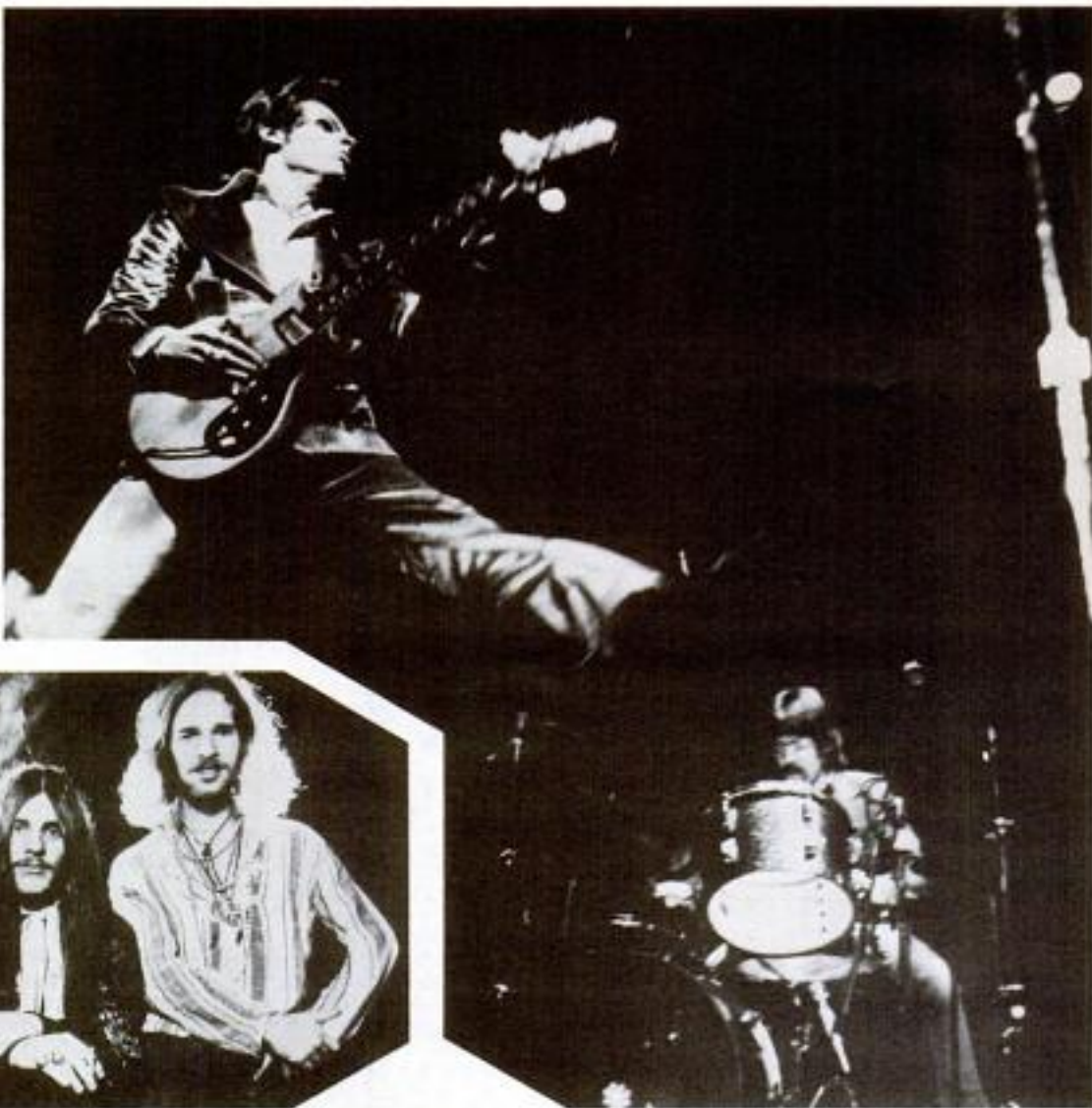


# MONTREAL'S ENGLISH POP COMMUNITY STARTS TO MAKE SOME SPARKS

BY JUAN RODRIGUEZ



**M**ONTREAL'S ENGLISH speaking population numbers about 800,000 out of the metropolis' total of two and a half million. This statistic alone has played a large part in determining the fate of English music in this overwhelmingly Francophone ambience.

Les Anglais are a large minority and English Montrealers have a difficult time finding an identity in the current surge of nationalism by the six million Quebecois around them. English Montrealers are alienated from the rest of Canada, particularly in the field of recording. (Only one of Canada's majors, Polydor, maintains a head office in Montreal.) As a result, it's not been easy for the city's English speaking singers and musicians to get a hearing.

Recent happenings indicate this situation is changing. The camaraderie between English and French musicians, particularly in the rock and pop fields, has never been more intense than it is now. People are trading off each other's ideas and plenty of distinctly original music is being created. Music that could only be created in Montreal . . . in fact, there are some who liken the city to San Francisco.

The three major English performers in the city are Mahogany Rush, the Wackers and Jesse Winchester. There are many others, but the special contributions of the above-mentioned three have been of particular importance in the development of the city's music.

A poll taken by one of Montreal's largest weeklies, *Le Petit Journal*, established officially that Mahogany Rush is the city's most popular heavy rock group, English or French. The group recently scored what is considered a major coup for local bands with its signing with Westbound of Detroit, for \$250,000, with a mandate to produce five albums within the next 30 months.

Mahogany Rush is spearheaded by guitarist-singer-composer Frank Marino, who is 18 years old. Four years ago, so legend (and fact) has it, Marino was undergoing the after-effects of an acid bummer in a hospital when he picked up a guitar, imagined he was Jerry Garcia playing down a track for an album, and suddenly Frank was playing guitar.

He later became known as "Le Hendrix du Montreal," as his guitar style bore an amazing resemblance to the late Hendrix. The group recorded a 4-track demonstration tape of a Marino tribute to the late Hendrix, titled "Buddy." The recording was crude, but Marino's ode was haunting and his guitar style was downright eerie. The tape made the rounds of local recording companies without much success until it landed in the hands of Robert Nickford, then working as Eastern promotion man for WEA in Montreal. Nickford left WEA, formed his own independent label, Kot'ai (distributed by London Records of Canada), and released "Buddy" b/w "All In Your Mind." Local English stations would not play the disk, but it became a Top 10 on Quebec's large Radio Mutual network (whose flagship station is CJMS in Montreal).

The trio's first album, "Maxoom," was recorded in an antiques run down East end Montreal studio but Marino was able to extract a raw sense of style and imagination that made Maxoom reminiscent of an early Stones or, indeed, Hendrix album. Mahogany Rush's debut album was a top chart item throughout last winter and the group was quickly recognized as superstars in Montreal.



Two of Montreal's most successful English speaking rock bands are the Wackers with Randy Bishop flying through the air and Ernie Earnshaw at the drums (top right); and Mahogany Rush, the leading "heavy" rock band (above).

Marino's fascinating style caught the attention of the rock journal, *Creem*, which entitled its expose: "Hendrix Alive In Montreal?" The band made a Detroit appearance early this year and then Nickford engineered the Westbound deal, which gave the group its own label, 9 Records.

The group's first Westbound album has been completed and Marino was (as of writing) mulling over the music. He's a perfectionist, and he knows what directions he wants the band to take. "Our first tour will be in quadrasonic sound and video," he enthused recently. "There's been a lot of three-man rock bands around, so we just have to be different. I consider the Hendrix thing, me supposedly sounding so much like him, to be a drawback but we've overcome that already." (The city's major critics agree with *Creem*, et al, that the group has an original style of its own.)

Mahogany Rush's second album was co-produced by Bob Segarini of the expatriot American rock 'n' roll group, the Wackers. The group played an engagement in a teenage beer parlor, the Mustache Club, a couple of years ago and enjoyed it so much that they decided to move to Montreal. Since then, the California quartet has recorded the bulk of its three Elektra albums in local studios.

Although they remain one of America's largely unknown bands, they are the school and college rock 'n' roll band in the city. They've performed so often during the past couple of years that their stage style has been honed down to a slick (including make-up and extravagant attire) edge that bursts with echos of the Beatles and the Stones. Segarini is a student of rock 'n' roll and quickly realized Montreal's potential as an international recording center:

"I feel we're on the verge of a very exciting situation here. Canada, we've found out, is the only English-speaking community in the world that hasn't reached anywhere near its peak yet. On the other hand, the Quebec music scene is so great because it has its own star system, and I think that should rub off on the rest of the country."

Both Segarini and lead guitarist/vocalist Randy Bishop have provided harmonies for a few local recordings and the Wackers are generally regarded as the city's most colorful (visually) rock act. For now, at least, the Wackers appear content to enjoy this role.

"We're not out to make a whole lot of money performing any more than we would not want to be worked to death to make someone else a lot of money," says Segarini. "We want to stay together as a band, to do that we have to pace ourselves."

Jesse Winchester, meanwhile, has been living in Montreal since 1967, due to his self-imposed exile from the U.S. draft.

At that time the Louisiana-born, Memphis-raised singer-songwriter literally had no other alternative than to seek employment as a musician. He played the small towns of Quebec province with a French-Canadian band for a while, and scuffled around the city's few folk houses performing his own songs ("Yankee Lady," "Payday," "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," etc.), and backing himself up on lone electric guitar. He was nervous, but his presence on stage was undeniable, and his songwriting was remarkable. What happened next—the production of his first Bearsville album by Band guitarist Robbie Robertson and the second, "3rd Down, 110 To Go," last spring—is well known; indeed, Winchester is regarded as one of the leading young singer-composers with as original a style (a strict purity of form) as any.

However, during the period immediately preceding last winter, Winchester had been confined to playing small local gigs over and over again. The performances were erratic, but the Winchester mystique grew. He produced his second album with striking simplicity and then he proceeded to form a rock band, the Wallbangers.

During the past year, Winchester has been performing steadily, including a cross-Canada tour last March-April and another larger Canadian jaunt scheduled for this fall. He's abandoned some introspection and he's become a rocker in the tradition of one of his idols, Jerry Lee Lewis.

Winchester and the Wallbangers are an exciting act who impress with their musical virtuosity (particularly guitarist Steve Deady) and their devotion to original rock forms. Winchester has become a powerful singer and, perhaps more important, entertainer. He shifts from electric guitar to piano effortlessly and often—the "new" Winchester seems ready to transcend his underground myth as an exiled loner. After the Canadian tour, there's talk of a European tour (where he's popular, particularly in Britain).

Winchester considers himself a Montrealer: "Sometimes I wish people would forget I ever came from the States. Obviously you can't escape your past, but it never crosses my mind that I came from America. I don't spend my time thinking about it. You can't live in a place like Montreal for six years and not grow to love it and be affected by it."

Winchester has written songs for several French-Canadian recording stars and he's involved himself in some local production work. With his own modestly equipped studio to work in, Winchester has been able to make decisions regarding his career without the pressure of grinding out a reputation in his native land.

The solid status of Mahogany Rush, the Wackers and Jesse Winchester has given the English rock and pop musicians the kind of atmosphere that's been lacking from the English scene during the time that the Quebecois star system made its spectacular rise.

The development of several new independent studios and production companies has given local musicians the kind of

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