



Picnics, portents and
poetry in the park /1

Description

Words and Music presents a Lawn Chair Après-midi

By **Wanda Potrykus**

What is it about the marriage of picnics and poetry that is so attractive?

Picture this: A verdant park, wind rustling through the leaves, a sparkling lagoon, a point of land with willow trees.

Spread around are people in lawn chairs and others sprawled on blankets, with babes gurgling in their poussettes. Older siblings sail leaves and twigs on calm waters, their imaginations endowing them with billowing sails and maybe even a mythical pirate flag or two. Several summer residents cruise by, these are some of our wild, avian, seasonal visitors, so very at home here, who disappear in autumn and return when spring is barely on the horizon, and the lagoon they love is still empty of water.

It's a sunny afternoon, and the Community Events summer concert series, from 2 pm to 4 pm on Sundays in Westmount Park, is coming to a close. There is one last concert offering on the calendar: **August 11, 2019 – Words and Music.**

It's a magical world: "You don't get poetry, it gets you"

For some park concert goers, Words and Music is their only annual exposure to the mysterious and magical world of poetry and song. "Poetry, not my thing" are the four words some had often used to explain their absence when the event was called Poetry in the Park.

Poetry is still mostly marketed to poets. But what would the world be like if only musicians listened to music? Or only bakers got cake?

– Angeline Schellenberg



A switch to the somewhat less challenging title gave more of them courage to stay a while. “Even if I don’t quite get the poetry, the music will be fine to listen to,” was the refrain that became more usual as each year the crowd swelled and ebbed depending on what else was going on that day.

One poet I love to quote on this is Angeline Schellenberg, who said in a CV2 magazine interview, “Poetry is still mostly marketed to poets. But what would the world be like if only musicians listened to music? Or only bakers got cake? We don’t all have to love jazz or red velvet or the sonnet, but there’s a kind of music and dessert – and poetry – for everyone. It’s unfortunate when poetry is presented as an escape room for which few of us can find the key. Poetry is music simplified. It’s a seed that could have grown into a story, but instead compressed itself into pure energy. You don’t get poetry, it gets you.”

She’s right since an increasing number of Westmount’s summer concert audience are finding they quite like the poetry vibe and the occasional short story mixed with an ever increasing and eclectic variety of musical styles and musical instruments on offer: First Nations, Caribbean, folk, Middle Eastern, Sufi, South Asian, rap, all produced on a wide range of instruments including, drums of all kinds, Irish whistle, hammer dulcimer, violin, cello, oud, guitars of all sorts, and sometimes just the magic of the voice itself, as in the throat singing, rap and a cappella voices that have all been presented in recent years. Words and Music indeed. It is well-named.

From soirée to après-midi

This year, Words and Music is hosting some of the poets and musicians who perform at the [Lawn Chair Soirée](#) – a Montreal Plateau-based spoken word poetry group – who are coming to picnic in the park with us and close out the concert series in style. A style all of their own, as only Plateau dwellers know how to convey.

‘In the beginning, when we met in the amazing loft space of Nota Bene on Park Avenue, there were no chairs, so we’d tell people to bring a lawn chair or a floor cushion... Since then we’ve moved a few times to places with chairs but we’ve kept the name.’

How did the Lawn Chair Soirée get its name?

Their unusual name stems from when their first poetry reading was held in a loft space in the Plateau that came with no chairs to sit on, so attendees were encouraged to bring their own lawn chair or floor cushion, which is how their name came to be.



Jan Jorgensen – Image: Ted Krasnicki

These poetry evenings were, and continue to be organized by the **Rev. Jan Jorgensen**, who also has a connection with Westmount and the Westmount Park United Church, which forms part of the picturesque background to Words and Music's sylvan summer concert venue. Even today Jan maintains a relationship with the people of Westmount Park United Church, her first pastoral charge some twenty years ago, returning from time to time to provide substitute preaching – but also finding generous assistance when in need of a space for literary community fundraising events.

In conversation with Jan during this past winter of 2018-19, with those long months of ice encased sidewalks that made getting around so very treacherous, especially when one walks with two canes as I was doing, we concocted the idea of bringing to the park for a summer outing the bright, relaxing, rainbow-hued lawn chair that has become the signature emblem of the Lawn Chair Soirée poetry events, and that has trundled around with Jan from one Plateau venue to another for a good number of years. In the middle of winter, nothing is more idyllic than dreaming of relaxing in a nice lawn chair in the hot sun in the company of friends and munching on a summer picnic.

Rain venue is Victoria Hall

Of course, currently we're hoping we haven't tempted fate and hope August 11 will be all we dreamed of weather-wise during those frozen winter months. A point to note: the event, along with the signature lawn chair, will still be held but in Victoria Hall, just in case the weather gods aren't kind to us.

Jan and friends launched the Lawn Chair Soirée in 2006 and it has been held once a month on the 3rd Thursday of each month from September to June, with a break here and there when life and studies got in the way. It has been hosted in a variety of Plateau venues and cafes. Most recently it can be found in the [Art Lounge MTL](#) on the corner of Casgrain and St-Viateur.

'It's often in reading to others that we best hear ourselves'

– Jan Jorgensen

Jan Jorgensen's engagement with Montreal's English literary community also includes the editing and production of chapbooks (sitting duck press) and convening literary and fund-raising events. Jan's other enjoyments and life mission include serving as a supply preacher for two United Church of Canada congregations and she's a member of the Ecological and Social Justice Action Group of Christ Church Cathedral.

Through her on-going commitment to reconciliation following the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Hearings she's also on the fundraising committee for the Indigenous Health Centre of Tiohtià:ke (shortened form of the Mohawk name for Montreal). Although she willingly admits: "I have a heart for the unaffiliated – and practice a ministry of hospitality as the co-host of the Lawn Chair Soirée where we are always pleased when we are joined by guests who have made a name for themselves in the literary and/or musical world of Quebec and beyond, but we feel we have a special mandate to encourage those poets, writers, musicians and artists who are relatively unknown, for they too have distinctive and powerful voices to share with us. For it's often in reading to others that we best hear ourselves."

Jan Jorgensen was a finalist in [Vallum magazine](#)'s 2019 chapbook contest with her poetry collection *The infinite significance of trees*. In addition, Vellum will be publishing another of her poems later this year.

'The rarest of things in poetry these days: a unique voice.'

– Jim Christy



Brandon Pitts – Image: courtesy of Brandon Pitts

Jan will also be sharing MC duties with me this summer and introducing Westmount audiences to the talents of performers such as **Brandon Pitts**, a Canadian-American writer, novelist, playwright, poet and socio-political commentator, who has played to capacity crowds in four countries and multiple cities with his visceral and dynamic poetry recitals. An alumni of the [Diaspora Dialogues](#) where he was inducted as an "Emerging Voice," Brandon has since published a novel and produced three plays and two books of poetry.

Artist, anarchist and Canadian literary icon [Jim Christy](#) has called him "the rarest of things in poetry these days: a unique voice". His second poetry collection for Mosaic Press, *Tender in the Age of Fury* is in its 3rd pressing.

Brandon tells us that he “cut his teeth” in the “raucous after hours salons of the Toronto underground poetry scene”, so let’s hope Words and Music by the lagoon in Westmount won’t be too tame a venue for him. Here we’re a bit more languid and laid-back but it might be fun to be woken up a little. Can’t wait!

What are Words without Music?

Words and Music is pleased to present five very different song-poets and musicians on this year’s roster of performers. Their differing styles cannot be summed up as mere sound organized in time for there is a deeper level of emotion present in their work that no generic label can encompass.

Mellow and melodious song-poet



Brian Campbell – Image: Thomas Colin

Brian Campbell, poet, singer-songwriter, editor, translator, literary critic, chapbook publisher and photographer is a co-presenter and organizer of the Lawn Chair Soirées. A long-time Plateau resident, he is nevertheless well-known around Montreal island singing and/or reading poetry in a wide variety of venues in both the east and the west, including bookstores, cafes, art galleries, bars and even depanneurs. A fun local venue where he is well-known is the Mariposa Cafe at 5434 Cote-St-Luc Road in NDG.

His poetry, reviews, and essays have appeared in literary magazines such as *Vallum*, *Montreal Review of Books (MRB)*, *The Rover*, *Evergreen Review*, *The New Quarterly*, *The Antigonish Review*, *CV2*, *Grain*, *Prairie Fire*, *Rock Salt Plum Review*, and *The Saranac Review*.

As a song-poet, a dexterous finger-stylist, and an impassioned, heart-felt singer, his sets are dynamic contrasts of serious and light, sorrowful and joyful, plainspoken and lyrical. *Shimmer Report*, published by Ekstasis Editions, is his most recent poetry book, published in 2015. Reviewer **Mark Ably** described it as “a book of searing honesty and shy grace.” Brian has also produced an independent music CD of original songs, *The Courtier’s Manuscript*. To learn more about his music as well as his poetry, and perhaps to explore having him sing at a party at your house, I encourage you to visit: briancampbell.ca

Peace and divinity in music



Shams Al Habib – Image: courtesy of Shams Al Habib

Shams Al Habib PhD., N.D. is an Egyptian/Canadian Holistic Naturopathic Doctor, Sufi Master, musician and singer, owner of Baraka Canadian Wellness Centre and founder of Baraka Divine Healing Energy for complimentary alternative medicine, as well as Rumi's Way of Love Sufi workshops and meditation circles. Dr. Shams is a Reiki Master and teacher practising a wide range of heart, mind, body and spirit alignment techniques. She considers sound and music to be a central part of her practice, connecting listeners to a sense of peace and divinity through her voice.

An accomplished musician and singer, she has performed at: the Cairo Opera House and Cairo National Theatre, Egypt; Festival Du Monde Arabe, Festival Orientalys, Montreal; the Spiritual Science Fellowship Annual Conference, Montreal; as well as at several universities in Montreal and Toronto; and at many Sufi events worldwide, including those in Cyprus, France, Spain, Montreal, NYC and now you, too, can enjoy her music in Westmount Park. She will be accompanying herself on one of the oldest stringed instruments in the world, an oud (ud), often confused in the west as a lute, and which is mainly used in Turkish, Middle Eastern, East and North African music.

The difference between an oud, a lute and a guitar

The oud, the lute, and the guitar all come from same musical family. The oud is the oldest, dating back thousands of years and typically has 10-12 strings. It is also unfretted, so the musician can play quarter tones (the notes in between the 12 notes of the Western music scale). It was originally played using an eagle feather.

The lute descends from the oud, brought to Europe by the Muslim inhabitants of the Maghreb (the indigenous Maghrebine Berbers) in the 9th century and the early Middle Ages, Later it was adapted to baroque European music by the installation of frets, which made it more compatible with western scales, and thus the lute was born. It has far more strings than the oud, typically 15 to 24, although it was also originally played with a feather.

The guitar is the most modern in this family of instruments as it cannot be traced back further than the 15th

century. It is thought to have been originally created by the people of Malaga, on the Iberian peninsula, although its shape and size have gone through many metamorphoses. Traditionally it has six strings, is fretted, and is played either finger style (classical music) or with a plectrum (pick) for other styles.

A taste of indigenous, socially relevant, indie-folk



Marie-Josée Tremblay – Image: Marie-Josée Tremblay/Socan

Of Algonquin heritage, **Marie-Josée Tremblay** is a gifted, pluridisciplinary artist and musician. She is a composer and interpreter of indie-folk, a photographer, a film-maker, director, actor and painter. She has also worked as a radio host and presenter for CKUT 90.3 FM in Montreal for programmes such as *Native Solidarity News*.

Her art is derived from her lived experiences and yet also goes above and beyond. The cause of Canada's Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is close to her heart and soul and her CD album *Searching For You* honours these women. She has been heavily involved for a number of years in this vital and searing social justice movement, and plays and sings at their events. A number of her songs can be found at mariejoseetremblay.bandcamp.com Her work underscores the basic facts that the victims deserve justice, and their families should be given the opportunity to heal. Her songs are in French, English and also instrumental.

Marie-Josée has 5 short films to her credit, four of which were produced in conjunction with the production company Wapikoni Escalpe Montréal and UQAM. Her EP album *Ni l'une ni l'autre* (Neither One nor the Other) features the music from her first film. She also composed the music in her film *Le battement de ma ville* (The Heart of the City) produced between 2015-2016. *Un matin tranquille* (A Quiet Morning) and *L'envol* (Taking Flight) were chosen to be presented at the Montreal First People's Festival (Festival Présence Autochtone de Montréal) in 2017 and 2018, as was her 5th independent short film *Nib8iwi* or "Durant la nuit" (During the Night) for the 2019 edition of the [Montreal First Peoples' Festival](#), which will be having its world premiere at **Cinema du Parc** at 8:30 pm on **August 10**, as part of an evening of experimental films. The festival itself runs from **August 6 to 15** at Place des spectacles, Metro Place des arts. It's well worth a visit.

Hopefully artists like Marie-Josée Tremblay and all our other talented guest performers are a welcome portent*



of better things to come.

Part 2, or the conclusion of this article featuring the rest of the performers will be published shortly. Check back for additional information on the rest of the talented line-up you can enjoy at Westmount's Words and Music Summer 2019.

Words and Music 2019

Save the date: **Sunday, August 11**

Place: Under the maple tree on Willow Point by the Lagoon in Westmount Park

Time: 2 pm to 4 pm

Rain venue: Victoria Hall, Sherbrooke West

Note: Since this event includes word artists as well as music, it is best to sit closer to the stage rather than across the lagoon in order to hear better as the words can get distorted as they float across the water. Bring a picnic, your lawn chair or a blanket and enjoy a Montreal Plateau vs. a West-end spoken word and musical vibe at our own version of a Lawn Chair Après-midi.

* *Definition of portent(s): courtesy of Merriam-Webster dictionary*

1. A sign or warning that something, especially something momentous, is likely to happen.
2. Literary: an exceptional or wonderful person or thing.

Feature image: Andrew Burlone

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