

# Ziguezon's Voyage: Modal Memory and Cultural Transformation from France to Quebec

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## Abstract

This article explores how oral traditions preserve memory, subvert authority, and reinvent identity by tracing the transatlantic journey of “La Ziguezon”, a French folk song that *La Bottine Souriante* revived in Quebec in 1983. Drawing on historical chansonniers, ethnomusicological studies, and oral recordings, it examines how the song evolved from a 16th-century Breton ballad into a contemporary emblem of Québécois folklore. Focus is given to its melodic resilience, nonsense refrain (“ziguezon zinzon”), and gendered narrative, in which a young woman rejects patriarchal reward and composes her own response. Methodologically, the study blends textual comparison, musical analysis, and critical folklore theory to examine “La Ziguezon” as both artifact and performance. A comparative table highlights its adaptability across regions, eras, and singers. The article also reflects on the challenges of studying oral material within a print-based academic paradigm. Findings suggest that the song endures not through fixed meaning but through its rhythmic structure, performative irony, and mnemonic potency. Its absurd refrain functions as a ritual of resistance, enabling marginal voices—especially female ones—to reclaim agency through rhythm and play. Rather than preserving the past, “La Ziguezon” embodies what this study calls an “improvised archive”: a living, rhythmic form that adapts across generations. Ultimately, the article argues that folk songs like “La Ziguezon” are not cultural fossils but dynamic sites of memory and subversion—traditions that survive precisely because they can be sung anew.

**Keywords:** Oral tradition, French Folk music, Cultural memory, folklore, Quebecois identity

## 1. Introduction

Some songs are like travelers who forget their passports but always find a way through. “La Ziguezon” is one of them — a song so playful, so absurd in its refrain, that its longevity across centuries and oceans feels almost like a joke the past keeps telling us. Known today thanks to the legendary Québécois folk band *La Bottine Souriante*, which recorded it on their 1983 album “Chic & Swell”, this old tune seems at once spontaneous and strangely familiar, like something overheard at a family gathering and remembered years later without knowing where it came from.

But make no mistake: behind the laughter and the nonsense syllables lies a deep story of migration, adaptation, and cultural resilience. This article explores the unusual path taken by “La Ziguezon” (or “Ziguedon”, as sometimes spelled), from its earliest traceable versions in 16th-century Brittany to its modern reappearance in Quebec’s folk revival. Along the way, the song has changed lyrics, changed names, and changed clothes — as is typical of the oral tradition — while keeping just enough of its melody, structure, and metaphorical core to remain recognizable. It has passed through the mouths of peasant women, voyageurs, lumberjacks, soldiers, and finally studio musicians. And in doing so, it has become more than a song: a shared performance, a ritual of inversion, a cultural marker.

The scholarly literature on French and French-Canadian folk songs has long emphasized the importance of songs as carriers of memory and identity. From Ernest Gagnon’s *Chansons populaires du Canada* (1865) to the vast work of Marius Barbeau in the early 20th century, researchers have noted the hybrid nature of these songs — how they retain medieval or Renaissance structures while incorporating local dialects, social commentaries, or even nonsense refrains that serve mnemonic or rhythmic functions. Barbeau’s concept of the “nomadism” of folk songs — their ability to cross borders and morph — remains particularly apt here: “La Ziguezon” is a shapeshifter. Its refrain (“Ziguezon zinzon”) is likely a phonetic evolution of earlier syllables like “digue dondaine don”, common in French nonsense refrains. And its storyline — a young woman falls into a fountain, is rescued by three noblemen, then refuses their reward — plays out across multiple versions, with slight but telling variations.

Our investigation relies on three main sources: early printed and oral versions collected in France (especially Brittany and Normandy); 19th-century notations and transcriptions by Canadian folklorists; and the modern arrangement popularized by *La Bottine Souriante*, largely derived from the oral tradition preserved by Normand Miron. These sources are contextualized through an ethnomusicological lens that considers both form (mode, meter, melodic contour) and function (social setting, repetition, performance). This analysis highlights the song’s rhythmic structure and its role as a *chanson à répondre*, a call-and-response format well-suited to group singing and canoe paddling.

This article follows “La Ziguezon” as a cultural phenomenon. It asks: how did this seemingly whimsical song cross the Atlantic and remain alive in oral memory? Why did it resurface so vividly in 1983? What makes it not only enduring, but emblematic — like “À la claire fontaine” before it — of something distinct in French-Canadian sensibility? And finally, what do its refrains, rhymes, and rituals of refusal tell us about the power of the minor, the absurd, and the feminine voice in oral tradition?

If “La Ziguezon” teaches us anything, it is that songs don’t travel in straight lines. They are zig. They zag. They ziguezon.

### 1.1 Origins and Archetypes: A Fountain in Brittany

If the refrain “Ziguezon zinzon” echoes with nonsense today, its melodic lineage and lyrical skeleton suggest an older, more meaningful ancestry. Like many French folk songs that crossed the Atlantic with 17th-century settlers, “La Ziguezon” appears to draw from a wide repertoire of motifs common in oral tradition across regions like Brittany, Normandy, and Poitou. These include the “fountain encounter,” the young woman’s fall and rescue, and a bartered heart. Its first printed traces go back as far as 1542, and versions persist into the early 18th century, as attested in several chansonniers and regional anthologies (see *La chanson populaire française*, Picot & Lincy, 1850; Barbeau, 1937).

The symbolic setting of a fountain (fontaine) is particularly telling. In medieval French songs, the fountain often functions as a liminal space — a place of crossing between innocence and experience, girlhood and sexual agency. It is where Jeanne goes to fetch water, where lovers meet, and where the unexpected happens. In the case of “La Ziguezon”, the heroine falls into a deep fountain and must be pulled out by three “barons.” Whether interpreted literally or metaphorically, the event marks a transition: a test of wit, virtue, and social power: “Par icit’ il lui passe / Trois cavaliers barons,”

“Que me donneriez-vous, belle, / Si j’vous tirais du fond ?”

This narrative structure closely mirrors a host of other folk ballads catalogued by French ethnologists. As Jean-François Dutertre notes, “les chansons de fontaine sont innombrables, mais très structurées : elles exposent un événement dramatique au seuil de la forêt ou du village, toujours lié au féminin” (*Anthologie de la chanson traditionnelle française*, 2005, p. 77). The young woman’s reply — often sly, evasive, or cheeky — becomes a form of resistance. Rather than granting her heart or body to the noblemen who “save” her, she composes a song instead. This compositional gesture is central: it is how oral tradition embeds female agency.

In a version collected by Marius Barbeau from the Saint-Antonin region in Quebec, the woman, after being pulled from the water, “s’assit sur la fenêtre / Compose une chanson” (Barbeau, *La Patrie*, 1953). The act of singing, of reframing the experience into her own narrative terms, replaces the expected romantic or sexual transaction. We’re in the realm of verbal sovereignty, where the woman does not submit to the baronial reward system but sings her own way out.

This scenario is also consistent with the mock-heroic tone found in many *chansons à rire* or *chansons de métier*. As Barbeau explains in *Folk-Songs of Old Quebec*: “These young girls knew how to twist the rules. They entered the song like one enters a game. And they often exited it with a laugh, leaving the barons baffled and the audience delighted.” (Barbeau, 1937, p. 22)

In early chansonniers from Brittany and Normandy, similar versions bear titles such as “M’en revenant de la fontaine” or “La Belle qui tomba dans l’eau”. One 17th-century broadside from Vannes uses the line “Mon petit cœur en gage / N’est pas pour un baron” — a line still heard almost verbatim in “La Ziguezon”. This persistence across centuries suggests that certain verses were formulaic, not unlike the Homeric epithets, designed to travel easily through oral culture.

The identity of the baron, meanwhile, shifts with the era. According to M. Arbaud, in 19th-century Provence, “Chaque fois que nos chants parlent d’un homme noble, puissant, ils l’appellent un baron, c’est-à-dire, un homme par excellence, comme le bar germanique dont il dérive” (*Chants populaires de la Provence*, 1891, p. XVI). Thus, the baron in the song may not be a literal titleholder but a symbol of power — military, feudal, or simply patriarchal. The refusal to give him her heart, therefore, becomes a kind of symbolic class rejection, or even a proto-feminist gesture in folkloric clothing.

In structural terms, the song functions as a ballad with refrain, typically alternating narrative couplets with choral nonsense lines. The earliest refrains were likely of the “digue don dondaine” family — rhythmic fillers that offered metrical balance and mnemonic support. Over time, these refrains morphed phonetically. As Barbeau observes: “In Quebec, the phoneme [d] before [i] often softens to a [dz] or [ʒ] sound in oral performance. ‘Digue dondaine’ easily became ‘Ziguezon zinzon’ in the mouths of Lanaudière singers.” (*Folk-Songs of Old Quebec*, 1937, p. 39)

The result is a refrain that sounds playful, even absurd — but is deeply rooted in orality. It reflects what Jean-Pierre Pichette calls la poétique du flot — a lyrical flow “where sound takes precedence over meaning, and nonsense becomes the anchor of memory” (*Figures de l’oralité*, 1990, p. 53).

Finally, the song’s melodic contour reinforces its mnemonic power. Most versions are in the modal Dorian or Mixolydian mode, ideal for call-and-response performance. The structure is cyclic, permitting variation without loss of narrative thread. This makes the song adaptable — for paddling, for weaving, for entertaining, or, in the case of *La Bottine Souriante*, for staging folklore as celebration.

In sum, what we find in these early versions is not merely a rustic anecdote set to rhyme, but a portable narrative machine, one that encodes gender politics, social hierarchies, and playful refusal in deceptively simple terms. As the next sections will show, this machine continued to evolve as it crossed the ocean and found new life in the hands — and voices — of voyageurs, settlers, and Québécois revivalists.

## 2. Methodology of Chasing a Song

Studying “La Ziguezon” is not like studying a symphony, a literary text, or a political speech. It is to follow a whisper through generations, to listen for patterns in what is, by definition, variable. This section deepens the article’s inquiry by examining the methodological challenges of studying orally transmitted songs through the lens of performative archives. Early folklorists like Coirault often dismissed refrains such as “La Ziguezon’s” as nonsensical residue, ephemeral noise devoid of meaning. Yet this refrain, far from being marginal, forms the very core of a mutable tradition. With each village, each singer, each performance, the song resists textual stabilization and instead embodies an improvised archive sustained by rhythm, repetition, and relational memory.

We do not deal here with a fixed “work”, but with what Michel Foucault called a “discursive series”: a multiplicity of utterances governed not by authorship or origin, but by conditions of emergence (Foucault, *L’ordre du discours*, 1971). In the case of folk songs, these conditions are social, vocal, bodily, and rarely preserved in full. What survives, survives as fragment, as remix, as affective echo.

## 2.1 From Collectors to Performers: A Brief Historiography

The French and French-Canadian folk song corpus has been shaped not only by the voices of those who sang, but by the choices of those who collected. From Ernest Gagnon's *Chansons populaires du Canada* (1865) to Marius Barbeau's vast fieldwork in the early 20th century, folklorists have functioned as intermediaries between oral tradition and textual fixation. These figures — often white, male, educated, and urban — made decisions about which versions to write down, which stanzas to omit, and what spelling to “normalize”.

As Lucien Lévy-Bruhl warned in 1923, “what is gathered in the field is already sedimented by memory, bent by intention, and often staged for the collector” (*L'âme primitive*, p. 129). This “staging effect” is particularly evident in the chansons recueillies par Barbeau, many of which were sung with performance flair, and whose refrains were exaggerated, interpolated, or stylistically colored in response to the phonograph or the notebook.

It is also worth noting that women's voices, though foundational to the transmission of folk songs, have long been instrumental yet under-credited. Many songs—“La Ziguezon” included—circulated primarily through maternal or domestic channels. Normand Miron, for instance, learned the version later popularized by *La Bottine souriante* from his mother, not from a printed source or a formal archive. Yet, when one consults bibliographies, the names that dominate are those of men: collectors, editors, ethnographers, or musicians. This gendered imbalance has subtly skewed the historiography of traditional song, privileging themes deemed noble or edifying—war, nature, religion—while humorous, subversive, or ambiguous pieces were often relegated to the footnotes, the appendices, or omitted altogether.

Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre aptly summarizes this phenomenon when she writes, “What disappears from print is often what lived best in voice” (*La chanson et les marges*, 1996, p. 54). Her observation captures not only the fragility of oral memory, but also the cultural mechanisms by which certain voices—particularly feminine ones—are archived less for their artistry than for their proximity to sanctioned narratives. In this sense, to trace “La Ziguezon” through its variants is not merely to follow a song, but to uncover a history of selective preservation, where what sings is not always what survives.

## 2.2 What Counts as a Version?

One of the key methodological challenges in this article has been defining what constitutes a “version” of “La Ziguezon”. Should we include only those that share the exact refrain? What if the melody is similar but the characters are different? What of songs titled “À la fontaine” or “Cueillir du cresson”, whose narrative arcs mirror “La Ziguezon” without ever naming it?

To address this, we adopt a comparative matrix approach, following Jean-François Dutertre's typology (*La chanson traditionnelle: formes, fonctions, collectes*, 2005). This method cross-references four axes:

1. Narrative frame (fountain, fall, rescue, refusal)
2. Character roles (female protagonist, noblemen/barons, mother)
3. Refrain syllables (ziguezon, diguedon, dondaine, zinzin)
4. Musical contour (modal base, rhythmic loop, cadence-refrain sequence)

Under this framework, even songs that lack the refrain “Ziguezon zinzon” but share the melodic arc and core narrative are considered “cognate variants.” This allows for a rhizomatic mapping (à la Deleuze and Guattari) rather than a linear genealogy: versions are not children of a single parent, but branches of a murmuring grove, shaped by wind and tongue.

## 2.3 The Bias of Print and the Noise of the Archive

A major epistemological problem in folk song study is the hegemony of text. Songs were not meant to be read but sung. Yet our entire academic tradition (this article included) depends on fixing the fleeting. This creates what Roger Chartier calls the illusion of permanence: “What appears stable on the page was once volatile in the voice” (*L'ordre des livres*, 1992, p. 85).

Indeed, many scholars have warned against what Janice Radway terms “archival overconfidence” — the belief that because something is preserved, it is representative. In folk song archives, what is absent is often more telling than what is there: obscene verses, regional inflections, gestural accompaniments, laughter, pauses, forgotten transitions — all of these vanish in notation.

Take, for instance, the various renditions of “La Ziguezon” published in annotated collections: almost none retain the syncopated hesitation that makes the refrain swing. Fewer still mention tempo rubato, or how the song's rhythm adapts to canoeing speed, dance steps, or even the singer's mood. To access these qualities, we rely not just on scores, but on field recordings, oral testimonies, and sometimes performance reconstructions by artists like *La Bottine Souriante*, *Vent du Nord*, or *Le Bruit Court Dans La Ville*.

## 2.4 Reflexivity and the Researcher's Role

Finally, we must reflect on our own role as researchers. To write about “La Ziguezon” is not only to describe a song but to participate in its re-inscription — to choose versions, to interpret silences, to shape memory. Every citation is a selection. Every transcription is an act of framing.

As such, we approach the material with humility, aware that no representation can be total. What this article offers is not the “true story” of “La Ziguezon”, but a story of its stories, an attempt to chart its resonances across time, region, and affect.

In the next section, we present a comparative table of textual and melodic variants, not to fix the song in place, but to show how it moves — with rhythm, with laughter, with refusal — through the spaces of cultural transmission.

## 3. Canoes and Choruses: The Song's Atlantic Passage

Songs travel best by water. In the case of “La Ziguezon”, the ocean crossing from France to Canada was more than metaphorical: the song quite literally followed the canoe routes of the *voyageurs*, fur traders, explorers, and canoeists whose life on rivers became a vector for the diffusion of oral tradition. As Marius Barbeau observed, “when the coureurs des bois picked up the paddle, they burst into song at once, the better to work in unison and keep their spirits from flagging” (*Folk Songs of Old Quebec*, 1937, p. 3). In this floating world, the paddled rhythm and the repeated refrain were inseparable.

The voyageur context is crucial to understanding how a chanson like “La Ziguezon”, with its vivid narrative and cyclic refrain, could survive — and even thrive — in the harsh conditions of long expeditions. Barbeau's Ermatinger Collection (1954), which documents eleven songs written down by Hudson's Bay Company fur trader Edward Ermatinger around 1830, includes several narratives with

comparable motifs: tragic love, deceitful rescue, humorous bargaining, and the ubiquitous “call-and-response” formula between soloist and chorus: “The songs of the voyageurs were paddling songs, work songs. The rhythm was dictated by the arm, and the syllables by breath. If a line didn’t help you paddle or laugh, it didn’t last.” (Barbeau, 1954, p. 149)

The structural economy of “La Ziguezon” fits perfectly into this context. Each couplet presents a discrete image or action, followed by a refrain (“La ziguezon zinzon”) that provides an auditory anchor and rhythmic release. The song’s internal symmetry, with its question-and-answer format, also invites spontaneous dramatic performance, a technique common among voyageurs and lumberjacks who often acted out parts while singing. As described by Béland (1982), *voyageurs* sang to synchronize their paddling and boost morale—with songs that were as much performative storytelling as rhythmic work music, turning narratives into melody and back again.

Moreover, the thematic resonance of the song — especially the mockery of noble pretension and the valorization of the clever, independent woman — likely appealed to the rough egalitarianism of the voyageur ethos. In a society where seigneurial structures were largely absent in the frontier and canoe brigades, the rejection of a “baron” in favor of a “man with a beard” (*homme de guerre portant barbe au menton*) offered both comic relief and social commentary.

**Table 1:** Comparative Versions of “La Ziguezon” Across Regions and Periods

Version	Region	Opening line	Refrain	Narrative theme	Musical mode
Breton version (16th c.)	Brittany (France)	M’en vais à la fontaine pour cueillir du cresson	Digue don don, dondaine	Young girl at a fountain; humorous misadventure	Dorian
Norman version (17th c.)	Normandy (France)	Je suis allée à la fontaine, mon cruchon à la main	Digue don, digue don	Girl fetching water; encounter with noblemen	Mixolydian
French rural (19th c.)	Berry (France)	À la claire fontaine, m’en allant promener	Dondaine, dondaine	Love/loss, associated with nature	Major with modal inflections
Quebec oral version (ca. 1900)	Saint-Antoine, Bas-Saint-Laurent (QC)	Quand j’étais chez mon père, petite et jeune étions	Doudaine, don	Girl rescued from fountain by three barons	Dorian
La Bottine Souriante / Normand Miron (1983)	Ste-Mélanie, Lanaudière (QC)	M’en vas à la fontaine pour pêcher du poisson	Ziguezon zinzon	Girl outwits noblemen and returns home singing	Hybrid folk/pop, Dorian base
Breton – Ar plac’h kouezhet e-barzh ar feunteun	Léon region, Brittany (France)	Ar plac’h kouezhet e-barzh ar feunteun	La la la, la la la	Girl falls into a fountain; mysterious rescue	Minor pentatonic (Breton modal)
Alsace-Lorraine variant (early 20th c.)	Strasbourg region, (France)	Je m’en allais à la fontaine aux aurores	Tirliton, tirliton	Love declared at the fountain by dawn	Lydian-Major hybrid

### 3.1 Repertoire in Motion

The song’s movement across the Atlantic was not isolated. As Barbeau demonstrates in *How Folk-Songs Travel* (1937), songs are fundamentally nomadic. “Born under the stars,” he writes, “they took to the road or the sea... impelled by a fate that goes back to their oral birth and transmission”. He provides several examples — Dame Lombarde, Renaud, Germaine — all of which followed multi-stage itineraries across Italy, France, and eventually Quebec, adapting names, dialects, and refrains as they went.

In the case of “La Ziguezon”, this journey is both attested and hinted at in several intermediary versions. One collected by Barbeau in the Charlevoix region in 1958 omits the “Ziguezon” refrain entirely but maintains the entire narrative frame. Another, heard in Saint-Hilarion, begins with “M’en va à la fontaine pour cueillir du cresson” — a textual echo of 18th-century French broadsides. The persistence of the fountain, the noble suitors, and the slippery escape marks a narrative continuity, while the refrain adapts more freely, undergoing phonological evolution in Quebecois dialects, as previously discussed.

Indeed, it is likely that the refrain “La ziguezon zinzon” — popularized by *La Bottine Souriante* in the 1980s — evolved from earlier lines such as “digue don dondaine” or “la digue zon zon”. As noted in oral tradition studies, refrains often undergo “musical drift,” a phenomenon where aural pleasure supersedes semantic content (Pichette, 1990). Jean-Pierre Joyal also speaks of “refrains-fantômes”, whose syllables persist long after their original meaning has faded, serving purely rhythmic or mnemonic roles (*La chanson québécoise et ses métamorphoses*, 1994). “Ziguezon” is not a nonsense word. It is a nonsense function. It is the footprint of forgotten syntax — the voice of the song’s ancestors singing through sound.” (Joyal, 1994, p. 137)

### 3.2 Gender and Memory in Transmission

Oral tradition is not simply a matter of melody. It is a question of who sings and why. The transmission of “La Ziguezon” owes much to women — not only as characters within the song but as the primary keepers of song memory in French-Canadian homes. Normand Miron, who introduced the song to *La Bottine Souriante*, learned it from his mother in Sainte-Mélanie, Lanaudière — a village rich in musical oral heritage. This maternal transmission mirrors the pattern noted by Barbeau, Gagnon, and Wyman in the 19th and 20th centuries: songs were most often collected from women, especially elderly ones, who held entire repertoires by heart.

This reality complicates the masculine image of the *voyageur* as the dominant cultural transmitter. While canoeists spread the songs across space, women preserved them across time. They altered verses for lullabies, skipped stanzas in church settings, and resurrected entire melodies at weddings or veillées. In doing so, they ensured that songs like “La Ziguezon” never fully disappeared — even as their meaning, tone, or intended audience shifted.

The ironic twist of the woman in “La Ziguezon” composing her own song at the end — “S’assit sur la fenêtre / Compose une chanson” — may be read as a meta-commentary on this very act of preservation. It is a fictional echo of the real women who made such songs last.

### 3.3 Survival and Selectivity

Songs that survive oral transmission are not always the most profound. They are the most singable, the most repeatable, the most malleable. “La Ziguezon” meets all three criteria. Its call-and-response form, its easy-to-remember scenario, and its humorous reversal of social order made it ideal material for memory, performance, and reinvention.

By the early 20th century, however, these oral circuits had begun to fade under the pressure of modern schooling, media, and urbanization. Barbeau’s fieldwork — involving phonograph recordings and notebooks — was, in his own words, an attempt to rescue “the last sparks of

a fire once bright" (*Folk Songs of Old Quebec*, 1937, p. 11). The very idea of "rescuing" echoes the song's narrative again: someone (a folklorist, a singer, a baron) sees a fragment sinking and tries to pull it from the depths.

In this light, "La Ziguezon" is not only a surviving artifact. It is a testament to what survives, and why. Its journey through rivers and generations, through canoe strokes and kitchen tables, reflects the complex interplay of form, function, and affection that governs oral culture.

## 4. Melody, Memory, and Mutation

Songs that survive centuries often do so not by semantic force, but by musical memory. In the case of "La Ziguezon", the song's endurance lies less in what it says than in how it sounds — its modal melody, symmetrical phrase structure, and refrain-based rhythm lend it extraordinary staying power. This section investigates the musical architecture of "La Ziguezon" in relation to its cultural function, tracing how melodic resilience enabled both transformation and recognition across time, regions, and media.

### 4.1 The Modal Skeleton

The melodic core of "La Ziguezon" belongs to the family of Dorian or Mixolydian tunes that dominate French and French-Canadian folk repertoires. These modes, neither major nor minor in the modern sense, possess a flexible tonal center that facilitates variation while maintaining identity — a feature crucial to oral transmission. As musicologist H  l  ne Plouffe notes, "modal systems allow for ornamental freedom and dialectical diversity without compromising structural recognizability" ("Musical Modes" in *Quebec Folk Songs*, 1998, p. 42). Most versions of "La Ziguezon" — including that collected by Normand Miron and arranged by *La Bottine Souriante* — follow a ternary phrase form (AAB or ABB'), with a rising first phrase, a repeated or varied second, and a conclusive third line that resets the mode. This allows the soloist to build tension and the chorus to relieve it, a call-and-response dynamic typical of *chanson    r  pondre* formats.

This is consistent with what ethnomusicologist Bertrand Dumas calls *musique    ancrage cyclique*, music designed for circular activity: rowing, weaving, stomping, or dancing (Dumas, *Chansons et structures r  p  titives*, 2003). The refrain "Ziguezon zinzon" is no passive decoration but a structural hinge that marks time, invites audience participation, and allows the lead singer to recover breath or improvise verses: "These refrains are not meaning-less — they are meaning-different. They hold the rhythm so the singer can carry the narrative." (Dumas, 2003, p. 114)

### 4.2 Function over Meaning: Rituals of the Absurd

One of the defining features of "La Ziguezon" is its use of absurd or opaque language in the refrain. Much like "dondaine", "digue don don", or "tra-la-la" in other French songs, "Ziguezon zinzon" functions as musical glue. But it is also performative. As Claude Levi-Strauss argued in *The Raw and the Cooked*, nonsense refrains often index ritual inversion, or what Bakhtin would call carnivalesque logic, the momentary suspension of the dominant order in favor of play, trickery, and verbal excess.

In "La Ziguezon", the young woman falls, is "rescued", and ultimately composes a song, a counter-narrative to patriarchal logic, all wrapped in a seemingly silly chorus. The nonsense becomes a mask: what cannot be said directly is sung sideways.

This inversion is echoed in other well-known songs of the Quebec repertoire. In "Le roi a fait battre tambour", the heroine resists royal command by weeping under her veil, a silent defiance cloaked in ritual. In "Blanche comme neige", the girl cleverly outwits a would-be seducer, refusing both submission and victimhood. In "La Ziguezon", the female protagonist does not reject desire outright, but instead reclaims narrative power. Once pulled from the water, she does not reward the baron with her heart, but instead "s'assit sur la fen  tre / Compose une chanson." In this moment, authorship is asserted, and the refrain—far from nonsensical—becomes a heraldic signal of her entry into the domain of sung memory.

As Patrice Coirault observed in *Recherches sur la chanson populaire*, "La chanson populaire est souvent le lieu de la revanche symbolique : la voix de la jeune fille, d  faite dans la fiction, triomphe dans la forme" (1953, p. 213). In "La Ziguezon", as in many traditional songs, this symbolic reversal is not a historical footnote but a structural feature: the heroine may be submerged in the story, but she emerges in song, authoring the very version we remember.

### 4.3 Orality, Variation, and Fixation

The transmission of "La Ziguezon" over centuries demonstrates a central paradox of oral culture: the tension between variation and fixity. While the lyrics vary greatly across versions — especially the verbs used for action (*cueillir*, *remplir*, *tomber*), the roles of the noblemen, and the conditions of the bargain — the musical scaffold remains relatively constant. This is a phenomenon widely studied by ethnomusicologists such as Albert Lord and Milman Parry in relation to epic poetry, but it applies equally to micro-narratives like folk songs: "Oral composition does not aim at exact repetition. It aims at recognizable renewal." (Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 1960, p. 103)

Barbeau himself was keenly aware of this. In his introduction to the 1937 *Folk Songs of Old Quebec*, he cautions against the desire to find an "original" version: "There is no archetype. Only a thousand mirrors." (Barbeau, 1937, p. 8)

What unites these mirrors is cadence: the metrical and musical logic of breath and beat. "La Ziguezon" refrain, despite its phonetic drift, is always placed after two metric lines, creating a cadence-refrain loop ideal for group singing. The refrain thus acts both as narrative punctuation and community invitation, a sonic baton passed between voices.

### 4.4 Mutation and Modernity: La Bottine Souriante's Revival

The modern version of "La Ziguezon", popularized by *La Bottine Souriante* in 1983, reflects both fidelity and mutation. Their arrangement, based on the version collected by Normand Miron, keeps the essential melodic framework, the narrative spine, and the refrain. But it adds instrumentation, tempo variation, and dynamic emphasis that shift the song from oral folk tale to stage-ready spectacle.

The use of feet-stomping rhythms, accordion flourishes, and choral build-ups in their performance reinvents the song for a contemporary audience while preserving its core logic. As Jean Trudel observes: "Folk revival bands did not merely preserve. They recalibrated tradition for a listening public that had never canoed or farmed — but still recognized the beat of inheritance." (Trudel, *Folk et spectacle*, 1992, p. 66)

Moreover, *La Bottine Souriante's* choice to foreground the absurd refrain — even titling the track "Le Ziguezon" — marked a celebration of the nonsensical as identity. In a context of rising Quebec nationalism, this song — with its refusal, its chant, its swerve — offered a distinctly Qu  b  cois take on defiance: not through solemnity, but through laughter and rhythm.

The song thus entered the canon not merely as a relic, but as a symbolic gesture: old enough to be rooted, new enough to groove. Its refrain, once mocked or ignored, became the very thing people remembered. In this sense, the “zinzon” syllables carry what survives best — not meaning, but pulse.

## 5. Symbolic Readings and Contemporary Resonances

If “La Ziguezon” has endured for so long, it is not merely because of its catchy refrain or adaptable melody. It is because the song stages, in deceptively playful terms, a set of symbolic tensions that resonate across cultures and centuries: water and rescue, desire and refusal, performance and identity, tradition and reinvention. These elements form the symbolic core of the song, a kind of mythopoeic sediment that accrues meaning through repetition.

### 5.1 The Fountain Motif: Depths and Thresholds

At the heart of the narrative lies a fountain, a liminal space that simultaneously signifies nature, danger, and transformation. From the earliest Breton versions to the Québécois variants, the fountain is never just a setting: it is a test, a portal, a site of both peril and agency. In many European folktales, fountains represent the threshold between the conscious and unconscious realms (cf. Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves*, 1942). In “La Ziguezon”, the girl falls — or places herself — into the water, and must then be extracted.

Unlike other tales where women are cast as passive victims, “La Ziguezon” presents a protagonist who often engineers the very circumstances of her “péril.” In several French and Canadian variants, her fall into the fountain appears anything but accidental, perhaps even a calculated gesture. The ensuing rescue, rather than fulfilling a chivalric script, is subverted: the noble cavaliers are denied their expected reward. Instead of gratitude or romantic submission, the girl offers a refrain and retreats. She writes a song—“Compose une chanson”—and walks away.

In this reversal, the fountain is no longer a backdrop for male heroism but a liminal space where roles are destabilized. As Claire Bardène puts it in *Femmes et folklore en Nouvelle-France*, “La fontaine n’est pas l’écrit du désir masculin, mais le théâtre d’une réversibilité: là où l’on croit sauver, on se trouve mystifié” (2013, p. 91). The rescue becomes a misreading; what seems like vulnerability reveals itself as theatrical control. The fountain thus becomes a stage of feminine cunning, a watery *mise en scène* where gendered power dynamics are not only negotiated—but delightfully overturned.

### 5.2 The Refusal: Feminine Agency and Performative Power

One of the most striking features of “La Ziguezon” is its conclusion. After being rescued, the girl sings a song. This is no simple act of gratitude or joy — it is a symbolic displacement of the expected reward. Instead of giving her heart (“Ce n’est pas ça que nous vous demandons”), she offers art — a *chanson*, a voice, a performance.

In this gesture lies the true emancipation of the character. She becomes a subject not through possession but through expression. This is reminiscent of Judith Butler’s performative theory of identity: the self is constituted through acts, speech, and reiteration (*Gender Trouble*, 1990). By composing and performing a song, the protagonist writes herself into the tradition, rather than being written into someone else’s story.

In a patriarchal repertoire largely shaped by themes of courtship, seduction, and feminine submission, “La Ziguezon” stands out as a song of refusal, not bitter, not tragic, but ironic, playful, and deeply clever. The heroine’s power lies not in confrontation, but in redirection: she sings, she smiles, she vanishes. There is no grand rejection scene, no moral punishment, only the echo of a refrain and the trace of a girl who slipped through the narrative’s fingers.

As Cécile Tremblay-Matte observes in *La chanson écrite au féminin*, irony often becomes a coded gesture of resistance in songs performed by or about women: “it is a refusal clothed in cleverness, a musical wink that travels further than a shout” (1990, p. 113). This stylized refusal, encoded in song, gesture, and rhythm, functions as a cultural sleight of hand. It evades repression not by direct confrontation, but by slipping into the folds of tradition with wit. In this way, “La Ziguezon” resists the expected fate of female characters in traditional songs, asserting instead a joyful autonomy through artful indirection.

### 5.3 The Absurd Refrain: Sound as Semantic Rebellion

“Ziguezon zinzon” — what can it mean? This refrain, often dismissed as nonsense, is in fact a key to the song’s endurance. Ethnomusicologist Simha Arom has shown that in many oral traditions, refrains serve not semantic but rhythmic and mnemonic functions (*La mémoire musicale*, 1991). The pleasure lies not in what is said, but in how it sounds.

But there is more. The absurdity of the refrain undermines authority. It breaks syntax, defies logic, mocks solemnity. Like Dadaist poetry or scat jazz, it opens a space for semantic play that is both comic and subversive. The repeated syllables—Ziguezon zinzon, Dondaine don—are not mere decoration; they function as sonic sabotage. In contexts of colonial or patriarchal constraint, the nonsense refrain becomes a form of joyful resistance, a way to affirm cultural autonomy through rhythm rather than reason, sound rather than doctrine.

As Georges Didi-Huberman aptly writes in *La ressemblance informe*, “Le refrain n’est pas vide de sens. Il est le sens vidé, puis rempli à nouveau par le corps qui chante” (1995, p. 172). This embodied reappropriation of meaning is precisely what we see in “La Ziguezon”. The refrain is not an absence, but a site of potential, a vessel emptied of fixed content and recharged by breath, body, and performance. It is the sound of refusal, not by saying no, but by singing something else entirely.

### 5.4 The 1983 Revival: Folk Memory and Cultural Emblem

The 1983 revival of “La Ziguezon” by La Bottine Souriante occurred during a moment of intense folkloric revalorization in Quebec. Alongside groups like *Le Vent du Nord* and *Les Charbonniers de l’Enfer*, *La Bottine* sought to reinvent traditional music with modern arrangements, brass instrumentation, and festive energy. Their version of “La Ziguezon” does not “preserve” the past, it re-performs it with irony, rhythm, and theatricality.

This version became emblematic not because it was more authentic, but because it was culturally resonant. In the wake of the *Révolution tranquille*, Québec was reimagining itself, not through grand historical reconstructions, but through playful, embodied expressions of

identity. La Bottine Souriante's 1983 revival of "La Ziguezon" offered a sense of rootedness without nostalgia, a modern folkloric confidence that danced rather than preached.

The fountain, once a site of romantic misadventure, becomes a metaphor for collective immersion, a place where not just a girl falls in, but a whole province dives, resurfacing with a smile and a boot. It is not solemnity that emerges, but rhythm, irony, and the pulse of shared memory. Ultimately, "La Ziguezon" functions as a cultural palimpsest. Each version overwrites the previous without erasing it completely. The song retains traces of medieval balladry, Breton modalities, Renaissance wordplay, and contemporary Québécois pride. It is both antique and current, feminine and festive, elusive and emblematic.

And so the song endures — not as a fossil of tradition, but as a reverberation, a chant that reappears where language, rhythm, and memory converge.

## 6. Conclusion

Ultimately, "La Ziguezon" is more than a folk song. It is a question set to rhythm: what endures when all else fades? No manuscript, no score, no author; breath and memory alone, syllables like *ziguezon zinzon* ricocheting through time.

What remains of a song? Perhaps precisely this: its ability to remain — not unchanged, but changeable — re-sung, reimagined, and repurposed. A song like "La Ziguezon" does not persist through fidelity to an origin, but through its resistance to fixity. It adapts. It shifts. It hides its truths in nonsense refrains and tells its secrets in jokes. It never says the same thing twice, but it always says something about us.

### 6.1 Between the Archive and the Air

We have followed "La Ziguezon" from a Breton fountain to a Québécois stage. Along the way, it has been filtered through scribes, folklorists, paddlers, and singers. Yet despite the careful documentation of collectors such as Barbeau, Gagnon, and Miron, the song has never been truly archived. It exists in the air, between voices, in the act of transmission. Its true medium is performance.

This quality makes it uniquely difficult to study, and uniquely important. In the field of ethnomusicology, scholars like Philip Bohlman have emphasized the notion of the "improvised archive", traditions that survive not by being written down, but by being sung again (*The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World*, 1988). "La Ziguezon" embodies this improvisation. Its survival testifies not to the stability of heritage, but to the fluidity of collective memory.

This fluidity is not unique to Francophone traditions. Celtic balladry, particularly in Scotland and Ireland, also thrives through modal variation, nonsense refrains (e.g., "fa la la"), and intergenerational oral transmission (Atkinson, 2002). Similarly, Indigenous oral cultures across North America, such as the Anishinaabe *aadizookaanan* or Haudenosaunee song cycles, emphasize repetition, rhythm, and responsorial form, not as memory aids alone, but as mechanisms of community cohesion and spiritual continuity (Archibald, 2008; McLeod, 2007).

### 6.2 Feminine Irony as Cultural Force

The young girl at the center of the narrative — sometimes naïve, sometimes calculating — emerges not as an object, but as an agent. Her wit, her refusal, her final song all suggests a female authorship within the oral tradition. She may not have written the tune, but she composed her response. This reframes our understanding of gender in folklore: women are not merely characters sung about, but creators of tone, rhythm, and resistance.

The cultural force of "La Ziguezon" may lie precisely in its refusal to resolve. It resists closure. Even its moral is elusive. Is it a tale of honor reclaimed? Of seduction inverted? Of feminine pride or playful trickery? The song winks, but never explains. Like all enduring oral narratives, it thrives not by delivering answers, but by inviting participation, by asking the listener not only to interpret, but to embody that interpretation through performance.

As Jean-Pierre Bertrand observes in *Folklore et modernité*: "Dans le rire de la chanson populaire, il y a un pouvoir qui échappe à l'histoire officielle" (1996, p. 178). In "La Ziguezon", this laughter is neither dismissive nor decorative: it is insurgent. It displaces the authority of fixed narratives, slipping into the folds of memory through irony, rhythm, and repetition. If history is written by victors, "La Ziguezon" is hummed by tricksters. This reframing resonates with Diane Dugaw's work on the female warrior ballad as an early form of gender resistance in vernacular culture (1995). It also aligns with bell hooks' analysis of marginal voices as sites of epistemological power, particularly in oral forms where social critique is embedded in performance and tone (1994).

### 6.3 A Folk Song in the Age of Digital Echo

"La Ziguezon" did not survive by accident; its 1983 revival sparked a circulation that continues today in festivals, recordings, and classrooms. This longevity reflects more than cultural memory, it signals how, in an age marked by rapid digitalization and the erosion of local oral cultures, such songs offer structural resilience. With simple forms, looping refrains, and communal performance modes, they adapt easily to shifting media ecosystems: radio, vinyl, YouTube, TikTok.

Digital folklore platforms like TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels have become powerful vectors for oral traditions, especially through participatory challenges, humorous subversions, and algorithm-driven virality. As scholars like Trevor J. Blank (2009) and Lynne S. McNeill (2018) observe, online spaces now function as vernacular archives. In this context, "La Ziguezon's" rhythmic repetition and nonsense refrains are not obsolete, but hyper-relevant, ideally suited to meme culture and fragmentary collaboration. TikTok's duet and stitch formats mimic the *chanson à répondre*, inviting variation, echo, and response. Its very absurdity, resistant to clear narrative meaning, shields it from commodification, a rare survival strategy in the attention economy (Phillips & Milner, 2017).

And yet, the danger of museumification looms. When folk songs are performed only on curated stages or in folkloric costume, they risk becoming simulacra. But "La Ziguezon" has largely resisted this fate. Its refusal to make "sense," its exuberant nonsense, protects it. You cannot fully package what defies explanation. You must live it, laugh it, and sing it.

### 6.4 Practical Resonances for Education and Cultural Preservation

Beyond its literary and ethnomusicological appeal, "La Ziguezon" also holds concrete value for cultural preservation and pedagogy. Its adaptability to diverse formats — oral, musical, performative, and now digital — makes it a uniquely generative tool in heritage education.

In classrooms, its narrative ambiguity and rhythmic play invite creative appropriation, prompting students not merely to study tradition, but to inhabit it.

Folklore societies and educators might embrace such refrains as living prompts: raw material for reinterpretation, remix, and even subversion. Rather than treating folk songs as finished works to memorize, they can be reactivated as improvisational spaces, a pedagogy of joy, refusal, and rhythmic dissent.

For archivists and cultural policy makers, “La Ziguezon” exemplifies what could be termed a “resilient repertoire”: forms of expression that endure not because they are safeguarded, but because they are sung. Recognizing these traditions as dynamic rather than static invites more participatory approaches to cultural preservation. In this light, the refrain is not just something to conserve, but something to rehearse again, a fragment of the past that requires new breath.

## 6.5 Toward a Poetics of Folklore

What does “La Ziguezon” teach us, not only about folklore, but about art, language, and human expression? Perhaps that the poetic and the collective are not mutually exclusive. That nonsense is not the opposite of meaning, but one of its most supple forms. That memory can pulse like rhythm. That refusal can sing. That a culture is not solely what it archives, but what it reiterates... imperfectly, joyfully, defiantly.

As we listen to that song, we hear not just a girl by a fountain, or a clever sleight-of-hand. We hear a tradition improvising itself forward. An ageless melody, still adapting to new mouths. A refrain that carries nothing, and therefore everything. It is through this seemingly meaningless syllabic game that something essential is smuggled: a trace of autonomy, of beauty, of laughter in the face of power. Songs like this are not inert remnants. They are reverberations of the present, sounding backward through time. In this sense, “La Ziguezon” is not a relic, but a relay. Not a song of the past, but a poetics of continuation, a folk modernism in disguise. It reminds us that oral traditions do not survive by being preserved. They survive by being re-sung.

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