

Guy walks into a bar, belts out an aria ...

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So, how does a young, unknown tenor from Minnesota get noticed in Montreal? Simple. He saunters into a crowded bar at happy hour and, without warning, serenades the tipplers with a bravura rendering of *Nessun Dorma* - a cappella, of course.

As all you opera buffs are aware, *Nessun Dorma*, the famed aria from Puccini's *Turandot*, roughly translates as "No One Shall Sleep." And I can report that no one dozed off while Ryan Wotherspoon belted Pavarotti's signature tune at the tony *Bistro on the Avenue*.

His audience, comprising some cynical boulevardiers as well as the more righteous, was genuinely moved by the impromptu performance. Women wept. Men came close. Glasses were on the verge of shattering as Wotherspoon hit the high notes.

Watch your backs, you Il Divo opera punks. Wotherspoon, a strapping 29-year-old farmboy who looks more like a hockey star than an opera star, won't be an unknown in these - or other - parts for long. He has been in Montreal for an extended stay, recording the bilingual single *What About Love* with local pop-singing vedette *Martine St. Clair*.

What About Love and You, a solo Wotherspoon cut, will be released on Monday. An album of Wotherspoon songs - many of which were written by him - will hit record stores in April.

On the surface, something seems odd about this picture. Generally, aspiring singers and musicians from here head to the U.S. for fame and fortune. Rare is the case of the American coming here for the big break.

But a little background is in order: Wotherspoon was a Ben Kaye project. Kaye, who died almost a year ago, was the legendary Montreal music producer and manager credited with helping to launch the career, a few decades back, of an unknown chanteuse from the boonies. Her name was Céline Dion.

Kaye - who also managed Dion's hubby, René Angélil, when the latter was a singing star of sorts in the group *Les Baronets* many decades back - became Dion's music publisher.

A few months before he passed away, Kaye was telling friends and cronies that he had signed and was co-managing a singer who was no-miss, who would take the pop and opera worlds by storm. That was Wotherspoon.

Just before he died, Kaye asked Linda Singer, who was co-managing Wotherspoon with him, to make sure the kid would get his due.

Singer is a Montreal vocalist who made waves on local charts with a few hit singles in the 1980s before turning to acting - she received a Jutra Award nomination eight years ago for her work in *Le dernier souffle* - and, more recently, to music management.

Singer, who can pass for U.S. actress Linda Hamilton, was the one who first discovered Wotherspoon and then brought him to Kaye's attention.

"It sounds like one of those really clichéd Hollywood discovery stories," she mused, sitting next to Wotherspoon at the bar, after his brief recital.

"I was in L.A. on business two years ago and dropped by a jewellery store on Rodeo Drive. I got into a conversation with the manager. I told him I was managing some French singers from Quebec.

"Next thing I know, he calls someone on the phone, and Ryan comes racing over to the store in a minute. He was out of breath, but he still managed to sing an aria and totally blow me away. I called (Kaye) and we signed him up not long after."

Wotherspoon turned out to be a diamond in the rough. Although he was toiling at this high-end jewellery store, he had been singing most of his life. He had trained in Minneapolis, Chicago, Nashville and L.A. He had also starred in a variety of musicals, most notably in Minneapolis in a touring production of *Hello, Dolly*, opposite Sally Struthers. He also happened to be unsigned and looking for representation when he met Singer.

Singer and Kaye hooked him up with Al Kasha, the Oscar-winning composer and producer of the Broadway smash, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. Kasha, who had worked with the likes of Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley, was so taken by Wotherspoon's voice that he wrote a few songs for him - which will be included on Wotherspoon's album. Wotherspoon has also collaborated with Harry Maslin, producer of David Bowie's *Young Americans* and *Station to Station*.

Singer, who works both sides of the cultural frontier here, figured Wotherspoon would be a hit in Quebec and arranged for him to team up with St. Clair in the recording studio. Their bilingual effort, *What About Love*, is a tender romantic tune that brings out the best in both performers and that should catch on locally.

St. Clair, who joined us, is bullish on Wotherspoon.

"I've worked with with some great voices and characters over the last 25 years," said the award-winning singer, who composed the music for *What About Love*. "But Ryan is some kind of talent and he continues to evolve. He will be a huge star. The women will adore him."

"I'm just loving Montreal and learning how to get by in French," Wotherspoon gushes.
"People are so open and friendly.

"I'm a lifer in terms of my music. I don't want to do anything else but this. Even if I wasn't paid for it, I would sing for free."

True to his word, he sings for free again. This time, a stirring rendition of Bach's Ave Maria.

Again, the women at the bar weep. And the cynical men at the bar are on the verge of weeping. And glasses are on the verge of shattering.

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