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'A bad choice not to answer'

Roch Voisine and why his sexuality was kept under wraps

Brenda Bouw
National Post

With that toothy GQ grin, the well-chiselled chin and cheekbones, not to mention those tight buns, it is no surprise that for years the question every woman and man familiar with Roch Voisine has had is: Is he gay or isn't he?



Yvonne Berg, National Post

And for years, the New Brunswick-born, internationally known musician has not said one way or the other.

NO SWAN SONGS YET: Roch Voisine is seldom mobbed by fans any more, but says his career is still going strong.

Now, in the wake of speculation of fellow pop star Ricky Martin's sexuality, Voisine wants to set the record, er, straight. He is heterosexual. In fact, he is engaged to a woman called Kimberly, whom he met three years ago and has been living with in his homes in Montreal, France and Los Angeles.

After more than a decade of rumours that he was gay -- including one that he was in a relationship with former Montreal Canadiens right-winger Stephane Richer (now with the St. Louis Blues) -- Voisine says the no comment on the sexual orientation question was a management-led tactic to create controversy, and keep fans, both gay and straight.

"It was a very bad choice for me not to answer," says Voisine, 37, during an interview in Toronto this week, where he is on tour to promote his two newly released Christmas albums, one in English, the other in French.

"If I was to redo [it] I would answer straight back that I am heterosexual and it doesn't bother me a bit. I suffered from that a lot."

Dressed in jeans, black lace-up boots and a black pullover sweater, the Catholic-raised Voisine says in his still-thick Québécois accent that his management team thought it was best not to respond to media questions about the rumours, which started surfacing in 1989 and have followed the singer since.

There were even rumours Voisine and Richer were living together, which both men denied. However, Voisine never declared his sexual orientation.

"Management thought ... it was better to lead them on a false track, to create that commotion," Voisine says, shaking his head. "This is part of the secret recipe of people in show business.

"You don't want to alienate the gay community because they are good for our business, and there is no reason to, either," Voisine says, matter-of-factly. "And we should not make judgment on anybody's sexuality. That is not any of our business."

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However, Voisine says the rumours got out of hand, and have stayed with him.

"Now that I am living with somebody, the trend is to say, 'Oh, he's bi.' They will never let me go."

Voisine met Richer for the first time last year, at a hockey rink in Montreal where they were being treated for on-ice injuries. He says they did not talk about the rumours.

"There is nothing you can say. It was too terrible. There was something about meeting him though, it was like closure for me on the whole thing," says Voisine, who was an aspiring NHL player as a child, but gave up the dream after a serious knee injury. He continues to play in off-season leagues that include some professional players.

If he was gay, Voisine says he would say so, and would be proud of it, "but I am not. I just want to be in my place."

For Voisine, his most comfortable place is onstage, where he has always been accepted by fans worldwide, singing in both English and French.

Voisine has sold more than six million albums since 1989. His last tour before the Christmas records release was in 1997, with the album *Kissing Rain*.

"Most of my life has been my work," Voisine says, while digging into a late afternoon snack of shrimp cocktail. "Most of my life, since I was very shy, I've been the guy who rides the wave, who does good because because he can ride the wave."

That is because, for most of his life, Voisine says he has been surrounded by his "protectors," which he lists as his grandfather, as well as his former manager, Paul Vincent -- both of whom are now dead.

Voisine, along with his younger brother Marc and sister Janice, lived with their grandparents for a while after the divorce of their parents, who were both English teachers in St. Basile, N.B. The children then moved in with their father, but he stayed very close to his grandfather, who passed away last year.

He met Vincent, a radio host who also grew up in New Brunswick, through Stephane Lessard, a childhood hockey friend. Lessard, who was Vincent's nephew, also helped Voisine write his first hit single, *Helene*, which climbed the charts in 1989. Vincent became Voisine's manager, business partner and mentor, before his sudden death in 1997.

The loss of those protectors has forced Voisine to take more direct control of his life and of his career, which he admits was spiralling out of control. "It was running so fast ... there was no room for anything else," he says, meaning a relationship and family, which he maintains he wants some day.

"Although it was very successful and glamorous, it was very lonely. Although I will probably be alone all of my life -- I am an artist -- one choice I have made is not doing this on my own. That is one of the biggest decisions I have made."

While Voisine is engaged, no date has been set for a wedding. He and Kimberly both lead busy lives, and Voisine says they are not ready to settle down completely just yet.

Voisine boasts he is in great physical shape and that his career is still on the rise. That is despite his decision to put out Christmas albums, which are

arguably done often by artists whose careers have peaked. "I haven't reached half my potential as an artist," he snaps at the question, adding he is planning to begin writing a new album in January, which will be released this fall. "I don't see this Christmas record as a [swan song.]"

He says fans were stopping him on the street and in elevators, asking that he record a Christmas disc. Voisine says many of the demands came after his Kissing Rain tour, during which he played a few Christmas medleys on stage. "They stole the show," he says.

While it used to be that Voisine could not walk down the streets of many international cities without being mobbed by fans, the singer says his public life is now much more subdued. While he still signs the odd autograph, the screaming girls have gone.

"I am 37. The girls that used to scream and pull my hair are 30 and 35 now. They have kids, jobs -- they have to educate their kids, they don't have time to run after me ... We have a different relationship now."

Voisine says he prefers his life now. "It was nice to go through the madness, but it would be ridiculous to have that at 37."

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