They're only the beginning. Read the thank-you section. I'm thinking of having it tattooed onto me, so I'll never forget their belief in me and their generosity.

Smoked Meat and The Main

Mordecai Richler is the city's best known English voice. His final novel, Barney's Version, shows us a man approaching the end, unjustly accused, thinking through his life's decisions.

Now I take my seat
At this bar on Bishop street
Where I waste my time
With lawyers that I meet
And I reminisce
'bout evenings at the Ritz
The women and the rain
Smoked meat and the Main

Not so long ago
The liquor used to flow
In small Parisian streets
I had friends you know
Now it's come to this
Remembering the Ritz
The women and the rain
Smoked meat and the Main

I was a man of grander means
Reflecting in the end
A man who found his dreams
Were haunted by his friends

Now that I can see my life receding
Now upon a closer second reading
I reveal a man of principles

My ex has lost her looks
I still pay for her home
I hear she wrote a book
It's time I wrote my own

'bout how I bent the wrist
And how I clenched the fist
And how I drowned my brain
In whisky once again

I was a man of grander means
Reflecting in the end
A man who found his dreams
Were haunted by his friends

Now that I can see my life receding
Now upon a closer second reading

I reveal a man of principles

I reveal a man of principles

Streetcar 55

One scene in Michel Tremblay's The Fat Woman Next Door Is Pregnant (La grosse femme d'à côté est enceinte) describes a cadre of friends who ride the streetcar for Saturday morning entertainment.

Slowly streetcar fifty-five
Shambles up the crowded drive
Several women climb inside
Find their spots for sitting

Chattering through their Sunday chintz
Sweating through their floral prints
Here they spend the afternoon
Gossiping and knitting

Past the bustling beehive blocks
And Schreter's with its discount socks
A rolling coop of happy hens
Clucking through the city

How's your husband's family?
How his mother grates on me
When's your hysterectomy?
My your daughter's pretty

Years and years have passed since then
No more street cars, no more hens
No more knitting baby boots
No more tracks along the routes

'Cause now the number fifty-five
Rolls on rubber up the drive
But I pull out my cellular
And gossip just like them

Florentine

This was inspired by the main character from Gabrielle Roy's great novel The Tin Flute (Bonheur d'occasion in French), the story of a girl who is forced by crippling poverty to make a shattering decision.

She knew she wanted him the moment that she saw him
From the way he wandered in the diner door
He was elegant and arrogant and witty
He was above everyone, could never love anyone
But he was proud and he was vain and he was pretty
Which only meant that she would want him all the more

She invited him to come to her apartment
Said her parents wouldn't be around that day
And when the two of them got down to nitty gritty
And she fell into his lap oh was she laying a trap?
Cause she was proud and she was vain and she was pretty
And couldn't bear to watch him wandering away

Florentine
I think you did the best that you were able
Waitressing and wiping off the tables
And dreaming about the day he'd take you away
Because Saint-Henri is not exactly living in a fable
It ain't exactly living in Green Gables
Florentine
Florentine
Florentine

Now a man of his considerable ambition
Can't be bothered by the breaking of a heart
He can't be hindered by compassion or by pity
He made sure he never knew about the child coming due
He packed his bags and beat a path across the city
We always knew that he would leave her from the start

Now a baby is a joy and it's a blessing
But a baby wants a raising all the same
And a baby is a struggle and a bother
And after all she'd been through she did what she had to do
She found a man who could believe
he was the father
From a family with money and a name

Florentine
I think you did the best that you were able
Waitressing and wiping off the tables
And dreaming about the day he'd take you away
Because Saint-Henri is not exactly living in a fable
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Florentine
Florentine

As the Cross Looks On

*The student population gives the downtown core so much of its spark, portrayed well in novels like **The Origin of Species** by Nino Ricci or **Nikolski** by Nicolas Dickner. Because they tend to move on to other places, these students also give Montreal a permanent sense of impermanence. I gently mock these students, because I am one.*

Breakfast, noon upon a Sunday
Students at the diner
Looking all hung over
Looking kind of drawn
As the cross looks on

Hear those drummers on the mountain
Kneeling on their blankets
Smell the marijuana
Drift along the lawn
As the cross looks on
As the cross looks on
As the cross looks on

Twenty only lasts you for a turn now
Social science doesn't pay the rent
Oh you feel like you have time to burn now
One day you will wonder where it went
But now they're closing all the bars up

Stumbling on the cobble-
stones upon Prince Arthur
Drinkin' in the dawn
As the cross looks on
As the cross looks on
As the cross looks on

Show me how to feel and how to move now
Show me your political dissent
Show me how to love and how to groove now
Bulletproof until the money's spent

Moving, on to greener pastures
Finished up your masters
Movin' from the Plateau
New ones come along
As the cross looks on
New ones come along
As the cross looks on

The Writer

*The main character in Dany Laferrière's **How to Make Love to a Negro** has a parade of attractive young women through his bedroom. The book makes a social statement, but in this song I was a little more interested in the character himself, and the possible roots of his womanizing.*

Ripening garbage lifts along and drifts along
the sticky summer air
Here we see a lonely writer through the nighter
perched upon a chair
Meeting women he is shameless in the nameless
bars of St-Denis
Each by one they'll fill his bed and fill his head
and keep him company
These denizens of St-Denis

Plateau parties welcome him in where the women
wonder at his face
Here he'll find a feminist who can't resist
to cook and clean his place
Defly dropping names and places, not a trace of
care, he baits the hook
Later she will see his peeling painted ceiling
then she's in the book
Yeah she's just one more for his book

Day by day each lady fails and starts to smother him
Night by night he'll take more tales down than the
brothers Grimm

Old Don Juan he pushes love away; he shoves it in-
to finite prose
Terrified he'll take a wife and make a life
there's something in him knows
That all this restless hostile bedding wants a wedding
wants to make a home
Is this really just a story of a man afraid to be alone?
Is he afraid to be alone?

LaPointe's Beat

Trevanian's crime novel The Main is pulp detective fiction par excellence. The main character, LaPointe, knows St-Laurent Boulevard inside out, and loves its inhabitants, wearily.

I tip my hat to a stripper at Main and Sainte-Catherine
Ask her what's new and make sure that she's doing okay
Heroes and heartbreak are fine for the young and the doe-eyed
But I've got to get through my shift till the break of the day

You can rely that I'm keeping an eye out for trouble
Dealers and drifters itinerant grifters and ghouls
Up at the shops where I check on the locks and the windows
Or down at the mission where drugs make attrition the rule

Better check the action down in Chinatown
There's been talk that something big is going down
There's a body in the trash and his pockets stuffed with cash
There's a building left in ash

Once I was thin with my shirt all tucked in and my hair combed
Once I was married and yes I was very in love
But twenty years into the force and we live with our choices
I answered the call now these people are all that I have

Now if you'll excuse me or even if not I'll be leaving
It's thirty below but I've still got to go the night through
Scanning the snow-covered streets is my plan for the evening
Even the criminals need me I know that they do

Do you recognize the face in this polaroid?
Found him near your place but don't be paranoid
There are folks who saw you round and
I took their statements down
Would you please remain in town?



Parc La Fontaine

Michel Tremblay's The Fat Woman Next Door Is Pregnant reaches its climax in this sprawling Plateau park. Tremblay draws together many different storylines, making clear a strong feeling of love for the characters. I was moved by this picture of the park as a focal point.

When the summer is simmering your brain love
You can meet me at Parc La Fontaine love
And at length as you cool down
You can start to make sense of your life in this town

There is no one around to arrest you
And no trial to torment or test you
We'll just sit under the leaves
And we'll plead your defense to the grass and the breeze

Rest now head against this tree
See how simple life can be
Something will render you whole once again
Here in the soft light of Parc La Fontaine

There are buskers and lovers and gypsies
There are sailors and soldiers and hippies
There are men back from the war
There are women who meet them (I won't say what for)

All these lives will now connect
All these lines will intersect
Only a moment and never again
Here in the gloaming of Parc La Fontaine

In the blue light of the winter
On the day after the blizzard
Here they come skates on their backs
And the new fallen snow quickly fills with their tracks

And the spring duly delivers
A plateau that is rippling with rivers
There's a cup it gently floats
And a boy with a stick proudly captains the boat

Where else can we hope to see
A vision of how life used to be?
Evenings in summer that don't seem to end
Here in the halflight of Parc La Fontaine

Evenings in summer that don't seem to end
Here in the halflight of Parc La Fontaine

The Dry Land Pirate

Nicolas Dickner's Nikolski features a character who, proud of an ancient family heritage of sea-piracy, imports this identity to Montreal's dumpsters, which she scours for computer parts. Using these, she creates a powerful computer in her Jean-Talon apartment, and uses it to commit fraud.

Alley cats and gutter rats are company
Ain't nobody can catch me
Far from the sea where I grew
Landlocked
Still I'm a pirate it's true
Drydocked
Bedrocked

Find me in the briny deeps of Jean-Talon
With the fish that I feast on
Customers never would know
To see me
A pirate like those long ago
Sells them
Sashimi

In the harbor my apartment offers me
Setting sail on a new sea
World Wide Web
International waters
Hoist up the net
And up goes the Jolly Roger

So watch your keel upon the electronic sea
Look out for the likes of me
Don't venture far from the shore
Ever
Or you could end up as more
Sunken
Treasure

Bags, Clothes, Bottles

Ted Allan's great screenplay Lies My Father Told Me paints a Montreal where the back alleys tell us all about our neighbours' closely guarded secrets. The story in this song is mine.

How can a man have a secret
when his life is so easily read?
When his wife yells about his digestion
and his underwear waves like a flag overhead

I've got the goods on these people
I know their histories by heart
But I'm not a shrink or a preacher
No I comb through their garbage with my little cart

Bags, Clothes, Bottles
Bags, Clothes, Bottles

Tin roofs and tangled emotions
and lives layered three stories deep

Sylvie likes reading the tabloids
Jacob's not right in the head
Alvin is caught up in credit card fraud
Jill takes so many pills she'll soon be dead

All of them take out their garbage
All of them think it ends there
That's when I come around and I dig through the truth
and the whole block is one big confessional booth

Bags, Clothes, Bottles
Bags, Clothes, Bottles

Tin roofs and tangled emotions
and lives layered three stories deep

There is only a floor between housewife and whore
And the walls here are thin and no secrets will keep

Next door to us lives a lady
Her husband was lost in the war
I like to play with her children
They still don't know that they're poor

I never go through her garbage
cause she never throws away clothes
And the patches on patches attest to the fact
that this family lives in a home full of holes

Bags, Clothes, Bottles
Bags, Clothes, Bottles

At the end of our block lives a rabbi
I saw him out walking last night
Crossing the street like a shoelace
staying clear of the light
But with the sunrise this morning
I saw his purpose come clear
Seems a miracle found its way under the door
of the woman whose husband was lost in the war
In an envelope five thousand dollars or more
for the children who'd never seen new shoes before

Bags, Clothes, Bottles
Bags, Clothes, Bottles

Horrible, beautiful people
The brilliant, the brave, and the broken
Under church bells above
that command us to love
in a language so haltingly spoken

Baby

Heather O'Neill's great book Lullabies for Little Criminals shows us life on the street for its main character, Baby. She's strong, and smart, and she loves her heroin-addicted dad. You can't help but feel concern for her.

Baby I see you standing by that Needle Park
Where bad things happen in the dark
Worse than faulty judgement
Worse than just a crime
Oh my heart sinks every time I see you there

Baby where's your father gotten to?
And who on Earth looks after you?
I see you're goin' home to a Hotel on St-Hubert
Clearly that's no way to raise a girl

But you ain't nobody's victim
And you ain't nobody's pawn
The girl grows up so quickly
But the child lives on
Now your heart's one husky muscle
Any man could be a John
Is that the way you've got to hustle?
When your daddy's a junky and your mama is gone

Baby you got a lot of garbage to forget
And life's got lots to teach you yet
I pray you'll think it over
You will see the world is bigger than just Carré St-Louis

To Carmen, to Breavman

*A letter to two characters who both spend time near the nightclubs at the corner of Ste-Catherine and St-Laurent. The poetic Lawrence Breavman, from Leonard Cohen's *The Favourite Game*, seems based on the young Cohen. Michel Tremblay's *Sainte-Carmen of the Main* features a young singer who returns from afar to that same run-down intersection with a message of redemption for its barflies. I wrote this one day as I walked up from the harbour through that "tenderloin district." The city is, for me, infused with these half-people.*

I emerge
From a book
Eyes a blur
Try to look
Round the restaurant
But my head still in the font

Trudging out
In the street
Squeaky snow
'neath my feet

Stories in my mind
Other people other times
People who I met in fading pages
Hang and haunt the port of Montreal
Here among the limestone and the laneways
Twilight you can see them best of all
And down by the cathedral
I cannot help but call

Carmen
Christ you're a sight for my sore eyes
I never thought it was true
The things they were saying 'bout you

They said that you were walking among us
Said you had risen again
Returned to the Main

Here by the Cleopatra
I put my hand in your wounds
I'll buy you a steamé and we'll talk it out till the dawn

Breavman
I heard them say you were leavin'
Taking our souls when you go
In those poems we all seem to know

But these streets still need your words to
describe them
Filled as they are with so much
that cries for your touch

There must remain some woman
you haven't conquered by now
We'll sit by the window and I will take notes
as they pass

You slipped right off of the page into
This life, haunting the feel of this place
With your trace
With a shadow's elusive embrace
And just when I try to touch you you're
Dust then gone when the wind starts to blow
Even though, you're as real as the people I know

Carmen
We couldn't keep you and
Breavman
Nothing could hold you to us
I guess I should not make a fuss

I stopped by
Your little place on the Plateau
Hoping I'd find you at home
But I stood alone

Just like you never existed
Gone with the leaves of the fall
Is this what I get when I let in the best of them all?

You slipped right off of the page into
This life, haunting the feel of this place
With your trace
With a shadow's elusive embrace
And just when I try to touch you you're
Dust then gone when the wind starts to blow
Even though, you're as real as the people I know

I live here in the embrace of the
River from one hardwood floor to the next
I reflect
And I publish my life in this text

Ode to Dusty's

*Breakfast here is virtually a competitive sport. I've noticed that I can't perform this song without eliciting from the audience (or the band) a list of favourite eateries. Which diners include the coffee in the price? How late do they serve it? Out there, somewhere, is the mythic \$1.99 breakfast, coffee included. One novel, Yves Beauchemin's *Le Matou*, revolves around the legendary Binerie Mont-Royal.*

Dusty's, Beauty's, Bagel Etcetera,
Binerie Mont-Royal,
Green Spot, Blanche Neige, Nouveau Palais...
Oh, my darlings I love you all

I put my coat up on the rack
I take a table at the back
I eat my waffles by the stack
I take my coffee extra blaaack

The Alley's Where to Start

Just my personal anthem about the gorgeous streets here. The tiny rue Le Jeune is a favourite, emblematic of the human scale of the architecture in Montreal. French lyrics translated by Yves Dorison.

Une cloche au loin m'appelle
Mystique, elle m'ensorcelle
Je joue avec les stores, je chante

J'observe la vie dehors
Je rêve les arbres, les fleurs
Les escaliers m'emballent
Balustrades et spirales

De Saint-Denis à Des Érables
De Sainte-Famille à l'Esplanade

The alley's where to start
The cherished hidden heart
All overgrown with oaks and maples
But I especially love
the clotheslines strung above
Garages built like old horse stables

Sur rue Le Jeune, sur Durocher
Sur Sainte-Famille, sur Du Musée

Et si jamais je ne vois le Nil ou la Seine
au moins je vois le Saint-Laurent, le Saint-Laurent

The past lives on again
In crinkled window panes
In blackened weather vanes
Dark hallways

Now on a distant pier
The night is drawing near
I pray this will be here for always

De Saint-Denis à Des Érables
De Sainte-Famille à l'Esplanade

And if I never see
The Nile or the Thames
Still, I see
Le Saint-Laurent
Le Saint-Laurent