

Serge Fiori and me



photo: Jean-Charles Labarre

I heard a voice and suddenly remembered with a jolt of joy that I'd been waiting an awfully long time to hear it.

I was plunged back into a familiar urgency to make music, speak French and do big things. I wanted to live and work with those who cared for truth and integrity, who respected the earth and all its inhabitants, and who exulted in creativity. Fresh and vivid, the memories of my early university days suddenly seemed very present, and all because I'd heard the distinctive, multi-octave voice of Serge Fiori. With his new solo album released March 4th this year, somehow, I felt he was talking to me directly out of that era. It was as if the intervening years had blinked out, and both he, and Debra of 1978, called out “Hey! Remember me?”

Meanwhile, in the social media, I could see I wasn't alone in my flashback:



from Twitter

Patricia Boulet [@pboulet1](#) Mar 5

**[@Sergefiori](#) J'ai l'impression de retrouver mes 20 ans
Même son, même douceur dans la voix. Merci Monsieur
Serge Fiori vous nous faites du bien**

Dayen [@guydayen](#) Mar 5

**[@Sergefiori](#) Merci beaucoup pour cette nouvelle musique. Il
y a tellement longtemps qu'on attendait cela ! Je revis ma
jeunesse avec plaisir.**

Jean Clavet [@jeanc1506](#) Mar 7

**[@Sergefiori](#) Je viens d'écouter ton album et j'ai revécu
avec émotion la voix qui a bercé mon adolescence.
Sensible fragile, issu d'un génie**



from facebook

[Louise Marion](#) le reportage dans la presse d'aujourd'hui ... ca m'a fait réaliser a quel point tu nous as manqué toutes ces années dans l'univers musical, j'en avais les larmes aux yeux, de l'émotion pure ta musique et parole, j'espere que tu nous lacheras plus!!! et quel bonheur de te faire redécouvrir a mes jeunes qui me demandent tu es qui

[March 1 at 6:09pm](#)

[Gervais Castonguay](#) Comme un vieil Amour de jeunesse perdu de vue parce qu'il ne s'était pas inscrit au même cegep que moi. 40 ans plus tard tu le retrouve et ton cœur bat encore très fort lorsque tu le vois. Merci Serge Fiori de refaire surface. Vraiment hâte de savourer ta musique à nouveau.

[March 2 at 8:17am](#)

[Inoue Normandeau](#) L' album ...s'écoute en entier non pas seulement avec un succes ...nous sommes envahi dans L'UNIVERS DE FIORI Merci Serge J'ai le même feeling ..que il y a 20 ans ou 23

[March 4 at 10:20am](#)

[Anne Marie Thouin](#) Si, comme tu dis, y a pu d'amour en politique, y en a en masse qui passe dans ta musique. Tu te rends compte Serge, que c'est toi qui est en train de rassembler les Québécois ! C'est toi qui part le courant. C'est toi le courant d'air ! :))

[March 7 at 9:02pm](#)

The excitement quickly translated into sales. Co-produced by Fiori and Marc Pérusse for the music label GSI Musique, Serge Fiori's self-titled album shot to the top of the Billboard Canadian Album listing, taking the number one spot for sales in Québec and Canada for two consecutive weeks, and earning the “Gold” certification for selling 40,000 copies.

It's been 28 years since Serge Fiori's last solo album, and closer to 35 years since he first drew attention fronting the folk rock group Harmonium. From about 1973 he and Michel Normandeau, both on guitar and vocals, and Louis Valois, bass and vocals, formed the nucleus of the group. With a recognizable sound due largely to the 12-string guitar, and singing poetry of self discovery, they played in small bars and cegeps, winning a huge student following largely through word of mouth. Their lyrics spoke of identity on many levels, and fanned the flames of nationalist fervour. Harmonium linked up easily with the Parti Québécois as they toured the Eastern Townships and played at party meetings. Often after these gigs, Fiori found himself playing poker with an insomniac René Lévesque.

The buzz for Harmonium continued to build. But as eagerly as they sought recording contracts, they dogmatically refused to cut their long songs to fit the 3-minute average for successful radio airplay. Despite their proven popularity among the valuable youth demographic, no Québec music company could tame them enough to fit their recording contract qualifications. It took an Ontario record label to finally record and release the group's first album, simply called *Harmonium*, (Célébration 1974). It contained *Un musicien parmi tant d'autre*, the song whose refrain quickly became a siren call sung by thousands of ardent fans:

Où est allé tout ce monde
Qui avait quelque chose à raconter
On a mis quelqu'un au monde
On devrait peut-être l'écouter

The second album, most often called *Les cinq saisons* but was, in fact, *Si on avait besoin d'une cinquième saison* (Célébration 1975) saw the group expand from 3 to 5 members, adding flutes and early synthesizers, including the mellotron and ondes martenot. For *L'heptade* (CBS 1976), a double album and considered by many to be one of the pivotal masterpieces of Québec music, the group expanded once more, and this time included orchestral arrangements. The group numbered 7 official members as they toured with *L'heptade* and a live recording of their Vancouver performance became the final album, *Harmonium En tournée* (CBS 1980).

Serge Fiori was the charismatic and incredibly talented front man, writing more and more of the music and lyrics, and stretching his musical skills to encompass guitar, flute, piano, timbales and whatever else intrigued him. Long straight hair, big dark circles under his mesmerizing eyes, thin and intense, I had seen him in person at the one and only Harmonium concert that I got to attend. It was a huge adventure for me, only recently arrived to a university dorm in Ottawa, and now taking my first trip out of the city with new friends to a breathlessly-anticipated concert in Kingston, a couple of hours away.

I remember still standing in the stifflingly warm camaraderie of a crowd, maybe a couple of hundred of us, all dancing in place and singing along with the musicians who were within touching distance. Sharing grins with my friends and proud of my ability to pronounce those few French words of the choruses, I felt connected to a larger world. I was soaring high when Fiori's haunting eyes caught and held mine. It was an upbeat song, perhaps "*Pour Un Instant*" and yet here was Fiori looking solemn. Throughout the concert I had been watching his soulful gaze and getting more and more irritated. I was convinced he was deliberately playing 'the guru' and overdoing it. When our eyes met, I fought the perceived manipulation and frowned. I broke

the eye contact, and looked instead towards a merry Valois grinning widely as he played. So even as I participated in the intense joy of music shared, I felt wary of the lead musician responsible.

The hugely popular group achieved mythic status in Quebec. Anglophones often described the musicians as “the Beatles of Quebec” but I still don't think that communicates the depth of their emotional, political and social resonance. A 1979 National Film Board feature *Harmonium in California* documented the group's visit to the US as one of the cultural ambassadors, chosen by René Lévesque and the Parti Québécois, to promote the province's viability to the Americans. The referendum on whether Québec should opt out of Canada and become its own country was a year away. Political intensity was heating up, and Harmonium's music merged issues of personal identity and Québec sovereignty in a seductively potent blend. I was playing my Harmonium records for friends, explaining proudly what I saw the group, and other Québec musicians, achieving. In the throes of my own developing identity, I loved how these confident artists with acoustic guitars and gorgeous melodies spoke of moments that I shared, being misunderstood, wanting something more than the conventional 9-5 life, dreaming big. But even as I applauded Serge Fiori's songwriting and politics, I remembered my reaction to him at that concert and was troubled. Had I been unfair? Could I love the music as I did but not love the man?

Trouble then loomed for Harmonium. On the brink of breaking out internationally with a chance to sign with a major international music label and to tour with the English rock group Supertramp, Fiori suddenly called it quits without saying why, and went into a kind of seclusion. Harmonium was heard no more.

After *L'heptade*, some members of the group produced solo albums. I was mildly interested. But I adored the 1978 Fiori-Séguin “Deux cents nuits à l'heure” (CBS 1978), as did many others, as Serge Fiori and Richard Séguin won 3 Félix awards (Québec's equivalent of the Juno award) for best Album of the Year (singer/songwriter category) Group of the Year, and Song of the Year in 1979. But after that I lost track of Fiori. There were no new solo releases to find at the record store until 1986. I spotted it by chance, having given up my weekly visits, and I enjoyed *Fiori* (Polydor 1986) very much. But I was leaving my quiet Ottawa pursuits to forge a new life in the metropolitan bustle of Toronto, and Fiori's new music just didn't have the same impact on me. I played my Harmonium albums often to help heal my homesickness. Gradually, I grew adjusted to the bigger city, and the records began gathering dust.

I worked a day job at CBC Television, while my nights were absorbed by playing clarinet semi-professionally. One of my tasks as secretary on the 14-hour High Definition mini-series "Chasing Rainbows" was to prepare crew lists. I could barely contain my excitement when I typed “Neil Chotem”, the name of late Canadian composer whom I knew collaborated with Fiori on *L'heptade*. Chotem had actually been at the country retreat in Saint-Césaire where the album had been both written and recorded. I still hadn't resolved for myself how I felt about Serge. Unquestionably I loved his music, but I couldn't get rid of the sense that I had been manipulated at that concert. I waited eagerly for the opportunity to ask Neil, thinking I would finally get the truth.



I got my chance during a music record one day, during a break for microphone adjustments. We stood in a corner away from the musicians, and I asked if he had enjoyed working with Harmonium. Preoccupied, he murmured yes. I said something about it being too bad there were only three albums. I was confident about that because I remembered checking the music store so diligently, week after week, hoping for a new release. He startled me by returning a very intense “No! There were four!”. I grew confusedly excited. Was there something new out there I had somehow missed? I rhymed off the albums to him, *Harmonium*, *Les cinq saisons* and *L'heptade*... and he added “the live' album. Oh, I said, as disappointment crashed over me. Not new material. But I persisted, asking hopefully 'how was it?’. He astonished me by replying that it was the best experience of his life. He spoke of the intense focus on music within the rural setting and remembered one particular morning's sunrise making him feel he was participating in a religious experience. Struck dumb in my amazement, I watched wordlessly as he walked away when the call came that the microphones were ready. He took his place at the podium, and I never had the chance to talk with him about it again.

No mistaking his sincerity. And no mistaking my dilemma. How could I be so enraptured by the music and still, so put off by the man?

Over the years, Fiori's “silent” years, I caught glimpses of him. I noticed he collaborated with other artists, including Neil Chotem. Though Chotem didn't mention it in the short time we spoke, Fiori had contributed to the recording *Neil Chotem Live Au El Casino* (CBS 1979). I hadn't particularly liked the music of rock singer Nanette Workman, but her album *Changement d'adresse* (CBS 1990), for which Fiori was the musical producer, quickly became a favourite. I noted his success writing theme music for the *Just For Laughs* festival. I was interested to see

he was writing music for films, and curious about his meditation chant recordings, but only mildly. I forgot that I was waiting for his next big statement, and forgot about him.

Then, last year, the remarkable happened.

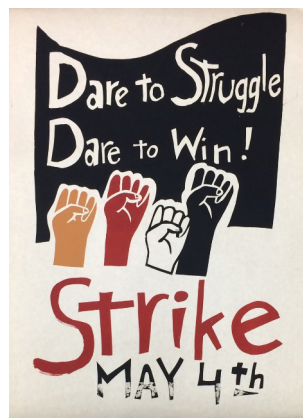
An authorized biography appeared, *S'enlever du chemin*, which promised to explain the public silence. This gifted musician revealed to his former companion, author and psychologist Louise Thériault, the neurological damage he's lived with since his teens, the result of a bad drug trip. He had been suffering deeply debilitating anxiety attacks, growing in overpowering intensity every time he went on stage. The panic and distress overwhelmed him but he didn't understand why. It's only recently that he feels he's been properly diagnosed and treated, and only with this book that he has felt able to speak out about what happened.

And now, even more remarkably, here is the solo album for which I had been, unconsciously, waiting.

During the buildup to the album's release in early March, I found myself eagerly listening to album extracts and to the interviews, once so rare, and now appearing abundantly. I felt dislocated, not unlike the album cover showing a multi-layered picture of Fiori twisted unrecognizably. I went to work absently, came home distractedly, preoccupied by memories of angst, companionship and such fierce hope. The effect lasted for days, prompting me to wonder why.

Is it just because Fiori hasn't been regularly on view, on stage, in the same way Richard Séguin or Paul McCartney have? I don't think it's just a simple time factor. Fiori's new melodies reach my heart in spot that feels raw and open. Hearing his unmistakable voice, and those evocative 12-string guitar chords, I was surprised by my stomach tensing as long-simmering anger I thought I had completely forgotten coloured my world once more.

In my university days I was riding the tail end of the 60's protest marches, the sit-ins, love-ins, and outrageous colours. I debated with my friends endlessly about ways of successfully navigating the world. I knew, with unshakeable confidence, that change was not only possible but imperative.



Poster for 1970 Student Protest By Unknown author - Bolerium Books, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=89119282>

I was too timid for my own liking, though. Just a little too conventional. I burned to wear the long, flowing skirts that to me signified a respect for female energy and a deliberate opting out of the corporate world. But I lacked the nerve to stand out and wore jeans like most of my friends. I longed to be a daring challenger, grow my own vegetables and live in the woods. But I lived in a quiet city backstreet and shopped at the supermarket. The world already seemed to me to have lost a bit of energy and colour. It had been more than five years since the gut-churning Kent State University shootings and massive student strike in the US. It was almost ten years since May 1968 when France had been crippled by the combined student-worker protest.

Now that I was in university and ready to join in, I found the train had already left. Desire for public protest was muted, most of my fellows concentrating on getting ahead in the world. Elected to student government and participating in one protest march and one sit-in, I found that I too, didn't really believe in the effectiveness of public demonstrations. I saw more results in knuckling down to the hard work of developing compromises.

But Québec was different.



I saw their artists speaking of identity, reminding us to respect elders and becoming self-sustaining caretakers of the environment and I was entranced, drawn by their truth and integrity. I was excited by their passion, loved the drama, and respected their actions. My wholehearted support grew a touch wobbly, though, as Québec separation began looking possible. An anglophone, I was proud that being a Canadian linked me with the Québécois. I was proud Canada included many nationalities, including that of my Ukrainian ancestors. I was proud of a country that was trying to honour many cultures while trying to build a new one. I hated the thought of Québec leaving and when finally, the 1980 Parti Québécois referendum on separation resolved the issue, I was relieved, though shaken by what I thought was an uncomfortably close vote.

And here we are again. Is it karma that once more, as Québec debates its future as a society, there is intensely personal and moving music from Fiori exploring once more our sense of identity?

Hearing Fiori's new music in the context of my life today seems to pull my past and current selves together in an uncomfortable confrontation. Am I walking the walk? Am I the ethical, concerned, creative person I have always believed myself to be? Do I still hold my beliefs as strongly? Am I still willing to look closely, and choose to change? It's not what he's saying that is laying this challenge on me, for my French comprehension is still not up to understanding every word. It's his very sound. It connects, on some visceral level, to what I think of as the best part of me. And remembering my 19-year-old's hopes and expectations, I'm not sure I measure up.

Serge Fiori has had his challenges, and I have had mine. He's a public figure who has managed to live a great part of his life out of the glare of paparazzi, and I'm a private figure with more than a few degrees of separation. We both inhabit this era, and this country. His music tells me we share concerns about loneliness, hopes for love. Marked by life as we are, Serge Fiori and I and many others carry within us our youth and our present age. And if he is saying "Hey, the world hasn't gone the way we wanted. Time to try again," I'm more than willing to listen. His music speaks to me, challenging me to re-examine my forgotten dreams, choose the ones that are truly important and work them back into my life. I feel touched by a kind of grace that connects who I was with who I want to be.

Maybe I'm just trying to explain away magic. What really matters is, he's back, and in some way, so am I.

Merci, Serge. Je suis émue..
