

# SHAKING OUT THE SHEETS



Sergio Gaudente

Malicorne, 1979 - (left to right) Olivier Zdrzalik, Brian Gulland, Dominique Regef, Marie Yacoub, Patrick Le Mercier, Jean-Pierre Arnoux, Gabriel Yacoub

**F**rançois Hadji-Lazaro, a popular French rock musician and the founder of a family of record labels, once said that the group Malicorne “single-handedly allowed the French public to discover folk music.” This is, perhaps, an exaggeration; during the 1960s and 1970s, before Malicorne’s heyday, folk music already had a cult following both in Paris and in areas where strong rural traditions remained. But by combining the folk tradition with influences from both rock and roll and early classical music, Malicorne accomplished a sound at once richly musical and widely accessible, and they brought French folk music to a far larger audience than had ever heard it before.

The history of Malicorne begins with a musical couple, Gabriel and Marie Yacoub. As members of Alan Stivell’s Breton folk-rock band in the early 1970s, the Yacoubs witnessed Stivell’s wizardry at mixing traditional folk music with rock and inciting young audiences to a frenzy. As non-Bretons, as Parisians, the Yacoubs began to wonder whether a similar combination of traditional and electric arrangements could be applied to songs and tunes from the French-speaking regions of the country. The first fruits of their experiments, recorded in March 1973,

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became the album *Pierre De Grenoble*, a landmark recording credited to Gabriel and Marie Yacoub.

Although *Pierre De Grenoble* featured some of the folk scene’s top players, the lineup did not coalesce into a group. Still, the album did lead to the formation of Malicorne; in early September 1973, the Yacoubs joined forces with Hughes de Courson, *Pierre De Grenoble*’s producer, who was also a talented multi-instrumentalist and singer. They soon enlisted Laurent Vercambre, a similar talent, to form Malicorne’s first lineup. With skill and enthusiasm, singing and playing obscure instruments like the bowed psaltery, the hurdy-gurdy and the crumhorn, they quickly rose to the top of the French folk scene. Their debut album, *Malicorne* [Hexagone CD 193.632 (1974)], was like a fresh breeze on the French scene. Its first two songs charted the course of Malicorne’s future: a murder ballad sung in Gabriel’s strong nasal voice and accompanied by a combination of gentle bouzoukis and dulcimers and tough electric bass and guitar, and a song of star-crossed lovers, sung with an ethereal wispiness by Marie, and accompanied by a steady, loping bass line, bright strums on

mandolins and the occasional otherworldly drones of psaltery and electric guitar. Other classic titles include “Landry,” their first venture into a capella harmonies, and “Le chant des livrées,” a ritual marriage song sung with Gabriel and Marie quite appropriately playing the courting couple. *Malicorne*’s main weakness is in the quality of the mix, which is muddy. But the interesting material, the band’s fresh approach, and the helpful bibliography of song sources

make this folk-rock debut fascinating even today.

One of Malicorne’s peculiarities was to keep on putting out eponymous LPs; their second was also simply entitled *Malicorne* [Hexagone CD 193.652 (1975)]; most critics call it *Malicorne II*. If *Malicorne* revealed a great band in the making, *Malicorne II* realized that potential marvelously. The choral richness of the group’s harmonies are fully developed here, and Gabriel allows his full, round acoustic guitar playing to emerge, on such tracks as “Le garçon jardinier.” Most importantly, the band is unusually tight and inventive; their arrangement of “J’ai vu le loup, le renard et la belette,” for example, uses two dulcimers, an épinette des Vosges, a bouzouki and a mandocello to produce a merry jangle of harmonies, while violin and hurdy-gurdy take the lead and electric bass, and tabor the rhythm. The other set of dance tunes begins with the completely traditional sound of the fiddle, but soon adds a fully realized arrangement featuring hurdy-gurdy, mandocello, and bass. As for the songs, Malicorne’s best-known piece of a capella harmonizing, “Marions les roses” is here, as are some classic songs in the vein of the first album’s material: historical ballads, songs about courtship, and a brief taste of potentially supernatural motifs, which would become a trademark of the band in the future.

Malicorne’s third album, *Almanach* [Hexagone CD 193.682 (1976)], would be their first true masterpiece; every facet, from the album’s initial theme to the details of its gatefold sleeve, was clearly a labor of love in



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Malicorne, 1978 - (left to right) Gabriel Yacoub, Laurent Vercambre, Marie Yacoub (in mirror), Hughes de Courson, Olivier Zdrzalik



conception, design and execution. As its title suggests, the original LP was conceived as a musical almanac; it presents twelve songs, one for each month of the year. Beginning with a New Year's song, ending with a Christmas carol, *Almanach* contains many items with a specifically seasonal focus: a carol for St. John's day (June 25th), a quête song for Mayday, and a song for the ritual hunting of the magpie, which occurs in March. Most of the tracks, though, are traditional ballads that contain some seasonal imagery: a slightly bawdy ballad represents the licentiousness of Carnival, while the ballad of "L'écoulier assassin," hair-raising both for the bloody murder it describes and the twisted Oedipal relationship it implies, represents November and the Day of the Dead. Probably the most effective and unusual treatment on *Almanach* is of "Les tristes noces," a French version of the "Nobleman's Wedding" ballad in which a young cad has the bad taste to invite his mistress to his wedding, leading unwittingly to both of their deaths. As befits such a sweeping story, the song is given a multi-part arrangement encompassing several melodies as well as a richly varied instrumental backing; Malicorne invited both a classical string quartet, who add lushness and texture, and the traditional folk band La Bamboche, who contribute excellent playing on bagpipe and accordion. *Almanach* was further enhanced by an illustrated booklet of notes stapled into the gatefold sleeve, which is reproduced in miniature for the CD booklet.

On *Almanach*, Malicorne reached their peak of creativity, and although they're sometimes called "The French Fairport Convention," a more apt analogy would be Steeleye Span; "Les tristes noces," for example, is much the same type of experiment as Steeleye performed on "King Henry," and both bands seemed

attracted to what Steeleye's Bob Johnson has called "the harsh, hard stories" of supernatural and murder ballads. Unfortunately, just like Steeleye, Malicorne could release some uneven albums as well. An example was their follow-up to *Almanach*, once again entitled simply *Malicorne* [Hexagone CD 193.712 (1977)], but referred to as *Malicorne IV*. A few of the tracks are shining examples of what the band could achieve. "Le déserteur," a ballad in which a soldier faces death for desertion, is given an extremely moving treatment by Gabriel, and a lush arrangement by the band, while "Daniel, mon fils," one of the group's most effective a capella arrangements, is another shockingly oedipal ballad couched in appropriately disturbing harmonies. But other songs that could have been great don't come off so well. "La blanche biche," one of the French tradition's best and most gruesome supernatural ballads, is given an arrangement that was very difficult to achieve in its day, but it sounds lackluster today. Meanwhile, "Le jardinier du couvent" alternates between a pleasant but uninspiring piano arrangement and bombastic rock and roll attack made possible by the band's new member, bass player and drummer Olivier Zdrzalik. The most interesting track, "La fiancée du timbalier," includes a brass band; it has been included as an extra track on the CD reissue of *Almanach*, further reducing *Malicorne IV*'s appeal. Still, this disc contains a few of the band's greatest tracks, and is worth hearing for them.

If *Malicorne IV* was a transitional album and a bit disappointing, their next disc more than makes up for it. Second only to *Almanach* among Malicorne's discs, this fifth effort bears the improbably long title of *L'Extraordinaire Tour de France d'Adelard Rousseau, dit Nivernais la Clef des Coeurs, Compagnon Charpentier du Devoir* [Acoustek CD 082301 (1978)]. Like *Almanach*, it is a concept album; the band invents a fictional character, Adelard Rousseau, and follows his wanderings on a journey around France. Rousseau is a new member of the *compagnons*, a fraternal order based on the old trade guilds; the "tour de France" is one of the rites of passage that many *compagnons* undergo in completing their training. The lavishly designed booklet of notes is Rousseau's diary, and the

songs are ones he encounters or composes on the road. Many of these pieces reflect the group's continuing interests in songs about failed marriages, bloody murders and the supernatural. "Le mari jaloux," for example, is a classic tale of a bad marriage, very similar to songs like "Cortège de nocé" from the band's previous discs. "La danse des damnés" and "Une fille dans le désespoir" tell classic tales about the devil, while "L'auberge sanglante" is about innkeepers who murder their guests; all of these themes fit in with the band's interests and carry those interests further than their previous albums did. Malicorne's musical arrangements are never stronger than they are on this album, and the balance between traditional instruments and electric ones is perfect. Most important is that, like a good work of fiction, this disc transports you to another world and puts you among interesting characters; when it's over, you wish there were more adventures to share with your new companion.

*En Public* [Acoustek CD 082302 (1979)], Malicorne's sixth disc, captures the same lineup live in concert. Most of the material, which includes "Le mariage anglais," "Le prince d'Orange," "L'écoulier assassin" and "La danse des damnés" had already appeared on other Malicorne albums, or on *Pierre de Grenoble*. The only exception is a version of a traditional Mayday song, rewritten by Gabriel to serve as a concert-closing farewell. The band injects these songs with even more energy than in their studio versions, and the sound quality is excellent. *En Public* thus serves quite well as either an introductory compilation, or a set of alternate versions for the group's fans.

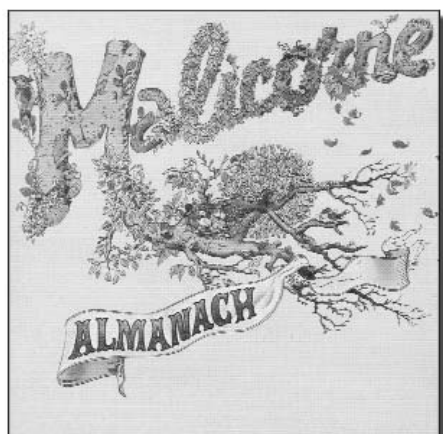
In 1979, the longstanding lineup of Malicorne changed when Vercambre and de Courson left the group. They were replaced by string players Patrick Le Mercier and Dominique Regef, and by wind specialist Brian Gulland, an Englishman who had previously founded the rock/early music hybrid band Gryphon. In addition, Malicorne added Jean-Pierre Arnoux, a full-time drummer and percussionist, which allowed Zdrzalik to concentrate more on bass and keyboards. The resulting seven-piece got its first airing on *Le Bestiaire* [Acoustek CD 082303 (1979)], another classic concept album. Although the theme of *Le Bestiaire* is "music inspired by animals," most of the songs on it are connected somehow to people who



turn into animals. In "La mule," for example, a young woman is cursed by the curate and becomes a mule, while in "Alexandre" a young man kills his benefactor and is cursed to be a werewolf. In "Les transformations," on the other hand, the changes are intentional. A man pursues a woman; she changes into various animals and objects to escape him, he changes into various animals and objects to continue his pursuit. It's a tale as old as time and told all over the world, but it's effective here all the same. The players approach the material more like rockers, with a rhythm section that contributes lots of drive, and hard-edged guitar here and there; still, the hurdy-gurdies, fiddles and crumhorns lead on most of the songs and tunes, and *Le Bestiaire* retains its essential grounding in traditional and early music. While it's not as great as *L'Extraordinaire Tour de France* or *Almanach*, *Le Bestiaire* is a fine piece of trad-rock.

As the 1970s turned to the 1980s, the music of Malicorne underwent serious changes. Although they recorded two albums after *Le Bestiaire*, neither of them contains any traditional French music. In April 1998, Yacoub explained to Pascal Burgain and Daniel Loppion: "Throughout my youth and my activities with Malicorne, I had this passion for traditional music. I worked on it a lot for 20 years, and I learned a lot. And, after a while, I began to feel limited. I realized that to express things that were maybe a little more personal, a little more intimate, I couldn't do it by those means." [My Translation]

On Malicorne's penultimate album, *Balançoire en Feu* [Acoustek CD 082304 (1981)] he sought to express these more personal feelings by collaborating with Étienne Roda-Gil, one of France's most celebrated lyricists. Roda-Gil has written songs for Julien Clerc, Johnny Hallyday, Louis Bertignac and Vanessa Paradis, among many others. His songs on *Balançoire en Feu* are a little more





**Malicorne, 1981 - Gabriel Yacoub, Marie Yacoub, Patrick Le Mercier, Jean-Pierre Arnoux, Olivier Zdrzalik**

cryptic and subtle than your average traditional ballad (no insane homicidal innkeepers here!) and people for whom French is a second language will certainly have more trouble parsing through the descriptive passages in such songs as "Dans la rivière" and "Beau charpentier." More importantly, even when the literal meaning is clear, the songs can remain puzzling and mysterious. The music, on the other hand, is familiar Malicorne territory; although they lost Regef and Gulland after *Le*

*Bestiaire*, *Balançoire en feu* has a similar sound, complete with crumhorns, bagpipes and autoharps, not to mention tubular bells! The result is a satisfying listen for fans of Malicorne's music, but perhaps not for fans of traditional French songs.

The same could also be said of their last effort, *Les cathédrales de l'industrie* [Celluloid CD 667942 (1986)]. Indeed, the story goes that this album was intended as a Gabriel Yacoub solo project, but got re-routed to

Malicorne to satisfy a contractual obligation. Whether that's true or not, *Les cathédrales de l'industrie* should not be dismissed as a "non-Malicorne" album. Indeed, Yacoub's songwriting is closer to the tradition than Roda-Gil's, and while *Cathédrales* does have a more conventional rock sound than much of Malicorne's work, it's still got enough fiddles, bagpipes and hurdy-gurdies to give it quite a traditional flavor. Yacoub's fascination with magic and the supernatural, so much a part of Malicorne's more traditional albums, is also explored here, in such Yacoub originals as "La nuit des sorcières," "Big science" and "Sorcier." Rich images from folklore fill these songs, and they do reward close listening. If you loved Malicorne for their folk roots, you might still get a kick out of their final disc.

In addition to these albums, Malicorne has three compilations available. *Quintessence* [Hexagone CD 193.732 (1978)] collects songs from their first four albums; it's a good selection, but it's only the length of one LP. I'd recommend *Almanach* over *Quintessence* as the best LP's worth of Malicorne music from that period. *Légende:*

*Deuxième Époque* [Hannibal HNCD-1360 (1989)] collects material from *L'Extraordinaire Tour de France* onwards. It stands up well as a collection of music, and is quite useful as a road map to the changes in sound and lineup the band went through in its final years. Finally, *VOX* [Acousteak CD 082300 (1996)] is a lovingly produced memento of the spirit of Malicorne. It collects practically all of the band's a capella harmony tracks, adding a remix of the classic "Marions les roses" and an out-and-out remake of "Les filles son volages," presumably because the sound quality and mixing on *Malicorne* and *Malicorne II* was below current standards. *VOX* even contains one Malicorne rarity, a medley that the group recorded with La Bamboche in 1978, for a charity album to help clean up after the Amoco Cadiz oil spill. All this and charity, too? You couldn't ask for more!

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