

essay

“Thanksgiving” in French

by Dan Chouinard



My first and only holiday season away from home began with a “Dîner Traditionnel de Thanksgiving” at Le Blue Note, a storefront jazz bar and eatery on a dark side street in Aix-en-Provence. I was a college junior spending my fall semester in France, and on Thursdays I had a regular gig here playing saloon piano.

Tonight, the very day of *Action de grâce* (standard French for “Thanksgiving”), the tiny place was packed to the walls, the locals far outnumbered by my 30 Minnesota classmates. We ate *dinde* (turkey) and *farce* (stuffing) and pumpkin soufflé; we gave thanks; we sang show tunes and ran up a big tab. On a break the owner poured me a snifter of something unpronounceable and said, “Why aren’t you doing something with your music?” I thought I was.

In times of displacement and loneliness I invariably go in search of a piano and an audience, and in the fall of 1982, my first trip away from home, I went at it with a vengeance.

Gérard, my host and a local choir director—also my *de facto* agent—helped me land the weekly gig at Le Blue Note, and I repaid him by recording piano accompaniments for his choir. I got myself a moped for the semester and put it to good use criss-crossing the Provençal countryside tuning people’s pianos for francs and dinner invitations. After class most days I practiced piano in the baroque hall of the international school, in preparation for a concert I’d give there in January. And on Thursdays I’d head for the restaurant where *Aixoïis* and Minnesotans alike showed up to sing American pop songs and listen to ragtime piano.

Activity helped crowd out the loneliness, but it crept in all the same like the smoky autumnal chill. Sometimes it came in the mail: a cassette from home, the voices of

Mom, Dad and siblings with last month’s latest news and the heartbreaking reminder that life there did indeed go on without me.

At this moment my life was in Aix-en-Provence, and on this night gratitude was my calling. How lucky I was: a student from a nice Minnesota liberal arts college spending four months in the south of France, zipping around on this moped that tonight had carried me through the Renaissance streets to this little bar where my family of traveling companions was gathered to sing away this peculiarly American holiday.

In a few days we’d all start activating our Eurail passes and scatter like leaves across the unexplored continent. I’d go to the French Alps to ski on a real mountain; to Paris alone to walk the crowded streets, humming “Silver Bells” and munching roasted chestnuts; and then by sleeper train to the starlit Pyrenees for Christmas with the family of a French oil executive and midnight mass in a stone church that rang with shepherd songs and ancient dialect.

Tonight, out in the dark street Adventure beckoned us, its bags packed, mouthing *Let’s Go!* For a brief moment we didn’t notice: we’d steamed up the windows with too many choruses of “New York, New York.” One last time, we sat crammed together at tables and around the hearth of the piano. Adventure and all its demands would come soon enough. Thanksgiving night was for home, family and music, wherever they were to be found.

Dan Chouinard is a freelance pianist, accordionist and writer who turns up frequently on Minnesota Public Radio and on concert stages across the region. In upcoming weeks he’ll make appearances with Prudence Johnson, Peter Ostroushko, the Twin Cities Gay Men’s Chorus, Robert Robinson and the citizens of Lanesboro, Minnesota.