

OBITUARY

Multi-talented Quebec performer evolved from slapstick artist to senator

JAMES CULLINGHAM

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 30, 2022



Performer and Liberal Senator Jean Lapointe, pictured here in 2001, died in Montreal on Nov. 18, at age 86.

CHRISTINNE MUSCHI/REUTERS

Jean Lapointe was a multidisciplinary figure in music, cinema, television who captivated, delighted and provoked hearts and minds in Quebec for more than half a century. “He was a Great talent. That’s Great with a capital G,” his late-career agent and friend Ginette Achim said.

After battling alcoholism during his performing career, he recovered and became an advocate for other people suffering from addictions. A highly visible public figure in Quebec, he also went on to serve in the Senate for nearly a decade.

Mr. Lapointe died in Montreal on Nov. 18 at age 86. He had been suffering from various medical conditions.

Born in Price, northeast of Quebec City, on Dec. 6, 1935, Jean Lapointe was one of seven children of Anne-Marie Ducharme and Arthur-Joseph Lapointe, a war veteran, station master and Liberal member of Parliament.

As a boy, Jean was “the artist in the family,” according to his daughter Anne Elizabeth Lapointe. As he reached adolescence, he impressed his family with his uncanny ability to imitate performers such as the renowned Quebec chansonnier Félix Leclerc. At age 17, Mr. Lapointe left Price to try his luck in Montreal. There would be no turning back.

Playing Montreal cabarets such as Casa Loma, Mr. Lapointe met Jérôme Lemay in 1955. The two became Les Jérolas an extremely popular duo that combined upbeat cabaret music hall compositions with slapstick. “They were like a French version of Martin and Lewis,” Ms. Lapointe said. There was no denying the duo’s popularity. In 1963, they achieved a remarkable coup for a Quebec-based act with an appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. Les Jérolas performed their music on the program and Mr. Lapointe imitated the host, Mr. Sullivan.

By the early 1970s, Les Jérolas broke up and Mr. Lapointe became a solo artist. He worked with fellow composer Marcel Lefebvre on more than 100 songs. “Some people think [Mr. Lapointe] was the one who wrote the music and I was the one who wrote the words. In fact we worked closely together side by side collaborating on both the melody and lyrics,” Mr. Lefebvre told *The Globe and Mail* just two days before his own death on Saturday of idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis. Mr. Lefebvre died at the same palliative care centre where his former collaborator Mr. Lapointe had died eight days earlier.

Songs such as *Chante-la ta chanson*, which Mr. Lapointe once performed as a duet with his daughter Anne Elizabeth on Radio-Canada, and *Les fleurs malades* are engraved in the memories of generations of Québécois. “Every show had a singalong aspect,” Ms. Achim said. “The audience knew the words by heart.”

Mr. Lefebvre recalled, “He was neither strictly a chansonnier or a crooner; he combined both.” Mr. Lapointe did not study music, nor could he read it. He was a capable pianist who played several other instruments.

“We can’t be compared to Mozart,” Mr. Lefebvre said. “We worked in the pop realm. He was a terrific melodist and a great singer. I came from a background in advertising who worked on jingles. Together we created a good body of work and some songs that are going to last.”

Regarding Mr. Lapointe’s career as a solo artist and the decision to leave Les Jérolas, his son Jean-Marie Lapointe, an actor, broadcaster and philanthropist says: “It was an opportunity for my father to show that he was more than a comic or a clown. He began to reveal his sensitive side.”



Jean Lapointe received the Genie award for his role in the film *Le Dernier Tunnel/The Last Tunnel* in 2005.

MIKE CASSESE/REUTERS

Just as his solo career as a musical artist was getting under way, Mr. Lapointe made a breakthrough cinematic appearance in 1974 as Clermont Boudreau in *Les Ordres*, a

drama directed by Michel Brault and filmed documentary style about innocent Québécois arrested during the imposition of the War Measures Act during the 1970 October Crisis. Mr. Lapointe's character is a union member of leftist persuasion and a family man. *Les Ordres* is considered by many to be a masterpiece of its genre and has been named by the Toronto Film Festival on four occasions as one of Canada's Top Ten Films Of All Time.

Soon after Mr. Lapointe further demonstrated his range and talents as an actor by appearing as Quebec premier Maurice Duplessis in the influential series *Duplessis*, written by Quebec cinematic stalwart Denys Arcand and directed by Mark Blandford. Duplessis was a strongman premier known for tough tactics with adversaries and a close alliance with deeply conservative elements in the Catholic Church. The Duplessis era is known as *la Grande Noirceur* – the Great Darkness – and led to the Quiet Revolution, during which the province quickly liberalized and modernized.

In his appearances in *Les Ordres* and *Duplessis*, as an actor already known to millions for his music, Mr. Lapointe humanized polar opposites in Quebec society.

As he ascended in his career, offstage and off camera Mr. Lapointe was struggling with demons. He was “off and on” for many years with a drinking problem according to son Jean-Marie Lapointe. Finally Mr. Lapointe gave up drinking.

“When he quit for good it totally changed the ambience at home in a positive way,” Jean-Marie said. “As many people know, an alcoholic is not the only one who is affected. It affects those around him as well.”

“He was a person of extremes,” Mr. Lefebvre said. “That could be good and bad. When he was a drinker, he went to the extreme.” The musical partners and friends supported each other in tackling and defeating the dependency they shared, which led to another critically important aspect of Mr. Lapointe's life.

He became associated with a treatment centre for alcohol and substance abuse that is now *La Maison Jean Lapointe*, under the direction of his daughter Anne Elizabeth.

“The centre and foundation were a matter of great pride for my father,” Anne Elizabeth said. Mr. Lapointe devoted his energy to helping people struggling with addiction through frequent visits to those in treatment, frank public speaking engagements and telethon appearances.

Centre Jean Lapointe assists thousands in treatment yearly and offers a range of services including an extensive bilingual prevention programme aimed at high school students.

By the beginning of the 21st century, Mr. Lapointe's reputation as a polyvalent artist and philanthropist was such that then-prime minister Jean Chrétien named him to the Canadian Senate. It was an honour that Mr. Lapointe took very seriously. From his seat in the Red Chamber, he dedicated himself to supporting culture and raising awareness about the damage wrought by alcoholism, substance abuse and gambling addiction in Canadian society.

Anne Elizabeth thinks her father's experience in the Senate inspired a change in his political thinking. Named by a Liberal prime minister and son of a Liberal politician, Mr. Lapointe came to develop a certain degree of support for Quebec independence. "In the Senate, he became increasingly aware of the 'two solitudes' and the differences between French- and English-speaking Canadians. He thought he needed to reconsider his position," Anne-Elizabeth said. Known for decades as a federalist, Mr. Lapointe surprised many by expressing support for the eventuality of Quebec independence in an interview with Radio-Canada in January of this year.

"Quebec's independence will come one day or another. And I hope for it," he told journalist Patrice Roy.

Mr. Lapointe was a member of the Order of Canada, l'Académie des Grands Québécois and the National Order of Quebec. In 2017 he was named an Honoured Citizen of Montreal. Mr. Lapointe won both Genie and Jutra awards in 2005 for best supporting actor in *Le dernier tunnel* directed by Érik Canuel, and in 2011 he won *Le Prix Jutra-Hommage* for career achievement as well as the Jutra for best supporting actor in *À l'origine d'un cri* directed by Robin Aubert.

"He was not afraid to show his vulnerability," Anne Elizabeth said. "He was not perfect. For many generations, he entertained, warmed hearts and did good for a lot of people."

Mr. Lapointe, who was married four times, leaves his wife, Mercédès Vincent-Lapointe; children, Danielle, Michelle, Marie-Josée, Maryse, Jean-Marie, Catherine and Anne Elizabeth; grandchildren, Olivier and Jean Auguste; and his sisters Huguette and Suzanne.