

Offenbach's rise from a Quebec bar band to a fledgling act on an international label is interesting. The members of the group are Gerry Boulet (lead vocals, organ, flute and guitar), Johnny Gravel (lead guitar), Willy Lamothe (bass) and Roger (Wezo) Belval (drums). During the 1960's Boulet, Gravel and Lamothe played in numerous other groups, the most famous of which was Les Gants Blancs. Lamothe comments on that group, "We wore white gloves and did stuff like Call Me Lightning in French. In the clubs we would only play American songs from the hit parade."

Johnny Gravel concludes, "It was not very bluesy at that time."

Offenbach, as such, started off around 1970. It was, and still is, a blues/rock band. They've never strayed too far from their original roots. However, their uniqueness in Quebec is that they stick to original compositions and don't flirt with numbers written by blues greats. Speaking on this Gerry Boulet says, "We like those people and they are good bluesmen. But we do our original stuff."

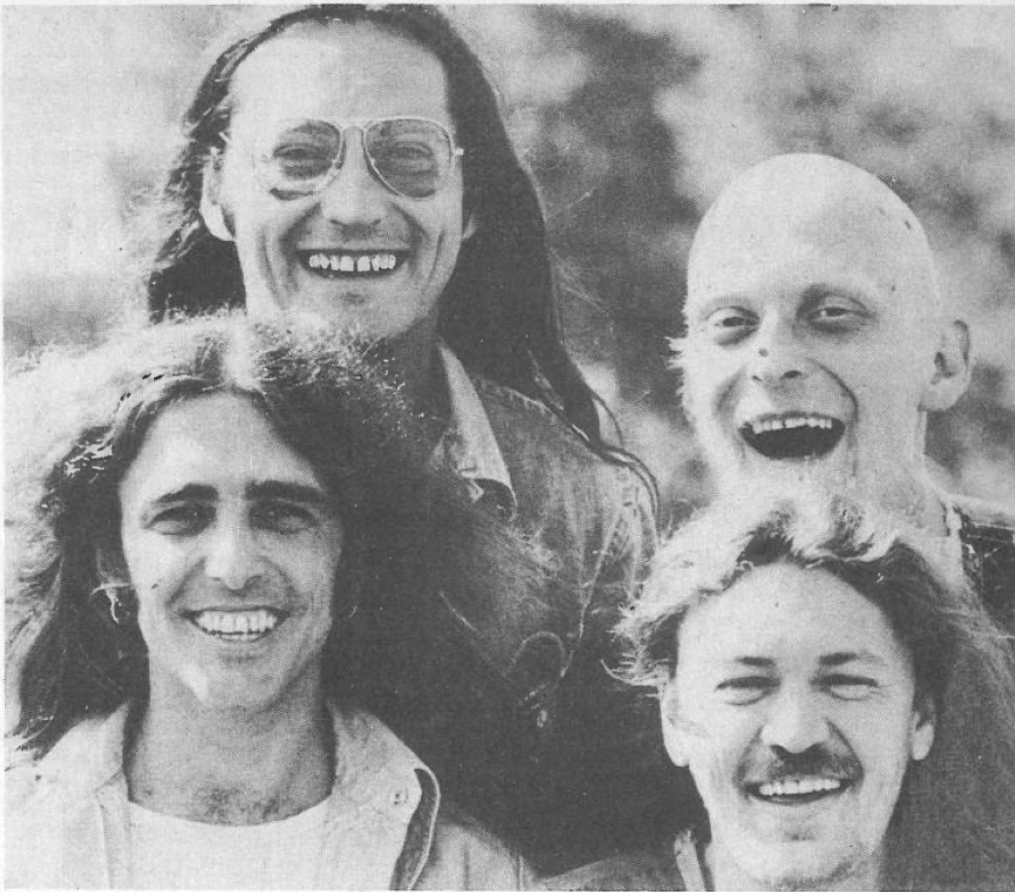
Their name has a connection to Jacques Offenbach who was a musical figure in Europe around 1900. "We chose that name because Offenbach was a songwriter and he made people dance, which we were doing at the time we chose the name."

For the first album, the group was called Offenbach Soap Opera. Surprisingly, that first album was meant to be an English one. Jerry Boulet explains, "We thought of doing an English album with one song all through it. Soap Opera was supposed to be that one song. We even had a Charles Manson thing in it called Sharon Tate. At that time, it was very hard for groups to get an album out in Quebec. We managed to but we couldn't do it in English because we weren't known well enough in Quebec."

The group received massive acclaim for its performance of a rock mass at the Oratoire St. Joseph church in Montreal in November 1972. Described by the Star's Juan Rodriguez as "one of the grandiose and bizarre events in the history of Montreal rock", the mass landed the group on the front page of La Presse. It was a major publicity coup. Prior to the mass the group was only thought of as an opener for headline acts throughout the province. The mass changed both the critical and public attitude towards them. Willy Lamothe comments on the event, "At first they said 'take the place and do an ordinary show' but we didn't want that. We did a real mass with everything in latin. It took us a month of rehearsal because we had a sixty person choir. We did all the gregorian songs but we did them rock and rearranged everything."

In this period, one of the songs that emerged from Offenbach was Hymne A L'Amour - originally part of the repertoire of the late Edith Piaf. Offenbach's version was powerful. Along with their own Caline De Doux Blues, it established Offenbach as an FM band. It's still easy to see them having success with translations of both of these songs. The group sees things differently.

"We did them once and now it's over. We did them five years ago in French and they're finished. Besides, Hymne A L'Amour



A&M recording group Offenbach

Offenbach: A band with a reassuring quality

by Richard J. Skelly

has been done in English. Edith Piaf wrote it with Margaret Manou, another French lady. A guy she was living with translated it and it was terrible. It didn't mean the same thing."

The members of Offenbach have very strong feelings towards Piaf and they all came out with comments about her. "She was a great trouper, one of the greatest French singers ever. In France she's like Jimi Hendrix. She died for her music and for her love. She didn't die in a can you know, she died on the stage."

Although they speak fondly of Piaf, the group makes no such concessions to other Quebec artists. They're aloof and don't make a point of jamming with other groups. Belval notes this independence by saying, "We're just four guys not into that. I don't see Jerry go play with Beau Dom-mage or a guy from them come and play with us."

There's little chance that Offenbach would be liked by Diane Dufresne or Claude Dubois. At a concert backing up both those artists, Offenbach ended their set with a striptease, grinding down to baby dolls before darting off stage. It's an incident they still chuckle over since the audience was pretty straight.

Offenbach has now turned its attention to getting a toehold in the English Canadian market. Ironically, the release of their A&M album Never Too Tender came two weeks after the Parti Quebecois gained victory at the polls. There have been

rumours that the group's plunge into the English market has been met with hostility from some of their more politically minded peers. Gerry Boulet says, "Music is music. If you want to say something you can do it in German, English or Japanese. It doesn't really matter as long as you can say it and people can understand what you're saying. Quebec has been very good for us but we want to go somewhere else too."

Although they're aiming at English Canada, I hope the group won't forget about the U.S. Their sound could probably go over there much more easily than it could in some parts of Canada. Never Too Tender is a good album but then there's always lots of equally good albums out by other blues/rock bands. The North American market has got to have the opportunity to see Offenbach. They really do shine when playing live. Perhaps it's because of their years of playing together, but Offenbach has a closeness on stage. Each member of the group knows what the others are up to and does his part to make the 'team' work. In Jann Wenner's classic Lennon Remembers, John Lennon explained the reassuring quality of playing with people who will know how to react musically even if you blink or breathe. It is that reassuring quality that Offenbach conveys from the stage. The style of music that they present may not be that different, from other blues/rock bands, but their presentation of it is. A real plea-

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sure to behold.

Nobody in the group is against the idea of playing in the U.S. but neither is anyone aggressively going after that type of break. Gravel notes, "You have to have some sort of connection to go down there. When you don't have it, you have to wait until somebody comes to you."

Hopefully A&M in the U.S. will come to them and help showcase them to some southern audiences. One would hate to see a band like this just go by the boards.