



Legendary chanson Edith Piaf (1915-1963) was affectionately known as the 'Sparrow of Paris'. 'Piaf' translates as 'sparrow' Photo: Keystone/Getty Images

## FOR THE LOVE OF CHANSON

From Piaf to Gainsbourg, music and arts writer **PIERS FORD** explores chanson the original, French music of the soul that imprinted our continent with melancholy and longing





## EUROFILE



**T**he lyrical French chanson has always offered an appealing counterpoint to the manufactured earworms of Anglo-American pop, with its promise of a richer sentimental experience, a brooding emotional narrative or an existentialist fix.

Even at its most apparently frivolous, chanson's ability to provide an authentic commentary on life's realities has helped it to side-step the critical snobbery that usually has us sneering at the oompahs of Europop Schlager.

Throughout its evolution, from its early crystallisation as a popular art form in the Parisian music-halls, bals and cafés of the 1890s and early 1900s to its revival as a prism for multi-cultural musical influences in a complicated France of the 21st century, its appeal has never found the English Channel much of an obstacle to catching the attention of British ears.

Then there is the iconic status of its greatest writers and interpreters: the towering reputations of artists such as Jacques Brel, Juliette Gréco, Charles Aznavour and, overwhelmingly Edith Piaf have found their own, instantly recognisable place on the international landscape of show business.

Whether they have been singing about the raw street-life of the prostitutes and sailors who populate the great chansons realistes, the intellectual introspection of the 1950s Left Bank, the relentless turbulence of matters of the heart, or simply capturing the fleeting significant moment in a commonplace event or experience, their ability to connect with audiences dramatically and musically cuts through the language barrier.

True, some of the great chansons have achieved a wider popularity through translation: the Sinatra totem 'My Way' was originally 'Comme d'habitude'; among Shirley Bassey's many signature songs 'What now, my love' started life as 'Et maintenant' by one of the great chanson writing partnerships, Gilbert Bécaud and Pierre Delanoë; and perhaps most beloved of all, Brel's desolate classic 'Ne me quitte pas' became 'If you go away', with words by Rod McKuen.

The impact of the French lyrics tends to be diminished just by relocating the central theme of the original song in the rhyming territory of mainstream pop music. Give me the hiss and crackle of Charles Trenet's definitive, scintillating 'La Mer' – a Dufy seascape rendered in music with simple perfection – over Bobby Darin's slickly American 'Beyond the Sea' any day. Nevertheless, numbers like this mark many people's introduction to chanson.

For others, it might be a chance encounter with a polished francophone ballad in the Eurovision Song Contest – once a sure-fire route to success before the competition became the bloated dance-track fest that it is today. Or the first hearing of 'Je t'aime (moi non plus)', notorious for the erotic content that got it banned from the



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BBC's airwaves when it was first released in 1969, thus ensuring its enduring hit status – and cementing Serge Gainsbourg's reputation as the enfant terrible of chanson, a label which tends to obscure his skill.

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No singer is more emblematic of chanson's broad appeal. She shares with those other great tragic vocalists, from Judy Garland and Billie Holiday to Maria Callas, Janis Joplin and Amy Winehouse, the sense of being inextricably bound to the dramatic themes of her best-known material. 'Non, je ne regrette rien' is at once an anthem to survival against the odds and an affirmation of the weight of experience. It is also the advertising creative's go-to soundtrack to denote anything definitively Gallic.

But Piaf transcends cliché. Despite the melodrama of a youth lived in the streets of the wilder Parisian faubourgs, the succession of climactic and doomed love affairs, the accidents and illnesses which helped to propel her into addiction and an early grave, her true legacy is a sound that makes an instantly recognisable connection with the listener.

Piaf was, according to Aznavour, a human being on stage rather than a singer. That honest relationship with the chansons that she owned so definitively – from the sexy haze of 'La vie en rose' to the descending terror of 'La foule' and the prostitute's pragmatic attentions to the needs of Milord – has influenced many British singers.

Petula Clark made her first appearance at the fabled Olympia music hall in 1957 and charmed French audiences with her quintessentially British take on the novelty numbers which tended to be the staple of the girl singer at the time. But it was the impact of seeing Piaf perform live which later had the greatest impact on Clark.

"On that stage was this tiny woman in her not-really-chic black dress, not really moving, just a few discreet hand movements, and singing – but singing with her whole being," she explained in her role as presenter of the 2015 BBC4 documentary, *Je t'aime: the story of French song*. "Not to a handful of intellectuals but here, to a real-life, down-to-earth audience. I was spellbound."

Clark's subsequent blossoming as a sophisticated singer who could find the dramatic pulse of even the most anodyne lyric owed much to that moment of revelation, and helped build the foundation of a career that is now into its eighth decade. She has been defined at various points as a child star, a sixties singer and a leading lady of musical theatre.

But her parallel incarnation as a bona fide interpreter of chansons gives her



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(1) Jacques Brel (1929-1978), singer, French composer-songwriter, in Paris, 1961. (2) Singer songwriter Charles Aznavour in reflective mood in 1965 (3) French singer and songwriter Charles Trenet in the popular film 'Les Années Folles' (4) French actress and singer Juliette Gréco (born in 1927), at the Théâtre de l'ABC, Paris, circa 1960. (5) Serge Gainsbourg poses during a portrait session held on April 18, 1980 in Paris. (6) Edith Piaf performs in Paris in May 1959

Photos: TopFoto/ Getty



genuine gravitas as a performer – and indeed a songwriter in her own right. Her latest album, *From Now On*, includes a French language number co-written with the nonagenarian Aznavour: two supreme exponents of the chanson collaborating to prove its timeless relevance.

Another British singer, Barb Jungr, has also found the chanson fruitful territory. Her highly regarded interpretations of the songs of Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen are imbued with a commitment to the integrity of the lyrics which owes more to dramatic authenticity of the chanson tradition than melody-driven pop. Easy listening it isn't. And she suggests that the existential bleakness which lies at the heart of so many of the great chansons is one of the main reasons why they have always appealed to British sensibilities.

"The weird thing about chanson is that it allows you to feel the story without it being personal," she says. "With Piaf, a lot is to do with the quality of her voice. Because there's such an extraordinary vocal sound, you have the thing that happens with certain performers: their lives and voices seem to reinforce each other. Look at Piaf's life. The intensity of her affair with Marcel Cerdan, going on stage to sing 'Hymne à l'amour' after learning of his death, all those car crashes. You can't write that kind of stuff! But the melodrama of her life appeared to be part of her voice, and the iconography builds out of that. I think she would have been a great pop star no matter what. It's almost incidental that she is so closely linked with chanson."

The actor Frances Ruffelle made her name at 19, playing Éponine in *Les Misérables* and singing a song – 'On My Own' – that has since become a standard in its own right, still cheered to the rafters nightly by British audiences; the show is now approaching its third decade as a West End fixture. She remembers sensing something different about the number, and the way the original French language tied it so specifically to the character's experience at the moment of performance – always the key to a convincing chanson delivery.

"I actually sang a Piaf song – in English – for my audition in front of Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg [*Les Misérables* lyricist and composer, respectively] and ever since then, the chansons I've preferred have been by people like her and Françoise Hardy," she says.

"I think we find that style rather romantic and dramatic. Possibly, that's what I'm attracted to. I did a show that was written for me about a French cabaret singer and I realised I had to take the weight of chanson on board. That's when I really started to listen to a lot more French music and I discovered Hardy, Bardot as a singer, and got the feel of those 1960s artists which later helped to build a solid base when I came to make my record."

Last year, Ruffelle released an album of chansons, *I Say Yeh-Yeh*, in equal parts an homage to the fragile-voiced yé-yé singers



of the 1960s, a tribute to the wrenched-from-the-gut emotional force of Piaf, and an affectionate nod to the role played by *Les Misérables* in the launch of her stellar stage career.

"Piaf's voice has a rawness that touches everybody," she says. "My son heard 'Non, je ne regrette rien' on a commercial and it stopped him in his tracks: 'Mum, who is that?' I played her later in Pam Gems' play, which was when I got to know her music properly. I've noticed that people tend to tear up when I sing 'Hymne à l'amour'. It's a song of strength but it's also very poignant, and I think that's a powerful combination. Sometimes, songs that are too emotionally 'out there' just don't touch you that way."

For Barb Jungr, the real epitome of the way chanson connects with the emotional solar plexus can be found in the songs of Jacques Brel.

"In a way, chanson is first and foremost about the song," she says. "Very occasionally it then becomes about the singer – which is what you get with Brel. I love the fact that he's the exception. He's a Belgian who comes to France and beats the chansonniers at their own game. Then he writes these bleak, existential songs while living the Sinatra life and being a bit of a lothario while his wife sits at home. There's quite a parallel between songwriters like Brel and Dylan, particularly in Dylan's early work. The only difference is that Brel couches his fear in describing other people, while Dylan deals with it as his own."

Chanson at its best, says Jungr, is unflinching in its gaze – something that sent her back to Brel's original lyrics for 'Ne me quitte pas' when she was making her 2000 album *Chanson: the space in between*.

"Look at the way he describes love," she says. "The brutal reality of it. The surrender: 'Let me be the dog at your command'. Some people call it passion but actually, it's just complete, and utterly observational. If you're in love, this is what it's like. Great chanson is so clear in the way it looks at the human condition. It becomes a stream of observation, and that's a gift to the performer and the listener. You don't get that in pop writing or even in musical theatre. I love them both, but the realism of chanson is where I find the actual passion."

Perhaps, then, the secret of the chanson lies in its capacity to adapt. Times change. The tropes of popular culture shift. Seismic events disrupt the world. But the chanson is constant. It can be at once achingly nostalgic and viscerally contemporary, intensely personal and astringently political, lushly romantic and archly detached. And in all its forms, it has made an essential contribution to the musical landscape of Europe.

■ Piers Ford is an arts writer and journalist. His music blog is [cry-me-a-torch-song.com](http://cry-me-a-torch-song.com)