

The Sad Tale of The “*Little Sparrow*”

By Andrew Glover-Whitley



Edith Piaf “The Little Sparrow”

When Edith Piaf died in October 1963, she had become a national icon of France, she also took a uniquely French spirit with her. To many French people she was the voice of France before, during, and after the war; a symbol of the nation that all levels of society could broadly identify with. Internationally she was seen as the personification of the French nation, one that had struggled to maintain its identity through the war and into the new Europe. Her songs and music could be identified with that struggle and yet they were the story of her own sad and poverty ridden early life, from unwanted child to national and international star that was as individual and painful as she was.

Edith Piaf (Edith Gionnave Gassion) was born 100 years ago this December the 19th. 1915. Her father, Louis-Alphonse Gassion was a street-performer of acrobatics. Louise-Alphonse’s mother was a brothel keeper in Normandy and this is where Edith grew up among the prostitutes and low-life after her father removed her from her by then drunken and destitute mother who had survived during the dark days of the First World War as a street/cafe singer and part-time prostitute. Edith had been ignored and was a sickly child due to the poverty and neglect of her mother. It was in her grandmother’s brothel that she first came into contact with the street songs and cabaret chanson of the day. Some of which she would record in her own inimitable style in years to come.

Many of the stories of Piaf’s life are apocryphal, told to enhance the image of this lowborn woman made good. It is even said that she was actually born on a Paris street but

her actual birth certificate states she was born in the local hospital of Belleville district in Paris.

She was a sickly child from birth and nearly lost her eyesight due to Keratitis in her early years. The degradation and poverty that she grew up in were to have a profound effect on her health for the rest of her life as well as her outlook on life and the songs she performed. She was a petit woman in stature who had suffered greatly through hunger and poverty and this can be seen in her slightly stooped hunch-backed stance and mannerisms in her wonderful performances later in life. She suffered physically with severe arthritis due to the poor diet and living conditions in her younger days and living wherever she could; very often on the streets.



Edith Piaf as a young girl before Keratitis

From 1932 onwards as a teenager and young woman she lived in Paris singing in the street and brothel nightclubs to make ends meet, but it was here she came under the sway and control of an unsavory local gangster but was eventually able to escape this and with her lifelong companion (possibly it is suggested her half-sister, Simone Bertheaut) they made a living singing and moved into their own place. Piaf met Louis Dupont in 1933 who tried to get her to give up singing for a more secure life, but thankfully for us failed in his quest. They had a daughter together called Marcelle. She found it hard to bring up the child and after a row with Dupont she, the child, and Simone moved out into another place. Dupont took the child away when he discovered that Piaf was leaving her on her own much of the time. Like her own mother, Piaf had virtually no motherly instinct and so left the child permanently with Dupont. Unfortunately Marcelle died of meningitis at the age of two. It is rumoured that Piaf slept with a man to pay for Marcelle's funeral.

In 1935, Piaf was discovered in the Pigalle area of Paris by the nightclub owner Louis Leplee whose club *Le Gerny* in the the Champs-Elysees area was frequented by the upper and lower classes of Paris. He persuaded her to sing despite her extreme nervousness, which, combined with her height of only 4 feet 8 inches influenced him to give her the nickname that would stay with her for the rest of her life, *La Môme Piaf* (Paris slang meaning "The Waif Sparrow" or "The Little Sparrow"). Through Leplee she was taught the basics of stage presence and he told her to wear a black dress for effect. This became her trademark dress code for the rest of her life. It was through these nightclub appearances that she was able to record her first two records produced that same year, with one of them penned by Marguerite Monnot, her signwriting collaborator throughout Piaf's life, and one of her favourite composers writing many of her best material.

<https://youtu.be/oromrP0iu3E>

In 1936 Leplee was murdered and Piaf was implicated but later cleared of any involvement. It appeared he had been killed by the local mafia. It did not do her burgeoning career any favours and she always carried the stigma of having been implicated somewhere along the line due to her underground gangland connections of the past. To counteract the negative press she recruited Raymond Asso with whom she become lovers. He changed her stage name to "Edith Piaf" and commissioned Monnot to write songs that alluded to or reflected Piaf's previous life on the streets, and so her waif like and gutter snipe imagery was complete.

<https://youtu.be/kFzViYkZA4>

Her role during the war years was dubious and as a survivor she used her instinct to survive these dark war years in the only way she knew how. She sang in hotels and high class brothels where German officers and collaborating Frenchman gathered. Piaf was deemed to have been a traitor and collaborator due to her role in these places. She had to testify before a purge panel, as there were plans to ban her from appearing on radio transmissions. Fortunately her secretary, Andrée Bigard, a member of the French Resistance spoke up for her after the liberation. According to Bigard, photos made during Piaf's repeated concerts in POW camps allowed falsifying documents to be used to assist French soldiers in their escape attempts. Piaf was quickly back in business as a national icon.

Her love life was complicated to say the least having been married twice and had countless affairs. The most high profile was with the French Moroccan World Champion boxer Marcel Cerdan whom she always called the love of her life. He was unfortunately killed in a plane crash returning to New York from Paris to be with her in 1949. It shook Piaf to the core and she never, although marrying, truly recovered from this loss although her career grew and grew along with her fame at home and abroad. In about 1960 she had

to give up performing due to illness and her increasing dependence on painkilling drugs for the arthritis and the encroaching cancer.

She had a succession of love affairs after Cerdan's death and each in their own way influenced her music and the songs she chose. Piaf died of liver cancer at the too young an age of 47 at her villa in Plascassier on the French Riviera on the 11th of October 1963. She had been drifting in and out of consciousness for quite a few months. Her last words were "Every damn thing you do in this life, you have to pay for." She is buried in Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris next to her daughter Marcelle and with her father.

Although she was denied a funeral mass by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Paris because of her lifestyle, her funeral procession drew tens of thousands of mourners onto the streets of Paris. The great and the good of the city as well as the ordinary people and guttersnipes that she had herself sprang from turned out in their thousands to say good bye to their heroine. The ceremony at the cemetery was attended by more than 100,000 people. The singer Charles Aznavour later recalled that Piaf's funeral procession was the only time since the end of World War II that he saw Paris come to a complete stop.

In October 2013, fifty years after her death, the Roman Catholic Church finally relented to public and international pressure and finally gave her a memorial mass in the St. Jean-Baptiste Church in Belleville, her home district of Paris.

Her legacy as a performer and singer not only remains in France but stretches around the world and not only in the French speaking regions. Her influence on singers of all genres has been great and does not seem to be dimming with age. Her music appeals to all ages and can be most keenly felt in female solo singers through the last fifty years from Joni Mitchell to Tanita Tikaram to the likes of Kate Bush, Susie Sioux and K.D. Lang. Whether it be in their stage presence, their way of presenting a song or their way of enunciating the lyrics, Piaf's little ways are always present. Her songs spoke of her life, her loves, her tribulations but most of all they spoke of France and particularly Paris where she grew up and learnt her craft.

<https://youtu.be/fFtGfyruoU>