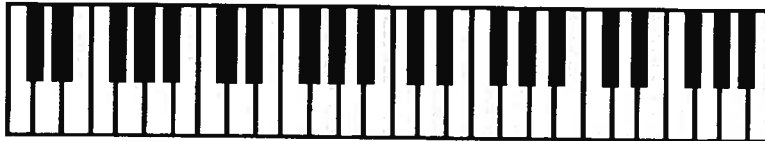


# ARTS & OPINION

ARTS CULTURE ANALYSIS

Vol. 8, No. 3, 2009

13:29:50  
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Jobs  
Ads  
Links

a day in the life of music festival programmer



## FRÉDÉRIC POULIN

Frédéric Poulin has been working as a music festival programmer for both the Montreal International Jazz Festival and Les FrancoFolies (the largest francophone music festival on the planet) for the past two years. In particular, he is responsible for programming the guitar events for the Montreal Guitar Show and Guitarissimo concert series. We spoke about his work.

**ARTS & OPINION:** Do you ever get sick of music?

**FRÉDÉRIC POULIN:** Never.

**ARTS & OPINION:** How many hours of music do you listen to per/day on average?

**FRÉDÉRIC POULIN:** Over the course of a year, a minimum of 4 hours/day. Most of it from December to June.

**ARTS & OPINION:** How many CDs do you listen to per/year?

**FRÉDÉRIC POULIN:** I would say about 3000.

**ARTS & OPINION:** Do you listen to them from beginning to end?

**FRÉDÉRIC POULIN:** That's impossible. But I give them a good listening before making a decision. Applicants don't have to worry that I'll (or anyone on our programming team) will listen to a couple of cuts for 30 seconds and then make a decision on it. We take our work seriously and I think it shows in our programming. It's not an accident that the Montreal Jazz Festival is regarded by many as the best in the world. One of the most difficult aspects of my work is having to reject good music because it doesn't fit into a particular theme.

**ARTS & OPINION:** I know you play guitar, that your father is a



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musician, that music is in your blood. Are you living the dream?

**FRÉDÉRIC POULIN:** Absolutely. Vocation and avocation are one and the same, on top of which I'm now playing in a band for the first time in many years.

**ARTS & OPINION:** What is most satisfying about your work?

**FRÉDÉRIC POULIN:** On a personal basis, getting to know and work with André Menard (co-founder of Montreal Jazz Festival = MJF) and Laurent Saulnier (Program Director of MJF). Both of these gentlemen have between 40 and 30 years of music listening experience under their belts, and I consider myself very lucky to have access to their incredible knowledge. Both of their brains should be digitalized and uploaded onto the Internet under the music encyclopedia category.

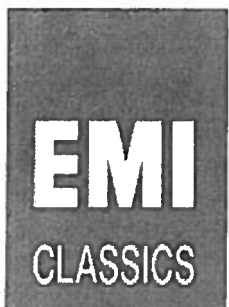
**ARTS & OPINION:** What most impresses you about their knowledge?

**FRÉDÉRIC POULIN:** Besides their many recommendations which are of course invaluable, what they have mostly taught me has been by example. They are both totally open to all genres of music, which is really quite rare. As we know, when people become more comfortable with complex music, such as jazz or classical, they sometimes become snobbish about music they 'used to love and listen to.' It's like a rich guy who wants to forget he was once poor. But good music is good music and our team doesn't care where it comes from or what genre it belongs to.

**ARTS & OPINION:** What is the most difficult challenge facing a festival programmer?

**FRÉDÉRIC POULIN:** For myself, it was learning to recognize and appreciate music that I don't personally like. As you know, it's impossible to be equally inclined towards all genres of music. Which obliged me to find a way into music that perhaps has nothing to do with my personal experience. So for example, let's pretend I don't like Rap music, but since millions of people do, I had to find out what it is about this music that attracts so many listeners from all around the world, which means I have to not only listen to the music but find the feelings and reasons which cause this music to be created. If the music is angry, there must be a situation in life that corresponds to that anger and I want to know about it. Cuban music is not only just music but it's the story of a people who live on the island of Cuba who aren't as free as we are, which is maybe why their music feels so free. They create their freedom through their music.

I wasn't prepared for this kind of discipline when I first joined the team, but it has forced me to become a much better listener; and when you finally learn to appreciate a new genre of music it's like learning a new language. During the past couple of years I have become familiar with many musical languages and I'm only at the beginning of my career.



a

u **ARTS & OPINION: As the person solely responsible for the**  
d **guitar programming, were you under more pressure than**  
usual?

i **FRÉDÉRIC POULIN: I could always consult with Jacques-André**  
o **Dupont, the director of all the guitar shows who also**  
**recommends. Like myself, he plays guitar and is familiar with**  
**many styles of guitar playing. But yes, there's lot's of pressure**  
**especially when you're working within a tight budget. It's one**  
**thing to find a good guitarist, it's another to get him to sign the**  
**contract. We have to pay for transportation and hotel and if the**  
**musician or group turn us down we have to find someone else.**  
**It can be very frustrating at times.**

**ARTS & OPINION: How did you decide on the programming of**  
**the 9-concert Guitarissimo series?**

**FRÉDÉRIC POULIN: The Montreal Guitar Show now features**  
**both acoustic and electric salons, and Jacques-André and**  
**myself wanted the concerts to reflect the many voices of the**  
**guitar as a means of expression, so we invited not only**  
**guitarists like Russell Malone and Stanley Jordan but classical**  
**guitarists as well as the sonic heavy electric guitarist Oliver**  
**Langevin, who to my pleasant surprise drew a huge crowd.**

**ARTS & OPINION: Do the guitarists find you or do you find**  
**them?**

**FRÉDÉRIC POULIN: Now that our jazz festival is known**  
**everywhere in the world, I receive lots of unsolicited CDs and**  
**DVDs, but for the more known guitarists, I have to go and find**  
**them, but it's a lot easier now since all of them have websites**  
**with contact addresses. But all of us programmers are open to**  
**unsolicited music and musical suggestions.**

**ARTS & OPINION: If there's one thing I'm going to take home**  
**with me from this conversation, Frédéric, it's the reminder that**  
**before we decide negatively on a certain kind of music, we**  
**should put in the effort to find out why so many people like it. I**  
**thank you for sharing your time and insights with Arts &**  
**Opinion.**

**FRÉDÉRIC POULIN: I thank you for the opportunity of**  
**explaining my work. I love talking music almost as much as**  
**listening and playing it.**

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Vol. 8, No. 3, 2009

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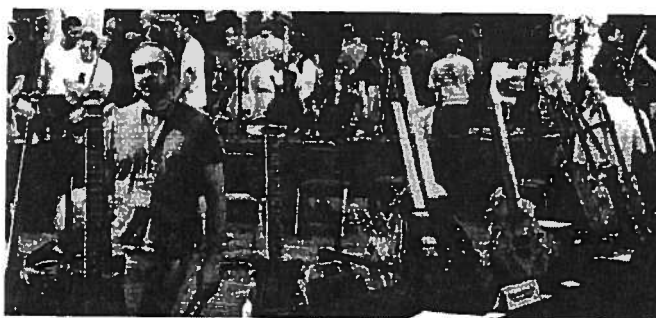
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## 2009 MONTREAL GUITAR SHOW & GUITARISSIMO

@  
 Montreal International Jazz Festival



A retreat is a place affording peace, quietude, sanctuary, an environment conducive to the replenishment of body and mind. Think of a Zen retreat around which a community of like-minded people gathers in pursuit of a common goal or purpose.

United in an over-riding passion for the guitar, people from all over the world come to Montreal to share their love of the instrument and the very particular music it generates. For three consecutive days, in a venue all to itself (Montreal's Palais des congrès), the Montreal Guitar Show (MGS) concentrates what is best in the guitar in both its arduous production (one hand-made guitar at a time), and the very special ambience the generic guitar sound produces.



The guitar sets itself apart from all other instruments by the manner in which its string-sounded pluck so easily and naturally suffuses with the invisible world around us. When wood, that has been meticulously treated, and string are purposefully married, the guitar, like no other instrument, is able to articulate the fragility and delicacy of acoustic space. It's as if the guitar sound was invented to dissolve the indifference that separates us from the spaces we always inhabit. Creating an environment that disposes the visitor to avail himself to what is sublime in the guitar is perhaps the MGS's most endearing accomplishment.

Walking the two short blocks from the Montreal Jazz Festival site to the MGS this year, I was accompanied by the ever-present unruly background din and cacophony common to all big cities. Then up the escalator and into the alt-



Kurt Rosenwinkel  
Mimi Fox



**FESTIVAL  
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world of the guitar salons and I immediately felt healed and restored, and privy to a sea breeze of sounds that cannot be produced by even the most loving relationship between metal and human breath (trumpet, sax, trombone). When a fledging bird takes aim at the skies, we look to the guitar, and not the trumpet, to describe that first fragile fluttering of wing.

MGS founder and guitar junkie, Jacques-André Dupont, believes the 3-day event, which includes exhibitors, salons, workshops, guitar lessons, mini concerts, is one of the most comprehensive in the world -- and it's only in its 3rd year and growing exponentially. Embedded in the world famous Montreal International Jazz Festival, it has taken on a life and personality of its own and deservingly so.

The guitar in its present form dates back to 15th century Spain, having borrowed what is best from the more medieval lute and mandolin. As such, its long history has been mostly acoustic, and for the first two years of the MGS, the salons reflected that long and illustrious tradition. But the electrification of the guitar, as an historical advent, has been revolutionary, and Jacques-André felt that a room dedicated to its emergence and pre-eminence was in order. If music has always been the medium of choice through which we confess our most private, unedited feelings, the electric guitar has become the instrument of choice in trying to make sense of a world whose rapid pace of change is the challenge of our times. In consideration of the almost infinite variety of sounds and feelings the electric guitar is able to generate, we now look to it -- above all other instruments -- to parry the effects (the malaises) of modernity. So with the addition of the electric guitar salon, the MGS is more inclusive than ever in bringing together a range of guitar sounds and effects that tell a story (our story) in progress.



The centrepiece of the MGS is its luthiers. The best in the world are pre-selected and invited to come to Montreal and exhibit axes bold as love to die for. Last year's show resulted in approximately 2 million dollars in sales, such is the quality of the workmanship and our propensity to buy what some of us can't afford and cannot refuse.

And if you're a junkie for guitar talk, the luthiers are only too happy to share their secrets. Made to measure takes on new dimensions when it comes to fitting someone up with a guitar. In sizing up the quality and texture of sound made by the finger striking the string, the luthier will consider the brittleness of the client's fingernails as well as their curvature.

If a singer is more comfortable singing in C (guitars are constructed in E), a luthier may suggest a longer neck with added frets (for the reverse capo effect), provided the fingers can handle the additional stretching. If the musician plays unplugged, the luthier will counsel against down tuning to C, which requires a loosening of the strings and significant reduction in the projection of the sound.

It goes without saying the guitar world's small details play big in attracting huge numbers to the MGS. And at the end of the day, they are rewarded with a handsome selection of concerts delivered by some of the best guitarists in the world.



This year's Guitarissimo series featured nine concerts running over three days. The programmers (J.A. Dupont and Frédéric Poulin) made sure the full dynamic and expressive range of the guitar was on

full display. Audiences were treated to memorable solo concerts from chording master Russell Malone and the inimitable Stanley Jordan. The traditional classical sound was warmly provided by Muriel Anderson and Valérie Duchâteau. Shred master Monte Montgomery dazzled with his combination of finger and pick style playing: He recently made *Guitar Player's* list of top 50 guitarists of all time. Frank Vignola and his trio reminded us why the standards are forever. Sylvain Provost expertly navigated between playing it softy and electric: his fusion solos were series highlights. Local guitarist Oliver Langevin made a strong case for the Guitar Hero playing style, delivering rich and sensuous, multi-layered melody lines dipped in sonic acid and molten metal. Following in the fevered footsteps of Joe Satriani *et al*, Langevin turned the polite venue (Cinquième Salle) into a post-industrial sound chamber to the delight of loyal following and new converts alike.

In recognition of the incredible contribution the greatest international guitarists have made to the instrument and the music, the MGS organizers created the Tribute Award, which this year went to future Hall of Famer Jeff Beck, one of the most respected players in the guitar pantheon.

And with that, a fitting conclusion to yet another remarkable Montreal Guitar Show and a reminder to stay the course with those passing chords to the 2010 edition.

Report filed by Robert J. Lewis  
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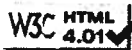
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