

# MACPHERSON

A film by  
MARTINE CHARTRAND  
Inspired by the song of FÉLIX LECLERC

## PRESS KIT



Produced by the National Film Board of Canada





## THE FILM

In Quebec during the early 1930s, young poet Félix Leclerc befriended Frank Randolph Macpherson, a Jamaican-born chemical engineer. A jazz fan, and a university graduate who worked for a pulp and paper company, Macpherson inspired Leclerc, who wrote a song about the log drives and the constant dangers faced by the log drivers. Leclerc entitled it “MacPherson” in honour of his friend and, through poetry, transformed him into one of those men who dance on logs. In the song, Macpherson dies a hero’s death as he tries to break up a logjam. The real Macpherson, however, died during the exceptionally cold winter of 1951, a fact Leclerc learned while he was in France.

In this poetic film, a warm interracial friendship is born deep in the heart of a wintry land to the melodies of jazz, traditional Quebec folk music, Jamaican mento and a Schubert sonata. The magical hands of Martine Chartrand, director of *Black Soul*, have created a new animated film with more than 10,000 paintings on glass. Filmed directly under a 35mm camera, *MacPherson* bursts with a pulsating hybrid of poetry and music. The filmmaker has painted lively images inspired by Leclerc’s famous song, paying homage both to the poet and to his friend, the scientist who transcended borders. A kaleidoscope of images—including the rivers of Lac-Saint-Jean, musicians from New Orleans, legendary boxer Jack Johnson’s raised fist and the soaring flight of white geese—coalesces and flies apart in luminous hand-paintings evoking themes of love and death.

Somewhere between documentary and fiction, *MacPherson* depicts turning points in history and, with great sensitivity, captures in lavish images the deep feelings shared by the Jamaican engineer and one of the poet’s sisters.

# THE FILMMAKER

## MARTINE CHARTRAND

Born in Montreal, Martine Chartrand completed a BFA in visual arts at Concordia University in 1986. She then earned a certificate in art education from the Université du Québec à Montréal in 1988. She has worked as a painter/illustrator for film production companies, created posters for festivals, taught and participated in exhibitions in Canada and in Europe. She first became involved in animation in 1986, working as a layout and colour artist.

In 1992, Martine Chartrand directed the international award-winning short *T.V. Tango*, her first animated film, for the NFB. In 1994, she received a grant from the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec and from the Canada Council for the Arts enabling her to study in Russia under Alexander Petrov, a master of paint-on-glass animation. During her stay, she helped Petrov prepare and translate his film proposal for the animation project *The Old Man and the Sea*, which was subsequently directed and animated in Montreal by Petrov and produced by Productions Pascal Blais. Once back in Canada, she was involved in the film's development.

In 2000, her second NFB animated film, *Black Soul*, was painted on glass directly under the camera. In it, Martine Chartrand uses images and music to create a sweeping portrait of black history. The film has won 23 awards, including the prestigious Golden Bear for best short film at the 2001 Berlin International Film Festival and the 2002 Jutra Award for best animated film. This success led Chartrand to travel to South Korea, Italy, Cuba, Brazil, the United States and within Canada to give lectures, hold master classes and lead paint-on-glass workshops. With *MacPherson* she followed in the footsteps of *Black Soul*, pursuing the themes of turning points in history and musical diversity, and employing techniques that have produced a film bursting with poetry and dancing to music from two different worlds.



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PHOTO © CAROLINE HAYEUR

# THE PRODUCERS

## MARC BERTRAND

Marc Bertrand joined the Animation and Youth Studio as a producer in 1998 and has since produced more than 100 films, including such notable successes as the award-winning series **Science Please!** (2001), and **Noël Noël** (2003) by Nicola Lemay, which won Gémeaux Awards for Best Animated Series or Film in 2002 and 2004 respectively; the 2004 Jutra award-winning **Blue Like a Gunshot** (2003) by Masoud Raouf; and **Léon in Wintertime** (2007), which received the 2008 Awards of Excellence Grand Prize from the Alliance for Children and Television. Marc Bertrand also produced *24 idées/seconde* (2006), a television series about animated film and its creators. He co-produced **Norman McLaren: The Master's Edition** (2006), an award-winning DVD box set featuring digitally restored masterpieces by McLaren, a pioneer in the fusion of music and animation. Bertrand's interest in new technology has led him to become involved in working on 3D films. In 2008, he co-produced **Facing Champlain: A Work in 3 Dimensions**, directed by Jean-François Pouliot, and produced **Les yeux noirs**, a new 3D film by Nicola Lemay. Among his other productions are acclaimed films such as **Imprints** (2004) by Jacques Drouin and works by Theodore Ushev: **Tower Bawher** (2006), **Drux Flux** (2009) and **Lipsett Diaries** (2010), winner of a Genie for Best Animated Short and a Special Mention at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival. Bertrand has worked on over 100 productions, including the Studio GDS/NFB co-production **Romance** (2011) by renowned Swiss animator Georges Schwizgebel, nominated for a Genie Award. In 2011, he produced **The Formation of Clouds** by Marie-Hélène Turcotte and **Sunday** (2011) by Patrick Doyon, which earned an Oscar® nomination and won the 2012 Jutra Award for Best Animated Film.



## MARCEL JEAN



PHOTO © ONF

Marcel Jean is a producer, director (*Le rendez-vous perpétuel*, 1989; *État critique*, 1992; and more) and screenwriter (**Dehors novembre**, Patrick Bouchard, 2005). He's also the coauthor of the *Dictionnaire du cinéma québécois* (Boréal) and author of a number of other books on film, as well as a critic at *24 images* magazine. He headed the NFB's French Program animation studio from 1999 to 2005 and films he produced have garnered over 150 international awards, including the Golden Bear for best short at the Berlin Film Festival (**Black Soul**, Martine Chartrand, 2001) and four Jutra awards for best animated film (**Black Soul**, Martine Chartrand, 2001; **The Brainwashers**, Patrick Bouchard, 2002; **Sleeping Betty**, Claude Cloutier, 2007; **Robes of War**, Michèle Cournoyer, 2009). At production company L'Unité centrale since 2006, he has produced or co-produced many films, including *The Man Who Slept* (Inès Sedan, 2009), *D'aurora* (Serge Clément, 2011, best art or experimental film at the Rendez-vous du cinéma québécois) and *Joda* (Theodore Ushev, 2012). An instructor of documentary filmmaking at INIS (film, television and interactive media training centre) since 2009, he has also taught film criticism, history and aesthetics at Université de Montréal since 1986. In addition, he was vice-chairman of the board of publisher *Les 400 coups* from 2005 to 2008. In June 2012, he succeeded Serge Bromberg as artistic director of the Annecy International Animation Film Festival.



SCHUBERT



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# INTERVIEW WITH MARTINE CHARTRAND

WHERE AND WHEN CAN YOU PINPOINT THE ORIGINS OF YOUR DISCOVERY OF THE FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN FRANK RANDOLPH MACPHERSON AND FÉLIX LECLERC?

I must have been 10 or 11 when I heard the song “MacPherson” for the first time. My family had a cottage in Abitibi, Quebec, and driving there we would cross the logging roads and see log drivers walking on the water near Grand-Remous. At that time, I didn’t know that Macpherson was a black man. I thought he was a Scot or an Irishman who loved jazz, and I liked that idea.

Félix Leclerc’s songs were very popular in the early 1970s and got a lot of airplay: “Moi, mes souliers,” “Le train du Nord,” “Le p’tit Bonheur” and “MacPherson.” I really liked his music with its jazzy tunes and gypsy-inspired melodies.

Listening to the song over and over again, the idea gradually came to me that Macpherson was a black man. I began to imagine black log drivers and sketched a few while I was at CEGEP, and later at university... Then I thought about making a film inspired by the song—that was before *Black Soul*—but then I decided to make *Black Soul*, intending to include black log drivers in it. In the end, however, I put that idea aside.

In 1996, I was talking to cameraman Martin Leclerc, Félix’s eldest son, and mentioned that I was thinking about basing my next film on “MacPherson.” Right away he replied, “That’s a great idea! Yes! He was a black man!” At that time I imagined the character in the song.

In 1998 during a broadcast of the radio show *Heureux qui comme Félix*, I heard Madame Gaétane M. Leclerc say that Macpherson had been Félix’s friend and that he was a Jamaican chemical engineer. That’s when I found out that this man had actually existed and had been part of the Leclerc family circle.

I told myself then that I was not just going to make a film based on the song: I was going to find out all I could about the person and include the friendship linking the two men in my film.

That’s how I came to travel to Île d’Orléans, after finishing *Black Soul*. To find out more about this man, I met with Gaétane. Later, I met with Michel Leclerc in Sainte-Marthe-du-Cap and visited the Leclerc family home, where Macpherson used to listen to Félix’s sister play the piano... Documentary filmmaker Serge Giguère came along and filmed me doing research and meeting people. It was the beginning of a great adventure...

LET’S GO BACK TO THE LOG DRIVERS. HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN YOUR GREAT INTEREST IN THESE MEN?

When I saw log drivers, I was really surprised because from far away they looked as if they were actually walking on water. It was because we couldn’t see the logs. To us in those days they were like heroes. The association of these images with Félix’s song made a huge impression on me. I practically considered Macpherson a member of my own family. Looking into his background, I felt I was looking into my own. The research process closely resembled my own search for my roots

THE IMAGE OF THE GREAT BOXER JACK JOHNSON, THE FIRST BLACK WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION, RECURS THROUGHOUT THE FILM. WHY?

I’m a boxing fan. I don’t necessarily like the fact that men fight, but rather that they train to survive. Boxing and sports in general have, like music, offered black communities a way to attain a higher status than that available in the working world, where the requisite higher education was denied them. All my films incorporate a scene related to boxing.

When I learned about Jack Johnson’s personal history (because of his love for a white woman, the 1908 world champion was punished for crossing state lines with her and forced into exile), he became a great figure in my personal mythology. I imagined that Jack Johnson’s story was a sort of metaphor for Macpherson who was single and in love with one of Félix’s sisters.

## HOW MUCH ARTISTIC LICENCE DID YOU TAKE IN MACPHERSON'S BIOGRAPHY AND, SPECIFICALLY, IN TELLING THE LOVE STORY INVOLVING THE PIANIST?

The feelings that Macpherson and the pianist had for each other are not fictitious. Everyone I met, the text of Félix's book *Calepin d'un flâneur*, the book of his brother Grégoire and other stories told by witnesses all attest to their platonic love. The fact that he came to the house every Sunday bringing his home-baked bread is also true. I also know that the pianist was rather fearful at the beginning. These events took place in the years 1933–1934. Macpherson was a man who had, no doubt, been ostracized in Trois-Rivières and who had decided to move to the country, to Sainte-Marthe-du-Cap, to live a peaceful life. That's how he came to be a neighbour of the Leclerc family, who welcomed him into their family circle. He continued visiting the family until the end, even after Félix and his sister, the pianist, had left home. Félix wrote that when his mother died, Macpherson was so heartbroken that his father became very concerned.

## IS THIS THE SAME STORY THAT INSPIRED FRANCIS LECLERC TO MAKE THE FILM *UNE JEUNE FILLE À LA FENÊTRE*

Francis told the story of another sister of Félix, who also played the piano, and who died very young. When I saw the film, I knew that the character of Oliver Scott was based on Macpherson. It's a fictional film that can trace its roots to a real-life situation. I went about things adopting a more documentary-style approach. During my research, people told me that Félix esteemed Macpherson as a philosopher friend, a wise man. The engineer also conducted chemical experiments in his home. Although the poster of Jack Johnson is my own creation, I was told that Macpherson put up maps, newspaper articles and photos on his walls, that he read many scientific journals and the works of Shakespeare and that his house was filled with books. From Félix's writings, I discovered more specifically that Macpherson was able to get to know the pianist better by lending her his Schubert sheet music.

## DID YOU SUCCEED IN FINDING ANY TANGIBLE TRACES OF MACPHERSON? IF SO, WHERE?

Yes, thanks once again to the Leclerc family. The first photo I saw was in the music album *Heureux qui comme Félix*. Then I went to Île d'Orléans, to Félix's den. Gaëtane showed me a very small photo of Macpherson on a wall filled with posters and family pictures. At that time, photos were rarer than today and thus more precious. I imagined that they had been exchanged almost like gifts. Later, I found other pictures through Félix's children, nieces and nephews, and in the archives of McGill University. Finally, I received a photo from Macpherson's family in Toronto.

## MUSIC IS VERY PREVALENT IN YOUR FILMS. THE CONNECTION TO SCHUBERT IN *MACPHERSON* IS BASED ON A KNOWN HISTORICAL FACT. BUT WHAT ABOUT DJANGO REINHARDT AND JAMAICAN MENTO? DO YOU PLAN YOUR MUSICAL COMPONENTS MUCH IN ADVANCE?

I wanted to include Jamaican music but didn't know what to use. My discussions with Mrs. Afua Cooper, a historian, led me to discover that when Macpherson arrived in Canada, Jamaican mento was very popular. It's a kind of folk music with African and European rhythms that first appeared in the late 19th century and began to be recorded in 1930. It seemed logical to use this music for the scene in which Macpherson remembers his arrival in Canada and thinks about his native Jamaica.

As for Django Reinhardt, that's a different story. I knew that Django and Félix had been friends, but that happened later, when Félix was living in Paris. But both Félix's guitar music and Django's gypsy-inspired jazz seemed to pave the way for "**MacPherson**." The song was written in 1948 and, since Félix worked in radio in the 1940s, it's highly likely that he was already familiar with Django's music.

## YOU HAVE CONTINUED THE THEMES AND THE AESTHETICS OF *BLACK SOUL* IN *MACPHERSON*. DO YOU SEE THESE FILMS AS A DIPTYCH?

One film does indeed follow the other. While preparing *Black Soul*, I thought about using sepia tones with a bit of painting on glass. Alexander Petrov convinced me to make the entire film by painting it on glass. When I began working on *MacPherson* I wanted to make a film with more sketches, especially using watercolour pencils, because I thought it would be easier and faster to draw the faces. In the end, because the log drives and rivers were part of the film, I chose to paint on glass once again. The aesthetic choices were thus made in different contexts. In both cases, the decision to use several colours made the work process longer and more arduous. I could have saved a lot of time had I restricted myself to a more limited colour palette, such as sepia.

## MUCH HAS BEEN SAID ABOUT THE DIFFICULTY OF PAINTING ON GLASS. IS IT A CHALLENGE TO KEEP GOING WHEN THE TIME NEEDED TO MAKE A FILM IS SO VERY LONG?

Persevering is not the problem... it's overcoming the feelings of isolation. Since you are working as an artisan under the 35mm camera and other filmmakers are at work on their computers, circumstances dictate that you work alone. E-mail messages are not available to you. You are not connected.

More than anything, you feel very spoiled taking so long to work on your film, when pressure is mounting on everyone else to finish quickly. The hardest thing to bear is the time pressure: you want to finish your film as quickly as possible and in the best possible way and still manage to maintain the fire of inspiration. All that is very hard and it makes you want to leave the ring. But you can't. You have to hang on, to make people dream.

## LECLERC AND MACPHERSON, A STORY OF TWO FRIENDS

Frank Randolph Macpherson was born in Kingston, Jamaica, on July 18, 1897. He graduated from Wolmer's School, Jamaica's most prestigious school (founded in 1729). On March 20, 1917, he arrived in New York City and from there travelled on to his ultimate destination: Montreal. In 1919, he was admitted to McGill University, graduating in 1924. He immediately began working for the Wayagamack Pulp and Paper Company as a chemical engineer. From 1924 to 1932 he lived in Trois-Rivières, and then moved to Sainte-Marthe-du-Cap.

Félix Leclerc was born in La Tuque, Quebec, on August 2, 1914, into a family that would eventually grow to include 11 children. After abandoning his studies in Ottawa due to the Depression, he returned to live with his family in Sainte-Marthe-du-Cap in 1932, the year he met and befriended Frank Randolph Macpherson. The engineer went on to become a friend of the entire family, and through his habit of reading and telling Leclerc stories of his trips, he encouraged the young poet to leave his land and travel to know the world. Félix composed the song "MacPherson" in 1948.

The singer/songwriter/poet left Quebec for France in November 1950. He gave his first show at the ABC on December 22 of the same year. The French public recognized his great talent, and he went on to earn the Grand Prix du Disque de l'Académie Charles-Cros in 1951. Félix then toured France, parts of Europe and the Middle East.

Macpherson died suddenly, possibly due to a heart attack, during a winter storm in early February 1951.

In *Le calepin d'un flâneur*, published in 1961 by Éditions Fides, Félix wrote these words about Frank Macpherson:

### **My First Friend**

*He would come on Sunday night with a book of Schubert's music. Shyly he would ask my sister to sit at the piano. He sat behind her, keeping time as if to chase away the sad hours of the week. Afterwards, refreshed, he would pick up his music and depart, bowing deeply to my sister while keeping as great a distance as possible between them, since he was a black man.*

*He baked his own bread, kept a small lemon tree from his native country in a pot near the stove and sometimes ate rose petals in warm honey. He was also a learned man. The chemical plant where he worked was indebted to him for his many discoveries. He strove for no greater glory than permission to live.*

*He foretold the fall of all those who are fanatically calling men to arms under any flag. No violence was to be found in his home—no weapons, no locks, no fences, no whips.*

*My mother loved him like a son.  
– She have always a smiling chair for me, he said of her.*

*On Sundays, he would bring his home-baked bread in exchange for a few hours of music. He had sown some soybeans from his country in one of his fields. One night they were destroyed by errant livestock. I visited him after mass on Sundays. Once, my mother came along to see his small lemon tree.*

*– She is a queen, your mother. How is the queen today?*

*One day, the queen was no more. His grief was as great and deep as our own—something that greatly affected my father.*

*Later, as I became a man, I left for faraway places. A letter from home told me of his death. He froze to death in a February storm, sitting at the table. His meal sat frozen on the plate, a white towel around his neck.*

*It was my brother who found him after the storm. Not having seen him come along the path for three days, he went to see: no footprints on the porch, lights blazing in the middle of the day. He pushed the door open and saw him sitting at the table. A small goat was still alive on his lap. His dog lay dead at his feet, as hard as rock.*

*From the big city a small truck came and took him away in a box. There were no church bells, no flowers; only tears from the one who played Schubert. We gathered up and shared his belongings, as those of Christ had once been gathered. Oh, faraway brilliant stars!*

*(Paris, December 1959)*





PHOTO © CAROLINE HAYEUR

## MACPHERSON - CREDITS

Direction, Research, Script, Animation, 35mm camera  
**MARTINE CHARTRAND**

Editing  
**NATACHA DUFAUX**

Sound Design  
**OLIVIER CALVERT**

Original Music  
**BON DÉBARRAS**  
**JEAN-FRANÇOIS DUMAS**  
**LUZIO ALTOBELLI**  
**DOMINIC DESROCHERS**

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Piano Sonata in A, D 959  
Andantino  
Franz Schubert

Pianist  
**ERIK SHOUP**

Musical Excerpts  
**MACPHERSON**  
from Félix Leclerc  
Accompanied by Michel Legrand  
© Éditions RAOUL BRETON  
Album; La vie, l'amour, la mort  
Courtesy of Universal Music Canada Inc.

Minor Swing  
from Django Reinhardt  
Django Reinhardt/Stéphane Grappelli,  
Quintette du Hot Club de France  
Album: Rétrospective Django Reinhardt 1934-53  
This Long Time Gal A Never See You  
from Monty Reynolds & The Silver Seas Orchestra  
Motta's Jamaican Mento; 1951-56  
Album: Mento Madness

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**MATHIEU LEROUX**

Foley  
**JÉRÔME DÉCARIE**  
**DANIEL BISSON**  
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Online Editing  
**DENIS GATHELIER**

Titles  
**SERGE GASPARD GAUDREAU**

Digital Imaging Specialists  
**PIERRE PLOUFFE**  
**SUSAN GOURLEY**

Book Excerpt  
Le calepin d'un flâneur  
**FÉLIX LECLERC**  
Éditions FIDES 1961  
Bibliothèque québécoise  
Courtesy of  
**GAËTANE M. LECLERC**

This film is dedicated to the memory  
of my filmmaker friends

**Fernand Bélanger, René Bail, Laurent Gorgiard,  
Helen Hill, Jim Hiltz, Emru Townsend**

Special thanks

To the Leclerc's family

Gaëtane M. Leclerc, Nathalie Leclerc,  
Francis Leclerc (Île d'Orléans)

Martin Leclerc, Lise Chevrier-Leclerc,  
Mélanie Leclerc, Andrée Vien (Vaudreuil)

Michel Leclerc, Georgie Ravary,  
Yolande Leclerc, Jean-Guy Pinsonneault,  
Jean-Marie Leclerc, Sylvette Leclerc and  
Grégoire Leclerc (Sainte-Marthe-du-Cap)

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Maria Macpherson, Ripton Macpherson

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Serge Giguère  
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Éric Barbeau  
Cathia Cariotte  
Robert Desrosiers

Denis Chabot  
Alain Corneau  
Lina Lechasseur  
Aldo La Ricca  
John Blouin

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