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**Migration, Music, and the Making of a Canadian Legend:
Mary Rose-Anne Travers, La Bolduc / Migration, musique et
naissance d'une légende canadienne :
Mary Rose-Anne Travers, La Bolduc**

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Migration, Music, and the Making of a Canadian Legend: Mary Rose-Anne Travers, La Bolduc

Early Life and Musical Education

Mary Rose-Anne Travers was born on June 4th, 1894, in the coastal town of Newport, Québec, during a tumultuous period in the region's history. Travers was born during a famine year, which financially devastated her already large family. Travers' mother, Adéline Cyr, was the second wife of her father, Lawrence Travers, causing Travers to grow up alongside ten siblings. Travers' childhood would be defined by poverty and, as a result, hard labour. Though she frequently had to work to help to support herself and her family, her childhood years were spent alongside her father, who worked as a lumberjack. According to historian Rachelle Chiasson-Taylor, her days spent in the woods with her father helped to develop a keen sense of observation and interest in the world around her.

Though Travers did not receive an education beyond her first communion, she quickly picked up the French language during her school years. At home, her family primarily spoke English, thanks to her father's Irish and anglophone heritage. Her father's Irish roots would also be essential in developing the skills that would jumpstart Travers' future musical career. Travers' father taught her to play multiple instruments, including the fiddle, the accordion, the harmonica, and the jaw harp. Furthermore, she learned "mouth music", or "turlutte" in French, a style of singing similar to Irish lilting which used sounds instead of lyrics to help create musical melody. This early musical education permitted her to start performing for her neighbours in Newport starting at the age of twelve. While she was only a child, her father's encouragement of his daughter's musical skills sowed the seed of greatness in young Mary Travers.

Moving to Montréal and Married Life

At age thirteen, Travers left Newport for Montréal to find work. Initially, Travers worked as a maid in the homes of wealthy Montréalers while living with her half-sister Maryann. Though she would move on to other jobs, such as factory work and, eventually, as a seamstress, Travers remained committed to playing music. She became involved in the social life of her parish, Sacré-Cœur-de-Jésus, and performed at community events. Through her church, she met a young labourer by the name of Édouard Bolduc. They would marry in 1914, when Travers was only seventeen years old. Her marital name, Bolduc, would be the source of her future stage names, which were "Madame Bolduc" or simple "La Bolduc".

However, Travers did not find fame instantly. In fact, the young Bolduc family would begin to struggle after Travers began having children in her early twenties. Staying home to care for the children slashed the family's income in half, causing the household to spiral into poverty. Two of the Bolduc children would die, because the family was unable to afford medical treatment for them. The family briefly moved to Massachusetts to search for work but returned to Montréal in

1922. Luckily, this return proved to be a positive one, as only five years later, Travers' star began to rise.

Becoming “La Bolduc”

Travers' professional career began thanks to an accident. During a party hosted by showrunner Conrad Gauthier, one of the musician's tasked with singing for the evening was unable to perform. Travers, who had been playing fiddle in Gauthier's orchestra in some of his earlier productions, was urged to replace the original singer. She complied, and soon after, Travers became a crowd favourite, with people repeatedly requesting “La Bolduc” for her diverse musical talents.

Travers' first recorded musical appearances would be as a musical accompanist to other musicians, notably famous singer Ovila Légaré. Her talent rapidly becoming noticed, and in 1929, she signed an individual contract with artistic director Roméo Beaudry. Her career skyrocketed when, in December 1929, she recorded her very first originally written song, *La cuisinière* (“The Lady Cook”). Pulled from an Acadian folk tune, the humorous tune describes the various romantic pursuits and failures of a female cook, each verse ending with “Hourra pour la cuisinière!” (“Hurray for the lady cook!”). This singular song would sell an impressive ten thousand copies and thrust her into stardom.

Between 1929 and 1931, Travers recorded fifty-eight songs and began to diversify her performances, in which she sang, played musical instruments, and even acted. Travers became renowned for her quick-witted writing style, which earned her fame outside of Montréal. In 1931, she went on her very first tour around Québec, and impressively earned herself the title of *marchande publique*, or independent female business owner.

Despite the fact that Québec was crippled by the financial devastation of the Great Depression, Travers acted as an uplifting and joyful voice for people across the province. Her acknowledgement of the struggles faced by Canadians during the difficult 1930s was present in some of her most famous songs, such as *Ça va venir, découragez-vous pas* (“It will come, don't be discouraged”). Travers' career would expand beyond the borders of Québec, and she would eventually visit Ontario and New England during her numerous tours over the decade. Her career even became a family affair, with her daughter Denise becoming her mother's studio pianist.





Car Accident, Final Tours, and Death of an Icon

In 1937, Travers had begun a new tour in Trois-Rivières, where she planned to travel by car up to the Gaspé peninsula over a matter of weeks. However, on June 25th, 1937, the car in which Travers was travelling was involved in a devastating collision that nearly took her life. Alongside severe breaks to her backbone, vertebrae, right leg, pelvic bone, and face, Travers would also suffer brain damage that left her with memory issues and aphasia. While Travers was rushed to hospital, treatment for her injuries revealed a devastating diagnosis: a cancerous tumour. Travers underwent several surgeries and multiple rounds of radiation treatment that left her unable to perform or record at all for the rest of 1937 and the entirety of 1938. Horrifically, Bolduc would only receive two hundred and fifty dollars in compensation for her injuries.

Travers attempted to return to her career in 1939, during which she composed four songs, appeared on live radio, and even returned to touring. She would perform her final show in Montréal in December of that same year, after which she was quickly hospitalized once again. Her final recorded song would be a reflection on the car accident that robbed her of her career, titled *Les souffrances de mon accident* (“The sufferings of my accident”). In it, she lamented the failure of her lawyers to secure any meaningful compensation for her; in turn, the driver that had caused the accident used the money he had earned to open a restaurant.

Travers’ final, chilling line predicted that she would die of starvation due to lack of income from the accident. Almost exactly a year to the day after she recorded *Les souffrances de mon accident*, Travers, age 45, passed away on February 20, 1940.

English, French, and Uniquely Québécoise – The Musical Legacy of Mary Rose-Anne Travers

Despite being born into poverty and facing hardship throughout her short life, Mary Rose-Anne Travers managed to uplift the spirits of listeners across Québec through her unique musical stylings. Her English-speaking Irish father provided her with a musical education steeped in the traditions of Gaelic folk music. However, Travers' own ability to communicate to audiences across the province through the use of the French language and her blending of Irish, Acadian, and Québécois musical styles made her legendary. Today, Travers is considered to be the first Québécois singer-songwriter in history, with many families still listening to her music to punctuate holidays like Christmas and New Year. A native English speaker who learned Irish music and made a career singing in French, Travers represents the brilliant unification of Québec's diverse musical traditions, leaving behind a legacy steeped in humour and hope.



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