

THE GREAT FRENCH SONGBOOK

© 2006 Monique

The Great French Songbook is as rich as the Great American Songbook! No, this isn't some Gallic, Chirac-inspired rant about *Les Anglo-Saxons*, I just want to remind everyone of France's incredible song heritage.

French people still ask how I can live in London with all that smog. Theirs is an out-dated snapshot, like cucumber sandwiches and bowler hats. French music has also been stereotyped: a music-hall voice (think Maurice Chevalier in Hollywood), stripey jersey, an accordionist with onions round his neck. In his autobiography, Aznavour recounts his refusal to sing live on American television until they removed Onion Johnny with his bicycle and baguette. That image is no more representative of French music than snails and frogs' legs are representative of French cuisine.

Unlike its wines, much of France's music has not travelled well. Aznavour's songs remain at their best in French; Barbara is only known for *The black eagle*; Johnny Hallyday may have done well in America, but when Melvyn Bragg devoted a South Bank Show to him he first had to explain how big a star in France Johnny is and has been for almost 50 years.

Nonetheless, the GFS has had worldwide influence: *My way*, *Autumn leaves*, *Beyond the sea*, *If you go away*, *What now my love*, *Let it be me*, *A man and a woman* are all French songs. Then there's *La vie en rose*, *Je ne regrette rien*, *Amsterdam* and *C'est si bon*, Piaf and Aznavour, Michel Legrand's prolific film song magic, and Maurice Jarre, the writer of that melodic anthem *Lara's theme* from Doctor Zhivago. Behind them is a vast catalogue.

The two songbooks start with much in common: at their height from the 1920s to the 1970s (although the GFS continued longer) they both owe a debt to the cinema; both countries experienced a musical liberation between the wars and a cultural and political confidence after 1945. Though styles changed in the 1960s (what the French call the "yé-yé" era), they are now fashionable again. Who would have thought in the 1970s that Frank Sinatra would be "cool" for a whole new generation? It's the same in France. You hear the great chansons of the GFS on the radio, many covered by current stars.

But there the easy comparisons end. The GAS reflected Hollywood musicals, Broadway, big bands, jazz and blues; the GFS reflected France's very different style of film-making, iconic Paris, the music halls of Montmartre and the intellectual Left Bank. Their musical origins are also different. The GAS is a melange of European music plus gospel, blues and jazz from the South and its African roots. While the GFS shared a folk and classical heritage it was more influenced by turn of the century theatre, operetta and music hall; no jazz, gospel or blues. The melodies of the GFS don't "swing" in the same way as the American and the cadences of French words don't lend themselves to swing and rhythm in the same way as American English.

New York Times jazz critic John Parelis described 20th century music as the triumph of rhythm over melody. The popularity of world music shows that while people are happy to hear songs in languages they don't understand, most of them are rhythm based. As the French try to adapt to the dominance of rhythm the sheer number of words don't help! It is always dangerous to generalise, but the average GAS classic, even with the rarely sung verses, has probably got about 150 words. The average Trenet, Aznavour, Brel or Brassens song will have nearer 300.

There are GFS exceptions of course. Josephine Baker arrived in a blaze of exoticism and had a huge hit with the iconic *J'ai deux amours* in 1930, but although she made France her own and was an important interpreter of the GFS she was a Southern States American with rhythm in her genes. Trenet was revolutionary in his use of rhythm but his witty, word-based songs are light-years from Tin Pan Alley. Henri Salvador introduced the rhythms of French Guyana and Martinique (now nearly 90, he recently duetted with Angelica Kidjo on her world music album *Oyaya*, celebrating the African roots of Caribbean music), and Enrico Macias imported the rhythms of his native Algeria. Later came the great Claude Nougaro but his most enduring work owed much to his time in New York and his collaborations with the jazz-influenced Michel Legrand.

While GAS songs were often just part of a musical storyline many French songs tell the whole story: e.g. Piaf's *L'accordéoniste* and *Les amants d'un jour* and Aznavour's *La Mamma*. They are often more intense and melodramatic ("melo") and more consciously poetic than their American equivalents. While Dave Frishberg observed that the great American lyricists "knew that good lyrics come up to the edge of poetry and turn left", many French poets and intellectuals wrote song lyrics: Jacques Prévert, Margaret Monnot and Louis Aragon; Jean-Paul Sartre helped to start Gréco's career by writing lyrics for her; the text for Pink Martini's recent "world music" hit *Sympathique* (used in Citroën adverts) is from a poem by Apollinaire.

Furthermore, much of the GFS from the 50s onwards was driven by politics and social issues: Boris Vian's *Le déserteur* (which Peter Paul and Mary later covered), Ferré's active anarchism, Jean Ferrat's originally banned *Potemkin*, Aznavour's defence of gay love in *Comme ils disent* and the social commentary of Brassens. These were not minority interests, but part of the GFS mainstream and of the *engagé* tradition.

The great writers of the GAS were not singers in their own right whereas the singer-songwriter was always part of the GFS: chief export among the early ones was Trenet, whose successes date back to the mid-late 1930s; but also Georgius and Mireille (helped to stardom on Broadway by Noel Coward) and before them the iconic Aristide Bruant. Later, Aznavour, Brel, Ferré, Brassens and Bécaud have been followed by Ferrat, Moustaki, Barbara, Gainsbourg and Nougaro, and, more recently, the likes of Sardou and Jean-Jacques Goldman. Piaf is a stand-out example of a singer who could write a great song with anthems like *Hymne à l'amour* and *La vie en rose* and more recently one might include Sacha Distel (who did more than sing about raindrops on his head and wrote Tony Bennett's big hit *La belle vie*).

The GFS had great writers and partnerships who qualify for "song-book" status: Kosma and Prévert, Misraki and Hornez, Scotto and Koger and later Delanoë (often

with Bécaud) and more recently Bernheim and Barbelivien powering Patricia Kass's spectacular career. There was also Contet and Monnot who wrote mainly for Piaf, Lemarque who wrote for Montand, Louis Amade, George Van Parys and Francis Lai who wrote for Gréco, Montand, Sinatra and Bardot.

Like the GAS, the GFS also benefited from "interpreters": probably the best two exports are Gréco and Montand (the comparisons between him and Sinatra are striking) but there was also the Corsican Tino Rossi, Damia, Dalida, Léo Marjane, Cora Vaucaire and Patachou.

The French do love categorising things and chanson is no exception: *chanteur à voix*, *chanteur de charme*, *réaliste*, *diseur*, *fantasiste* and *chanteur engagé*. I would add the singers in the music-hall tradition like Mistenguette (although Aznavour calls her a *réaliste*), Chevalier and Fréhel. The Larousse Chanson Française even divides up the styles of the yé-yé era: e.g. Johnny Hallyday and Eddy Mitchell (*rock*) Claude François and Sylvie Vartan (*variété populaire*) and Françoise Hardy (*chanson de qualité*)!

A *chanteur à voix* was usually trained in the classical tradition, like Elyane Celys, and included those who became popular through opera and operetta: Roberto Alagna has just released a tribute album to the Basque singer Luis Mariano who enjoyed huge success from the 1940s singing operetta, many written by the adopted Frenchman Francis Lopez (*La belle de Cadix*).

Chanteurs de charme sang beautifully but in a less mannered way than the *chanteur à voix*, like Lys Gauty (*Le chaland qui passe*), Cora Vaucaire and Léo Marjane (although her best work was done on French versions of GAS imports like *Nuit et jour*, *Begin the beguine* and *Septembre sous la pluie*). Henri Salvador and Lucienne Delyle were considered *chanteurs de charme* when they started out.

The *réalistes* are the best-exported part of the GFS. With their origins in the 19th century they sang stories to music, often *melos*: Berthe Sylva's huge 1926 hit *Les roses blanches* is an early example. Later, purity of sound and accuracy of pitch played second fiddle to drama and phrasing. There are some memorable GFS recordings that would not escape a modern record producer's auto-tune. When Brel sang of *Le port d'Amsterdam* and Piaf shared *Hymne à l'amour* with her audiences following the death of Marcel Cerdan, the disciplines of the *chanteur à voix* or the poise of the *chanteur de charme* were not on the menu.

Trenet was chief in the *fantasiste* category with his plays on words, surrealism and fun. Pierre Perret (actor and *chanteur engagé*) is perhaps best remembered now for a *fantasiste* song about French willies called *Le zizi* (not to be confused with the fine Zizzi restaurant chain!).

Have they stood the test of time? Certainly. Aznavour, Gréco and Salvador have been recording and packing venues in their 70s/80s. Youssou N'Dour has recently recorded *Il n'y a pas d'amour heureux* by Brassens/Aragon on his album *Nothing's in vain*. Madeleine Peyroux included *J'ai deux amours* on her CD *Careless love*. Dee Dee Bridgewater has released a superb collection of up-dated GFS classics called *J'ai deux amours* (including by the way *Danse sur moi*, Nougaro's French translation of

Girl Talk) and Patrick Bruel's sold over 2 million of his double album *Entre deux* which showcases Trenet and revived Lucienne Delyle's wartime hit *Mon amour de St Jean*. Isabelle Boulaye, a young French Canadian with a lovely voice, has recorded many GFS classics and the raï singer Rachid Taha has had hits with Trenet's *Douce France* and *Comme d'habitude*. Jane Birkin has reprised her role as Gainsbourg's interpreter with her album and world tour of *Arabesque* and Parisian Caroline Nin and New Yorker Karen Akers have both produced fine, intimate GFS albums. There is even a Flamenco GFS CD though this is a very acquired taste!

There are four ways to explore the GFS: (1) the originals; (2) modern re-workings; (3) the English language versions of Aznavour's own songs, some excellent English translations of Brel, Ferré and Nougaro by Robb Johnson and Des de Moor and Brassens' *Brother Gorilla* by Jake Thakeray; (4) English singer-songwriters whose chanson style captures the spirit of the GFS, like Thakeray, Johnson, de Moor, and Brel ambassador Philip Jeays.

Recommended listening

Original versions: Montand: *Ballades et mots d'amour* (Mercury), Aznavour: *40 Chansons d'or* (EMI), Brel: *2 CD collection* (Universal), Ferré: *Avec le temps* (Barclay), Nougaro: *Nougaro 2000 Compilation* (Mercury).

Reworkings: Patrick Bruel: *Entre deux* (BMG), Isabelle Boulaye: *Au moment d'être à vous* (Opendisc), Dee Dee Bridgewater: *J'ai deux amours* (Universal Jazz), Karen Akers: *Feels like home* (Drg), Caroline Nin: *Scarlett stories* (Irregular).

English versions: Barb Jungr: *Chanson – the space in between* (Linn), Aznavour: *You and me* (Angel) and *She* (Premier).

The spirit of chanson: Jake Thakeray: *Lah-di-dah* (EMI), Robb Johnson: *Clockwork music* (Irregular), Philip Jeays: *Mr Jeays* (Irregular).