

Chanson

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Autumn 1989. I am sixteen and more excited than ever before. Billy Joel is coming to Belgium and I have tickets. My first big concert. I sing along with all his records from start to finish. It is not the Fall of the Wall but the arrival of Billy Joel that is the event of the year. I was a child of my time which meant that I had been completely immersed in the music universe of the English-language. Not only Joel but also Dire Straits, Pink Floyd, The Rolling Stones, Lou Reed, The Doors, Bruce Springsteen, Jackson Browne, Fischer Z, Supertramp and Talking Heads wrote the soundtrack to my adolescent years. Yet, precisely in that same year of 1989, a crack appeared in that world view.

One blue Monday afternoon my revered French teacher Herman Geudens pulled out a white cassette from his red briefcase. That was all it took to change one life. While my classmates continued to doze off I sat up and took notice. ‘Moi, je n’étais rien et voilà qu’aujourd’hui / je suis le gardien du sommeil de ses nuits / Je l’aime à mourir’. What is this? A voice, a guitar and a declaration of love to put medieval troubadours in the shade. My adolescent heart gallops. It does that in the French language for the first time. *Mon coeur s’emballe*. In no time, the entire collection of Francis Cabrel was on my record shelf. The rather sugary sweet romanticism of *Je l’aime à mourir*, at least that is how I see it now, entered at precisely the right moment in my life, embedded itself deep under my skin and remained there. Songs are a force that is hard to resist. You suddenly hear a certain song and in an instant you are catapulted back to a forgotten era. When in search of lost time, music is much more powerful than any madeleine.

Each time I hear it, *Je l’aime à mourir* takes me back to the threshold of adulthood. Young, expectant, romantic and driven. The number instils in me the hope that I have perhaps not entirely lost those qualities along the way. In my memory, it was above all else a signpost pointing to a treasure trove where possibly even more beautiful surprises lay in wait. If Cabrel was able to pull this off then surely there must have been other French people with similar things to offer? Inquisitively I trawl record and CD shops. A new world opens itself up to me. It is 1989, I am sixteen and more excited than ever before.

But the search proves laborious. With the younger generation it is the comeback of The Who and the new records of Elvis Costello or Tom Waits that are extensively reviewed but nobody, literally nobody, has even a single French artist in his collection. There is certainly nobody around who can give any tips. Even the adults in my environment pretend to know nothing. The radio then? It imposes silence on the matter in all languages apart from English and a little Dutch. Under my own steam I stumble across Brel; just a syllable away from Cabrel, so that cannot be bad I tell myself. Yet even that was awkward. Jacques Brel is someone you need to learn to appreciate. Much like

good wine he improves with the years. As a youthful beanpole one really needs a little assistance with such enterprises. That is barely available but I plod on.

Luckily I surrender to *La valse à mille temps*. Evening after evening I try to sing along, to learn it by heart but even with the text in my hand that is a courageous act. Brel's incredibly rapid and crystal-clear diction blows me away. Later I learnt that he had thought up the text during the dangerous descent of some French mountain pass. There are few numbers in which the material circumstances of their creation may be said to ring through so clearly in their concrete realization. Every verse is a hairpin bend that is faultlessly negotiated, every refrain an acceleration that makes you turn pale. With *La valse à mille temps* I stumble upon what is, at first sight, Brel's inhospitable oeuvre. Thank God. Brel spiced up my days: the most daring of poetry, music set to the rhythm of the tormented heart.

And so I fluttered on my own wings from one discovery to another. Jean-Jacques Goldman, Georges Brassens, Stephan Eicher, Charles Trenet, Dominique A, Boris Vian... Seven years later I had become a teacher myself and at every given opportunity I slipped in a French chanson. *Si tu n'existais pas* by Joe Dassin, who then adds 'pourquoi moi j'existerais alors' finds its way into a grammar lesson. 'Si' followed by an *imparfait* (if you did not exist) always demands, in French, a *conditionnel présent* (why then should I exist). In passing my pupils find out that there are also French songs that can stand the test of time.

Whilst listening I am unable to restrain myself. Softly I sing along and start to move to the beat. Thus came the idea of allowing the pupils to participate. Surely the curriculum is full of those sorts of ideas? Acquiring grammar and vocabulary in a rhythmic fashion, humming while completing the exercises, singing their way into the Easter holiday. The list is long. From *Le poinçonneur des Lilas* by Serge Gainsbourg they learn everything about ticket collectors and return tickets but also about punning and crazy humour while getting a fair portion of some of the eccentricities of that brilliant enfant terrible of the French chanson. Naturally Francis Cabrel resounded within the classroom walls, how could it be otherwise?

I make it clear that the French song is not confined to the French fatherland. The chanson permeates every nook and cranny. Jacques Brel and Arno are from Belgium, Dalida, Georges Moustaki and Claude François come from Egypt, Charles Aznavour and Serge Gainsbourg are sons of Armenian and Russian immigrants, Yves Montand and Serge Reggiani have Italian blood running through their veins, Sylvie Vartan is Bulgarian by birth and Stephan Eicher is Swiss. However, what my pupils had especially impressed upon them was that on this planet there is more than just the music of English-speaking countries. It is no mere matter of politics, snobbism or pedagogical fastidiousness. It rests on the conviction that the French chanson can guide us in our quest for beauty and truth.

'I have forgotten nothing'

Eagerly the mill of life keeps on turning. Meanwhile my teaching career lies years behind me. The thousand pages of my trilogy on France *Eat! Read! Make love!* are lined up in front of me on my bookshelf. For a while, I have been thinking about writing a book on French history, if only because it would read like a novel and would immediately constitute a résumé of half of our European history. But also the chanson microphone screams out to be written down. Suddenly one day the two ideas somehow cross-pollinated in my mind.

The French chanson has two feet which are firmly rooted in the fabric of the past. With its left foot it is anchored in the detail of minor history; that of you and me. Gilbert Bécaud who after amorous disenchantment asks 'Et maintenant, que vais-je faire?' Christophe who daydreams about the beauty of the dentist's assistant and languishingly bestows her Christian name *Aline* upon humanity. Jacques Brel who at the graveside of his mate *Jojo* sings a heart-rending number about friendship. Edith Piaf who manages to crystallize the intoxication of souls in love in *La vie en rose*. Françoise Hardy who with *Tous les garçons et les filles de mon âge* manages to immortalize the loneliness of scores of young people who yearn for love.

With its right foot the chanson is firmly planted in the wider perspective of history, that of warlords and revolutions. *De Marseillaise* was born during a turbulent night in 1792, propelled revolutionizing France to its illustrious victory and inspired Serge Gainsbourg, two centuries later, to produce a contested reggae number. *Le temps des cerises* is a desperate plea from the bloody revolt of the Commune of 1871. With *Bruxelles* and *La bohème* Jacques Brel and Charles Aznavour compose the soundtrack for the belle époque. Charles Trenet sings the praises in *Route Nationale 7* of the rise of motoring holidays in the nineteen-fifties. Léo Ferré and Serge Gainsbourg register with the sensual *C'est extra* and the no less intense *Je t'aime... moi non plus* the turning point that heralded the sexual revolution.

The story of the French chanson is the tale of history in general but simultaneously of the most universal of our innermost emotions. Love, sadness, death, freedom, revolution, war. Your story and mine, but also the narrative of Charlemagne, Louis XIV and Charles de Gaulle. That is the story I want to tell.

Who knows, perhaps the old-fashioned medium of the book can somehow breathe new life into the French song fermentation that has so often been declared passé. No doubt you will recall an old slow rendering of *Évidement* by France Gall, carefree summer evenings in the company of *Une belle histoire* and Michel Fugain or the strange cries that accompanied Claude François's *Alexandrie Alexandra*. Perhaps during lonely drives your eyes fill up at the sound of *Non je n'ai rien oublié* by Charles Aznavour while upon hearing *Marcia Baila* by Les Rita Misouko you are suddenly seized by the urge to dance a jig. You may discover the unexpected sheer joy of Charles Trenet, Yvette Guilbert and Barbara. It is even conceivable that you may go rapping to the virtual or non-virtual record seller to purchase for yourself several hours of magic from previously unknown magicians like Eddy Mitchell, Daniel Balavoine, Dominique A, Sammy Decoster or, of course, Francis Cabrel.

[Extract from page 255 to page 263]

Bell-bottoms, onomatopoeia and sequins

Or how Serge Lama inadvertently sang the praises of French malaise, Michel Fugain emerged as the herald of summer love, Michel Sardou reaped success with dire texts and Charles Aznavour unexpectedly stood up for his homosexual compatriots. But also how Joe Daissin and Claude François vied to produce the most original chanson catchphrase, and how finally several chanson greats suddenly called it a day. With further important supporting roles set aside for Mike Brant, Georges Brassens, Jacques Brel, Julien Clerc, Dalida, Dave, Michel Delpech, Patrick Juvet, Gérard Lenorman, Les Poppys and Charles Trenet. Also the remarkable manifestations of Chic, Jodie Foster, Pierre Kartner and B.A. of The A-team.

'President Georges Pompidou has died.' France listened in stunned silence to the voice which, seconds before, had abruptly announced that all programmes being broadcast at that moment were to be interrupted. Nobody could believe it. True, he was sick, but all the press communiqués had

reported a nasty bout of flu. On 2nd April 1974 the country not only heard that its leader had died but that the cause of death was blood poisoning resulting from Waldenström's disease, a rare and pernicious bone marrow condition. What also emerged was that he had been ill for years: that Pompidou even knew that he was suffering from the illness when he was elected president in 1969; that if he had not opted for a turbulent existence as head of state he probably would have lived longer. Feelings of confusion were mingled with deepest grief because Pompidou was actually loved by the French people.

On the radio Serge Lama's hit suddenly sounded different. *Je suis malade* (1973; Sick) is about a man whose heart is breaking following the painful ending of a romantic attachment. But surely it is tempting to interpret Lama's text as a description of Pompidou's physical decline. During the last months of his life he must, indeed, have suffered tremendous pain. Despite his recalcitrant

blood the president had aligned his destiny, to the bitter end, with that of France. Lama's outpouring of such lovesickness seems to somehow parallel an ode sent out from Pompidou to his country.

Comme à un rocher comme à un péché

Je suis accroché à toi

Je suis fatigué je suis épuisé

De faire semblant d'être heureux quand ils sont là [...]

Tous les bateaux portent ton drapeau

Je ne sais plus où aller tu es partout

Je suis malade complètement malade

Je verse mon sang dans ton corps

Like to a rock, like to a wrongdoer

I am attached to you

I am weary, I have had enough

Of pretending to be happy about my lot [...]

Your flag is sported on every ship

You are everywhere, wherever I go

I am sick and tired, completely sick

I bleed blood, sweat and tears for you

At the same time, one could interpret the recurrent refrain 'I am sick and tired, completely sick' as a confession from France itself which, following the oil crisis towards the end of 1973, faced hard times. Inadvertently *Je suis malade*, the box-office success of the seventies, was thus to become the swansong following the years and years of unbridled rising French prosperity.

In 1970 everything seemed to be going swimmingly for France. Pompidou was keen to profit from the boom to 'give an international dimension to the French economy'. Less than a month before his death it was the sick president himself who had inaugurated the new Aéroport Roissy-Charles de Gaulle. He had rigorously scrapped a whole host of light railway services, something that the country is still suffering from today. Many outlying French areas can still only be accessed by car. Under the regime of De Gaulle's successor, hundreds of kilometres of motorway were built. In 1973 the premier, Pierre Messmer, cut a tape to celebrate the opening of the brand new Parisian *boulevard périphérique*, the construction of which had begun in the time of De Gaulle. President Pompidou also had grand plans for the modernization of the French capital itself, and there again, the role of the car was central: 'One has to adapt the city to the car.' Under his administration the numbers of cyclists fell in inverse proportion to the rise in automobilists. It is no coincidence that his name rings out like a hooting car: Pom-pi-dou. Before very long, the Paris automobilist was to get a rude awakening in the form of the jolly cabaret-like song *La complainte de l'heure de point* (1972; The rush-hour lament) by Joe Dassin, jazzed up with kazoos. 'At the place des Fête the traffic is slow / In the place Clichy we've ground to a halt / The Bastille seems to be under siege / The Republic is in danger'. Naturally Dassin is referring to place de la République, but in omitting the word *place* the innocent ditty suddenly seems to be issuing a warning to the entire country. A year later, during the oil crisis, the county conquered by king car came, for a while, to a complete standstill.

Carried along by the last gusts of optimism and progress Pompidou had wanted, upon first coming to office, to fundamentally crick up Paris's prestige by allowing high-rise blocks to spring up

everywhere. On one occasion he confided to a *Le Monde* journalist: 'I know that I shouldn't say this but the Notre-Dame towers... they are too low!' 1972 saw the construction of the screechingly-ugly Tour Montparnasse. In La Défence, the modern office block district in the north-western part of Paris, one skyscraper after another started shooting out of the ground. The final green areas there were sacrificed. From the side lines, where he had for a while taken cover, Charles Trenet bewailed the evolution. In *Les bulldozers* (1972) he describes the 'sad spectacle' of a 'doleful machine that bends its neck, selects and reaps in the wind'. Under Pompidou, France opted resolutely for progress, a dream populated with skyscrapers and motorways. There are many young people, though, who have other ideals.

'It simply began like every beautiful story'

Together with like-minded souls, Michel Fugain established the Big Bazaar, a motley group of singers, dancers and musicians who travelled around like medieval troubadours setting up spunky little parties in every corner of the country. Their message was rather less medieval. This commune lifestyle outfit wanted to mirror its time. They heralded peace, love and understanding; had flowers in their hair and mind-expanding joints in their mouths. The girls abandoned their bras and donned Indian-style dresses. It was, in short, the anticonception and anti-Vietnam decade. Leading this happy throng of teenagers with a new world dream was Michel Fugain, decked out in satin suits and colourful shirts.

Fugain, who had made a few hits in the late-sixties, asked the monumental Pierre Delanoë what he thought of the music. That was the man who had made a name for himself by translating various Bob Dylan lyrics for Hugues Aufray and had also worked with Gilbert Bécaud, Michel Polnareff, Tino Rossi, Johnny Hallyday, Serge Reggiani, Dalida and Claude François. All in all, Delanoë's oeuvre amounts to some five thousand song texts. In 1972 Fugain had merely confided that when composing his final number it was perpetually a romantically-tinted encounter on Route 66 that had been uppermost in his mind.

Great was his dismay when he clapped eyes on the text that Delanoë had written. Already the first lines made him cringe: 'C'est un beau roman, c'est une belle histoire, c'est un romance d'aujourd'hui'. To Fugain, the word *romance* had a pre-war ring to it. The whole thing sounded so corny that it made him weak at the knees. Apart from anything else, the text-writer had dispensed with Route 66. It could not have been more provincial. The son's hero turns homeward to the mists of the north, the girl travels off to the south of France. Delanoë, who was used to contending with the whims of chansonniers, shrugged his shoulders. It was just another hurdle. He simply retorted: No, it is fine just as it is' and without flinching sent Fugain into the studio.

The rest is history: the wind instruments, the organ and the fifteen-strong choir turned Fugain's loathed 'c'est un beau roman, c'est une belle histoire' into just about the best known opening line of all French chansons, covered in virtually every thinkable language, Dutch included. In the Netherlands Paul de Leeuw sang *Alderliefste*. In Flanders it was Ann Christy and later on Noordkaap who opted for this free translation of the famous opening verse:

C'est un beau roman, c'est une belle histoire

C'est un romance d'aujourd'hui

Il rentrait chez lui, là-haut vers le brouillard

Elle descendait dans le Midi, le Midi

It simply began like every beautiful story

On a summer's day, not far from here

He was a dark sunburnt adventurer

She was searching for a golden ray of sun

After the recordings Fugain went off to Italy on a sailing holiday. When he returned his song was being played non-stop on every radio station. Even though there was competition from *Le lac majeur* (Lake Maggiore) by Mort Shuman, *C'est ma prière* (This is my prayer) by Mike Brant and *Si on chantait* (If we were to sing) by Julien Clerc, it was obvious: *Une belle histoire* was the summer hit of 1972.

The number was evocative of a passionate holiday romance in an idyllic southern context. In reality that was not completely accurate because the two met each other on a concrete motorway somewhere near Valence. Why Valence? Why the motorway? Delanoë wanted the words 'vacances', 'chance' and 'providence' to form a rhyming sequence. In French, holiday, happiness and providence all rhyme with Valence, the place that is generally seen as the gate to the south.

Fugain was no Charles Trenet, neither was he inclined to sing the praises of the Nationale 7. Thanks to Pompidou's substantial expansion of the French road network in which the brand new Lille-Marseilles connection played an important part, Fugain was singing about 'l'autoroute des vacances', widely known today as the 'highway to the sun'. Consequently, the two turtle doves did not meet each other in a romantic bend on a provincial road but rather amid the noise and smell of traffic rushing past, at an *aire de repos*, in the shadow of a petrol station. The irrepressible Delanoë allows Fugain's protagonists to make love in a nearby corn field. Apart from anything else, the summery acoustic guitar, the fairy-tale melody and, not least, the *parapaapaapa* and *tietierietie* onomatopoeia of *Le Big Bazar* added a timeless sense of bliss despite all the filling stations in Valence.

'I saw it on the television every day'

As well as Fugain it was also the young Julien Clerc who disseminated the utopian dream of the post-'68-era. With his angelic face and dark curls he was the perfect singer to excel in the French version of the hippie musical *Hair*. The French flower power generation thought the world of him but Julien Clerc could not be bothered. The events of May 1968 meant nothing to him, in fact he held the whole business of *peace, love & understanding* in disdain preferring to view his achievements in *Hair* as mere character acting. All of this created some confusion but did not stand in the way of the singer making many a heart beat faster with hits like *Ce n'est rien* (1971; It is nothing) and *Partir* (1977; Departure).

It was the utopia of love, freedom and peace that was to provide inspiration for many artists. Apart from everything else, established chansonniers had to tolerate the not insignificant competition of a number of young upstarts. In 1970 the record label owner Eddie Barclay wanted to make hits with a band composed exclusively of teenage lads. It was the *poppy* dimension of their songs that instantly gave the kids their name. A proper affirmation of principles specified that Les Poppys 'sing rhythmic songs with texts that reflect reality and are allied to protest songs'. It was that facet of social engagement that was to mark them off from subsequent boy bands. Furthermore, for

just about every number Les Poppys had a different lead singer which automatically gave each of their hits a new élan. It was not until 1982 that their success story came to an end.

With *Noël 70* and *Chansons pop* they managed to gain many followers but they only became world famous with their ever-popular *Non, non, rien n'a change* (No, no nothing has changed). 'This is the story of a truce': the first line leaves little doubt as to the song's message. In the midst of the Vietnam War it is hard to misconstrue the intentions. *Non, non rien n'a change* reminds us that already in 1971 the TV was full of war reports:

Mais j'ai vu tous les jours à la télévision

Même le soir de Noël, des fusil, des canons

J'ai pleuré, oui, j'ai pleuré

But I saw it on television every day

Even on Christmas Eve, guns, artillery

And I wept, yes, I wept

By around the end of the seventies there were some eighteen million TVs in the country. What really took off was the *Il vend des télévisions aux paysans* (1976) sentiment when Charles Trenet got a clever salesman to comb the countryside flogging sets to farmers 'to give them some enjoyment when they came in from working in the fields'. Since 1st October 1976 the world has been forcing its way into French living rooms in colour. On that day, live on television, a handful of dignitaries stood staring at the ground in reverent silence. Suddenly the viewer heard in the background: *Cinq, quatre, trois, deux, un*. The black-and-white screen underwent a metamorphosis and the then fairly dull colours of the rainbow appeared. For a moment it remained painfully quiet but then the Minister of Information, Georges Gorse, uttered the memorable words 'Et voici la couleur!'

The musical TV shows of Maritie and Gilbert Carpentier brightened up the evenings of millions of French people. It should be admitted that they did their utmost to surprise the viewers. One time Julien Clerc and Barbara were asked to sing each other's numbers, then the public were treated to *Poupée de cire, poupée de son* in an historical duet between Claude François and France Gall. Referring obliquely to the sullen reaction to Gall's triumph during the 1965 Song Contest, Clocco states that 'it will perhaps recall bad memories'. Gall genially replies that she had 'more or less forgotten the matter'. Sometimes there are dressing up sessions: Nana Mouskouri who donned her glasses to act the part of a sensual Carmen, Dave as a sea captain, the dream couple Johnny and Sylvie as Adam and Eve. In 1977 the ubiquitous Claude François heaved himself, together with a juvenile Jodie Foster, onto a swing seat to present Gainsbourg's *Comic strip*. 'Viens, petit Clocco, dans mon comic strip', Foster warbles.

The shows were so anchored in the collective memory that Bénabar (1969) immortalized them in the both swinging and nostalgic *Maritie et Gilbert Carpentier*. A simple summing up of the song's key words was sufficient to invoke the childhood memories of many French citizens: washed and in pyjamas in front of the box, playback, bell-bottoms, Michel Fugain, sideburns, imitation saloons, much clapping, Sylvie Vartan, microphones with long cables, dancers all over the place, Claude François, closing credits, bedtime.