Gene Lees
Jazzletter

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Letters

I keep digesting, relishing, replaying the album. I should be watering and feeding and plowing and reseeding the planet. With efforts like yours, it will live. I'm very impressed with the score, orchestration, performance, Sassy, and particularly the lyrics — elegant, tasty, meaningful, just-right words. The whole concept is just too much, a gigantic effort!

Mike Dutton, Morro Bay, California

It's a masterpiece.

Oscar Treadwell, Cincinnati, Ohio

Mike Dutton's jazz record broadcasts are heard on KCBX, San Luis Obispo, and Oscar Treadwell's on WGUC, Cincinnati.

The Sarah Vaughan album is simply stunning. I have not stopped playing it since it arrived. I have played it at home and continually in the car on journeys and I cannot begin to tell you of my admiration and affection for your work.

Hal Shaper, London

Hal Shaper's own lyrics include Round Midnight *and* Softly as I Leave You.

The album is phenomenonal.

Woody Herman, Los Angeles

Last fall I attended the gala in New York celebrating the honors bestowed on Marian McPartland's *Piano Jazz* show on National Public Radio. As you know, the show is the recipient of a Peabody award, and the tapes of it are now in the Rogers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound at Lincoln Center. The show is great, and invaluable to the jazz audience. It certainly helps keep the tradition of jazz piano alive.

Marian is absolutely brilliant at hosting the show. Her ego never gets in the way, and her repertoire and versatility are mind-boggling. In the duet format, she plays every style with such artistry and command.

She makes one feel as *comfortable* as possible, and her personal graciousness sets a marvelous tone for the show.

When guest pianists discuss how they do what they do, it's a wonderful learning experience. The Bill Evans and Hank Jones shows are great examples of this.

Marian certainly deserves awards, not only for thinking of the idea but for carrying it through with such consummate artistry.

I'll bet this is the only letter you've ever received from Battle Mountain, Nevada — my hometown. My mother still lives here. How I grew up to be jazz musician is a total mystery. There sure as hell isn't any jazz here — nor has there ever been!

Joyce Collins, Battle Mountain, Nevada

Singer and pianist Collins normally lives in Los Angeles, where there is some jazz, quite a bit of it coming from her.

I feel like I'm eating real food after a couple of years of living on tofu. I've read the back issues of the *Jazzletter* through to May, 1983, and have been chewing on them in between my regular activities. The counterpoint of letters and articles by other writers is great. Just when I think you've over-generalized on an issue, the following *Jazzletter* carries a letter from somebody bringing things back to center. And when I have a question on something on which I wish you had expanded a little further, the following issue usually brings the expansion and answers my question. I still don't know what took the *Jazzletter* so long to find me or me it, but I love it.

Mike Zwerin's piece in the March, 1938, issue startled me considerably. He evidently was on the Thornhill band a few years after I left it, and we both seem to have spent about six months there. His description of the state of the band and Claude's condition rings true, and I'm sorry things had deteriorated to the point where there no redeeming parts of the gig for Mike. When I was there Claude was strange, most of the guys were using drugs of one kind or another, the road trips were rough, and the band was undermanned. (We at least had three trumpets, not two, as Mike says they had when he was on the band.)

But, for me, the experience was extremely positive. Let me count the ways:

Claude was a superior musician. He could get that lovely sound out of some of the worst excuses for a piano I had ever seen. He would size up a piano in the first couple of minutes and by avoiding the worst notes, fooling with the soft pedal, and modifying his touch, he would clean up its worst faults and make his own kind of music come out of it. And a couple of the better charts were his, indicating that he had established the sound he wanted himself.

Claude was by nature a recluse and hated being a bandleader. But he loved hearing the band play. He often stayed with the slow ballads and simpler arrangements in his book because he knew the band was stoned and couldn't cut the harder Gil Evans charts. He also knew he was there to play for dancing, and took care of business that way. But I don't remember any charts being unmusical. Unhip, yes, and in some cases ordinary, but always with good harmony written by competent arrangers. And many of them were gorgeous.

We never felt that Claude lacked respect for the musical talent on the band. And we had a lot of it. Gene Quill was the lead alto player, Dave Figg was a fine tenor Man, Dale Pierce, Dick Sherman and Sonny Rich made a lovely trumpet section,

Billy VerPlanck played trombone and wrote a couple of charts we liked to play, Al Antonucci had been Claude's French horn player for many years and never missed a note. He was playing a book that had originally been written for two horns in unison and did a lot to make the band sound the way the arrangers had intended. Winston Welch was a sensitive drummer and, by being less far-out than many on the band, helped me keep my sanity.

Claude hated the spotlight, hated formal jobs, hated to make announcements. When we played scruffy gigs at service clubs and outdoor ballrooms through the South, he was cheerful, more direct, drank less, and took pride in the band. When we went into the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans for a couple of weeks, he stopped talking to us, drank heavily, behaved capriciously on the stand, and in general withdrew from the job. Some of the older hands on the band told me that he had never wanted to be a hit, only to have a good band in relative obscurity. If a record would start to take off, he'd break up the band for six months and go fishing until things quieted down.

I remembered the band from the 1940s, when it was at its best. I was excited about playing the book. I was young and naive and still learning to play the bass. Claude's theme song, *Snowfall*, one of his own arrangements, forced me to get my left hand into shape since the bass line walked through tenths in D-flat, presenting technical problems I hadn't solved up until then. That band was a great place for me to improve my playing.

I also learned there that I didn't want any part of alcohol and drugs, because I saw so many of my friends on the band in such desperate trouble trying to function as musicians while juggling chemicals. It's a wonder we survived the gruelling jumps we made between one-nighters, considering how many guys were high. I was terrified of riding in cars which had no reliable drivers, and wound up driving a car myself because I didn't dare let one of the others drive.

Claude was a sort of father figure to many of the young junkies on the band. He was strange, and had a bad-boy sense of humor that you had to understand, but he took care of the band in his own way. He never moralized to anyone about their behavior, and seemed to be saying, "You can't out-weird me, kid, I'm 'way ahead of you." He only fired two guys while I was on the band, and in both cases it was because he thought they needed to go home and get well before they killed themselves.

Dale Pierce, the lead trumpet player, was on notice for three months before Claude finally made him leave. Dale was an alcoholic, but he could play beautifully as long as he didn't have to stand up. When he stayed drunk long enough he could get evil and play rotten on purpose, and Claude would fire him. But then he'd think about how hard it would be to replace him, and keep him on for anther week.

I left the band when Claude told us he was only going to be working weekends for a while, and a steady job turned up for me with Terry Gibbs. From Mike's description of the band in 1958, I guess the road and alcohol had worn Claude down pretty badly, and I'm sorry.

I was also turned around by Mike's reference to Allen Eager as "living in a broken-down house in the black slums of Coconut Grove. He has lost his teeth and was a born-again Christian, on welfare and the food stamp program." Allen was the first New York jazz player I met when I came to town, and he kept turning up now and then, always in a different disguise. He was a brilliant player when he was being a jazzman, but the next month he might be a tennis instructor in the Catskills, a ski instructor in Aspen, or a high-society bon vivant. Allen could choose a character and become that person, complete with the talents, style, and grooming appropriate to it. Whatever he did he did flawlessly. I never could tell whether he was having any fun, but I know he took pride in being very good at whatever he was doing. I hope Mike's last encounter with him was just another of his chameleon disguises, soon to be shed for another. Or, I hope the condition Mike found him in is exactly what satisfies Allen's soul, and that he is happy. He is one of a kind.

Bill Crow, New City, New York

Bill Crow, another classic example of the "inarticulate" jazz musician, has been in the pit orchestra of the Broadway musical 42nd Street *for the past five years, playing jazz gigs as they become available. For the past three, he has been part of the new administration that unseated the old guard of local 802, American Federation of Musicians. He writes a monthly column in* Allegro.

Phil Woods, the late Willie Dennis and others who made the journey told me priceless stories about the Benny Goodman tour of the Soviet Union. Bill, who was also a member of that band, has promised to write a memoir of the experience for us. Stay tuned.

The Sparrow

Americans never really knew Edith Piaf. When she died, the New York *Times* said in an obituary, "Strangely, Miss Piaf was perhaps best known in the United States for her *La Vie en rose*, a song of happiness and love." There may have been something ironic about it but there was nothing strange. Her act was bowdlerized and glamorized for her appearances at the Versailles and the Waldorf Astoria in New York. Her songs about prostitutes and their *marlous*, about the murders that often ended the search for love, were thrown out or cleaned up for Americans raised on a diet of sexless love in songs and happy endings in movies and *Saturday Evening Post* fiction.

To anyone who really knew her work, death added no unexpected dimension to her legend. Death was in her life and in her songs, gritty realistic ballads about the Paris streets and the outcasts who haunted them. Her songs — and her life — were filled with the desperate faces one sees fitfully in the poems of Villon, the novels of Balzac and Hugo, and the erotic fantasies of Jean Genêt.

One of Piaf's classics, *Un monsieur me suit dans la rue*, is about a little girl who dreams of the day when a man will follow her in the street. When at last one does, he is "*un vieux dégoûtant*", a disgusting old man. Later another man follows

Notice

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her in the street — she is now a prostitute. In the final verse her childhood dream is fulfilled for the last time: a sexton follows her coffin.

She sang songs of this kind in the era before rock when you assuredly did not mention death or prostitution or juvenile sexuality in American songs. *Un monsieur me suit dans la rue* was about all three. Even today, when rock has become pornographic, a silly satanism fills the grooves of records, and drug use has been chronicled and condoned for more than twenty years in American pops, we hear only a sophomoric rebellion against the Puritan tradition, bad little boys writing bad little words on walls. We hear nothing — nothing whatever — to compare with the songs of Edith Piaf.

Cole Porter dealt with prostitution in *Love for Sale* but not for the mass audience. Porter knew about as much about the harsh life of a whore as Paul Whiteman, by his own honest admission, did about jazz. The song is a soft one, the prostitute's life seen through a misted long lens from the luxurious penthouse apartment on top of the Waldorf Astoria where Porter lived in the cushioned comfort of inherited wealth, the same Waldorf where Piaf presented herself with a scrubbed face to the New York chic set. And at that, *Love for Sale* was barred from radio broadcasting for years. *Un monsieur me suit dans la rue* was never played on American radio either, not even in French.

Though the American misrepresentation of Piaf was to some extent corrected in the early years of the LP by the release on the Angel and Capitol labels of collections of her songs, you still could not get *Un monsieur me suit dans la rue*. Nor could you get *Paris-Mediterranée*, a song about a girl who meets a man on a train bound for the Riviera and beds with him. On their arrival in the railway station the next morning, she sees him arrested. She shrugs and says, "You just can't trust the people you meet on trains these days."

Her real name was Edith Giovanna Gassion. She was given the name Piaf by the cabaret owner Louis Leplée. It is Parisian slang for sparrow. (Or at least it was in her day; who can keep up with the slang of Paris?) No name ever suited an entertainer better. Her voice was neither pretty nor melodious. It had that rapid French vibrato that is obtained I know not how — or why. (Even housewives sing that way in France.) But that voice was filled with an intense and urgent energy that could not possibly, it seemed, be coming from so tiny a body. She stood four feet eleven inches tall and, when she was in good health, weighed ninety-nine pounds.

In her work she always wore a simple black dress with a sweetheart neckline. As she stood in a stark spotlight, she seemed all head and hands. And the hands were marvelously expressive. They floated disembodied in the air, open and at ease. As a song progressed, they became more agitated. At last, at the peak of a song's drama, they curled into trembling claws, at once imploring and ominous. In the last months of her life, those wonderful hands, gnarled now by arthritis, looked more than ever like talons. But they never lost their eloquence.

Her songs were, in effect, rhymed short stories of pain, irony, and compassion for the human condition. Occasionally the blues and some country-and-western songs give a hint of a similar flavor. But the blues by their very twelve-bar construction are structured for quick aphoristic snapshots of life, not for long-form story-telling. And country-and-western songs, even those that do deal with comparable subject matter, are almost always compromised by sentimentalism or a maudlin self-pity. Nothing in all the songs of the English language approaches the vinegar imagery of the French *chansons réalistes*, in which the narrative has primacy. There is a tunelessness about many of these songs, which no doubt derives from the fact that the lyrics were written first. In all history, only a few composers have been capable of creating fluid contoured melodies for existing text. When lyrics are written first, composers almost always come up with melodies that have a slightly stiff and recitative quality. Thus it was with Piaf's songs, but they worked for her to intense dramatic effect. American songs, in the golden age of Kern and Gershwin and Youmanns, put a primary emphasis on melody; French songs, at least of the kind Piaf sang, put it on drama, and must be listened to in a different way. (There is another kind of French song that is gloriously melodic.)

Piaf wrote almost nothing. But no singer was ever more truly defined in her songs. The best of them were drawn from her life by the writers who worked with her, such as Raymond Asso, who created the bulk of her early repertoire. *Paris-Mediterraneé* is a case in point.

Traveling to Nice with her half-sister Simone Berteaut, Piaf was smitten by a handsome well-dressed man who shared their compartment. She leaned close to him, he took her hand, she put her head on his shoulder. When the man stepped into the corridor for a smoke, Piaf told her sister she was mad for him and would never leave him. At Marseille, the man got off the train to stretch his legs. The girls watched in astonishment from a window as two cops clapped handcuffs on him. The man turned and gave her a last smile before being led away.

Piaf later told the story to Asso, who turned it into *Paris-Mediterranée*.

When Piaf was about sixteen, singing in the streets near Porte des Lilas, she became enamored of a little blond delivery boy and sometime bricklayer named Louis Dupont, known as P'tit Louis. They lived together, along with her sister, in a scabrous hotel in the the rue Orfila, where they slept three in a bed. Piaf sang and Louis made his deliveries and on Sundays they went to the films of Tom Mix, Rudolph Valentino, and the little tramp the French call Charlot — Chaplin. She gave birth to a girl she named Marcelle. She soon tired of Louis, resumed her infidelities, and got a job singing in a sailor's suit in a dive called the Juan-les-Pins. Simone was hired as a stripper although she was as flat in front as she was behind, stood only four-foot-eleven, like Edith, and was not yet fifteen. P'tit Louis objected to Edith's working there because she was surrounded by prostitutes. She left him.

Having no need for full-time lodgings, as the two girls now saw things, they moved from one shoddy hotel to another, dragging Marcelle along with them. Piaf had no idea how to wash baby clothes. When Marcelle's got dirty, she and Simone would throw them away and buy new.

Much of the time the baby was left untended at their hotel. One day Edith and Simone returned to find that P'tit Louis had come on his bicycle and taken the child away. When the two girls went to the old hotel in the rue Orfila, he told Edith that she could have her daughter only if she would return to him. She shrugged and walked away. The child had been a nuisance anyway.

A few months later, P'tit Louis sought her out to tell her Marcelle was in hospital with meningitis. She rushed there with Simone. The child died the following morning. Edith was eighteen.

She was ten francs short of the eighty-four she needed for the funeral. She had lived all her life on the edges of prostitution: abandoned by her parents, the Italian street singer who was her mother and a father who was an itinerant street acrobat from Normandy, she had been raised in a bordello by her grandmother, who was its cook. So, after getting plastered on Pernod, she did the natural thing: she accosted a man on the street, the boulevard de la Chappelle. In a hotel room, he asked her why she was doing this and got what must have sounded like one of the tiredest of the hard-luck stories told by whores since time immemorial. Yet the man gave her more than the ten francs and left.

She continued singing in the streets by day, with Simone, two and a half years her junior, collecting the cash, and at the Juan-les-Pins at night, living in a succession of shabby Pigalle hotels. Their friends were pimps, prostitutes, burglars, pick-pockets, con men and hoodlums. Piaf liked tough guys. They were her preferred bed companions. And they protected her when she worked the streets. All her life she had a taste for the company of pimps. It was a bent she shared with Billie Holiday. The difference is that Holiday's early history was totally hidden from the American public; Piaf virtually trumpeted hers.

Americans for years saw Pigalle as a place of naughty fun but the French know it as a sinkhole, the haunt of gangsters and their girls, of weary *putes* and their vicious "protectors". In recent decades, it has been repopulated by gangsters from Algeria. It is very easy to get your throat cut in Pigalle.

Piaf fell in love with a pimp named Albert. She refused to whore for him, however, and begged him to let her continue working as a street singer. He at last agreed, providing she handed him thirty francs a day. In due course she broke with Albert, as she did with all her men when boredom set in. Some of her friends gathered to protect her when he came after her. He pulled a gun and demanded that she return to him.

Piaf said — one of the great lines — "Fire, if you're a man!" All ninety-odd pounds of her.

He did, too. But one of her friends struck his arm and the shot only grazed her neck.

Edith — the French pronounce it Ay-deet — took to singing in the area between l'Etoile and Place des Ternes. She was singing for a small crowd in the rue Troyon one autumn afternoon in 1935 when a well-dressed man stepped forward, gave her ten francs, wrote his name and address on a corner of his newspaper, and told her he owned a cabaret called Cerny's in the rue Pierre-Charron. She auditioned for him the next afternoon. Louis Leplée said he could use her. But that name, he said, her real name, half French and half Italian, Edith Giovanna Gassion, would have to go. He named her *La Môme Piaf*. *Môme* means brat, urchin, waif, but the connotation is affectionate. Edith Piaf, then, made her nightclub debut as the Waif Sparrow, or the Kid Sparrow.

Louis Leplée was the first person to start teaching her her profession. She and Simone began immediately to call him Papa Louis. He made her learn new songs. He began an advertising campaign for her. He planned every detail of her opening, including the lighting. That first night the place was full of celebrities, including Maurice Chevalier and Mistinguette. Terrified, Piaf began to sing, "*C'est nous les mômes, les mômes de la cloche . . .*" The audience talked on. And then they began to fall silent. "She's done it!" Louis Leplée cried. She was invited to tables. Gentlemen addressed her as "Mademoiselle". She was astounded. Chevalier praised her.

It was not, however, Chevalier's praise that emplaced Piaf in the national awareness. It was Louis Leplée's murder.

Leplée had become her manager, mentor, and father figure, building her career, arranging for her to perform in galas as well as his club. Under his direction, she got her first record contract, cutting *L'Etranger* for Polydor. One night, with a record date scheduled for nine the following morning, she went on one of her periodic benders with Simone, dragging back to their hotel at eight a.m. Knowing how angry Papa Louis would be, she phoned to tell him she couldn't make the session. The voice on the phone told her to come immediately to his home on the boulevard de la Grande Armée. As she sobered up in the taxi, she began to think it was not Papa Louis who had spoken to her. A crowd stood about in front of his house, into which Piaf was escorted by a cop. During the night four young men had come to Lepleé's house, tied up his cleaning woman, and shot him where he lay in his bed. Piaf was arrested as a material witness, which, in view of the company she kept, is hardly surprising. She was soon released for lack of any evidence of complicity in the killing, but not before photographers and newsreel cameraman had made her face famous. (There were several theories about the death, but the case has never been solved.)

Years later a French critic wrote that his first awareness of her had come from a Paramount newsreel in which she was seated on a bench, telling the police, "*Je ne sais rien, je ne sais rien*" — I know nothing. Such was the power of her personality, he wrote, that he was fascinated by her without ever having heard her sing a note. Some people have that kind of presence.

Again, Piaf made use of her life's experience: The song *Browning* that she sang several years later describes a little hole in a man's head and the other little hole, in a gun barrel, out of which comes Madame Death.

After the Leplée affair, Raymond Asso became the next important figure in Piaf's life. She'd met him through Leplée. He was a slim, intelligent man-about-show-biz in his early thirties, and a veteran of the Foreign Legion, which was not without its appeal to Piaf. She had a taste for Legionnaires and sailors. Simone said, "It was Leplée who discovered Edith, but it was Asso who made her." Asso took her as a mistress, then became her manager, coach, and teacher, an incarnation of the Henry Higgins character in Shaw's *Pygmalion*. She was barely literate, having had only a year of school. Asso taught her to sign her autograph without errors; all her life she did so using phrases he had written out for her to copy. He pounded a measure of education into her and also Simone, forcing them to learn such names as Baudelaire.

But he also listened patiently, smoking a pipe, as she told him her tales of the streets. He decided that she would have to have a repertoire entirely her own, drawn from her own experience, and began writing the first of what would be a long list of her most famous songs, such as *Elle fréquentait la rue Pigalle, Mon Légionnaire, Le Fanion de la Légion, Je n'en connais pas la fin, C'est lui que mon coeur a choisi, Le grand voyage du pauvre nègre*, and *Le Petit Monsieur triste* — the very core of her early repertoire. It was Asso who introduced her to Marguerite Monnot, who had written *L'Etranger*. Monnot, an extremely well-schooled musician — she'd made her piano recital debut at the age of three and a half, playing Mozart, and had been trained by Nadia Boulanger — became his collaborator of choice and one of the most important composers in Piaf's life. Asso would write a lyric, Piaf would recite it, and the dreamy Monnot would go to the piano and start playing, gradually

fitting melody to lyrics. It was an absolutely unique professional relationship.

A genuinely tough young man, as well as a refined one, Asso cleared out the crowd of pimps and hoods who hung around Piaf. And the minute he thought she was ready, he got her her first important booking at the A.B.C., the best of the major Paris musical halls, on a bill with Charles Trenet. Asso next introduced her to Raoul Breton, the music publisher, and his wife, whose support was critical to the success of a singer in those days. It was Mme Breton who suggested that she henceforth bill herself as Edith Piaf, not La Môme Piaf. And Piaf worked. She studied Marie Dubas, a singer she admired all her life — how Dubas walked on a stage and left it, her gestures, her inflections, the way she sequenced her songs.

She was a smash at the A.B.C. Raymond Asso had made her truly famous. But her affairs usually lasted about eighteen months, as Simone has noted, and his days as her lover were numbered.

In 1969, six years after Piaf's death and a year after Asso's, Simone Berteaut published a book about her half-sister, titled simply *Piaf*. (They had the same father, Gassion.) It is a remarkable book, both in its unconscious self-portrait of the archetypical gofer, namely herself, and for the insights into Piaf's character. It is one of the finest studies of a singer ever written. It examines the egotism, the compulsion, the hunger, the ingenuous self-involvement — and the drive. It is all the more compelling for being a naive rather than a clinical portrait. And Berteaut hardly even questions her own utter devotion to her half-sister.

She quotes Piaf as saying, "A woman who gets herself dropped is a poor sap. There's no lack of men — the streets are full of them. But you have to find a replacement first, not after. If you wait till after, you're the one who's been cheated on; but before, it's him. And that makes one hell of a difference."

Berteaut says, "Edith always applied this principle with a clear conscience. No man was ever able to make her change. She'd cheat first, and then see what happened. Sometimes she'd tell them; other times she'd just laugh watching them. And if any man thought he'd cheated on her first — boy, was he wrong! She'd already beaten him to the punch. As long as the new guy wasn't ready to shack up with her she didn't say anything; she kept the old one. She had to have a man around the house."

Piaf had the sexual rectitude of a starfish. Of all the famously libidinous show business ladies, not even excluding that English actress long known in Hollywood movie circles as the British Open, Piaf appears to have been the most voracious and the most casual. She must have had thousands of men in her life. Berteaut tells how, when they were living at one Paris location and found themselves without a man of an evening, they would open a window and put themselves on display. When a cop arrived with a complaint, they'd grab him. Both of them. Indeed, although she never says so, Berteaut gives the impression in her book that when a man took on Piaf, he might get two for the price of one. Charles Aznavour called the endless succession of men "Piaf's boys".

Raymond Asso's successor was the singer and later actor Paul Meurisse, an urbane man whose cool polish and perfect manners impressed her. War was pending and ex-Legionnaire Asso had been called back into military service. Born in Dunkerque, son of a bank manager, Paul Meurisse had come to Paris as an insurance investigator who really wanted to be a singer. He'd entered an amateur contest, won it, become a chorus boy, and was singing in cabarets when she met him. Pierre Hiégal, who supervised her recordings for the Polydor label, later wrote, "When one evening Paul said to her, 'Come over to my place for a glass of champagne,' she accepted quite naturally — and stayed two years."

This time, her life's adventures became the material not for a song but for a play. Her new friend Jean Cocteau wrote a one-act drama about Piaf and Paul Meurisse, who fought incessantly and bitterly, which he called *Le Bel Indifférent*. Piaf and Meurisse starred in it, playing characters based on themselves. The success of the play launched Meurisse as an actor.

They continued their battles, offstage as well as on, and finally parted. Singer Tino Rossi tried to effect a reconciliation, but Piaf had decided to make Meurisse jealous. Knowing Meurisse was following her, she met a man in a cafe. Meurisse dragged her home. In the ensuing battle their apartment was wrecked. And Piaf left for good. She was twenty-five.

By now Paris was under German occupation. Piaf and Simone took up residence, along with the secretary she had acquired, in a high-class bordello frequented by Gestapo officers in civvies, out for a little fun between torture sessions at their nearby headquarters, incognito members of the French underground, and big-time gangsters, both French and German. The conquerors were constantly after her to perform for them in Germany. She never did. But she did do performances in various stalags for French soldiers still held by the Germans. During one of these, her secretary, Andrée Bigeard — unbeknownst to her employer an active member of the French underground — told her to ask permission to have her picture taken with the German guards and their French prisoners. Back in Paris, the faces in this photo were carefully blown up and attached to false identity cards and travel documents, which Piaf slipped to the prisoners on a second visit to the camp. Many of them escaped with those documents.

In the spring of 1944, on the advice of one of their pimp friends, Piaf and Simone checked out of their brothel. A few days later the house was closed and its owners jailed.

When the war began to go badly for the Germans the atmosphere in Paris grew grim. Black-bordered posters bearing the names of hostages appeared on walls. From time to time, the Germans would shoot a batch of them, often in the ruined old castle in the Bois de Vincennes. Piaf sang a song called *Où sont tous mes copains? — Where Are All My Pals?* — against the projected backdrop of a French flag. The audience was full of German officers. The next day Occupation authorities told her to take it out of her act. She refused. Her only compromise was to drop the flag from her staging.

Paul Meurisse's successor, aside from the casual lovers, was Henri Contet, of whom she said to Simone, "We've never had a newspaperman; it'll be a change for us." Contet was a writer with *Paris Soir*. Piaf seemed to have an instinct for taking up with men who could educate her, and Contet was no exception. She in turn affected their lives just as deeply. She had made an actor of Meurisse. And now she turned Contet, as she had Raymond Asso, into a lyricist. If Asso had created the body of her first repertoire, Contet — working with Marguerite Monnot — created that of the second, such songs as *Y'a pas d' printemps, Coup de grisou, Monsieur Saint Pierre, Histoire du coeur, Mariage, Le Brun et le blond, Bravo pour le clown*, and the great *Padam . . . Padam*. Contet went the way of all her

lovers, but, like Asso, continued writing for her.

She had long since lost count of her lovers. At one point she decided to file them by period: the streets; the sailors and colonial troops; the pimps; the flings. She referred to the time of Asso and Meurisse as her professor period. Contet she listed in the brothel period. After Contet, she went into what she called her factory period. She'd made Asso and Contet into famous songwriters. Now she began manufacturing singers.

The first was Yves Montand, a six-foot hundred-and-eighty-pound "dream", as she called him, born in Italy and raised in Marseille. She met him when he was assigned on a bill with her at the Moulin Rouge. She promptly vivisected his act, telling him it was corny and out-of-date, and mocked his Marseille accent. She told him that when he was ready to accept it, she would train him. And train him she did. She developed a new repertoire for him, some of it written by Henri Contet. She taught him gesture and movement, sometimes rehearsing him for fifteen hours at a stretch. In two months, she created the Montand the French public was to know, the dramatic figure in simple brown slacks and shirt. Then she made a movie with him, about a singing star who takes a lover and turns him into a famous singer only to lose him to the stardom she has herself created. Montand was in love with and wanted to marry her, but when his name became as big as her own she threw him out.

She next took an interest not in one but nine singers, *Les Compagnons de la Chanson*, who had begun singing together in the French resistance. She coached them and took them on tour with her, as she had Montand.

In the mood of francophilia that saturated the United States in the years right after the war, Piaf acquired an American reputation. In November, 1947, she toured the U.S. with Les Compagnons. The tour was a failure for Piaf, although Les Compagnons, whose act was all sweetness and light, with songs such as *Les Trois Cloches*, *The Three Bells*, went over well. Piaf decided to leave the tour and go home. The critic and composer Virgil Thomson wrote a newspaper column explaining the character of her work, ending it with, "If we allow her to leave on the heels of this undeserved failure, the American public will have given proof of its ignorance and its stupidity." On the strength of that review, she was booked into the Versailles. Charles Boyer, Marlene Dietrich, and Jean Sablon were in the high-society audience that came to cheer her. She had been booked for a week; she stayed twenty-one. She and Dietrich would become close friends.

A few months earlier, toward the end of 1946, when she was thirty-one, she had met in a Montmartre cafe Marcel Cerdan, the boxer, born in Casablanca, billed as the Morrocan Bomber, the French contender for the world middleweight championship. Cerdan was a handsome roughneck with a heart of utter simplicity.

Piaf was intensely lonely during the Versailles engagement. Then she got a call from Cerdan, who happened also to be in New York. He took her to dinner, then to Coney Island after midnight. Some of the sports fans in the crowd recognized him; and some people recognized her, begging her to sing *La Vie en rose*, which she did, on the spot, old street singer that she was. She saw Cerdan fight for the first time. And she was in love again. But Cerdan was married. Marriage to Piaf was impossible.

The relationship with Cerdan was unlike any she had known. She had always bought gifts for her men and dressed them. Cerdan would not allow this. He, on the contrary, bought her gifts, a mink coat among them.

Cerdan went into training for his title fight with Tony Zale in New York. Piaf was booked into the Versailles during that time. She arrived early, and Cerdan, against the rules, smuggled her into his training camp at Lake Sheldrake. Despite the supposedly debilitating effects of sex on prizefighters (and tenors), Cerdan, in Madison Square Garden on September 21, 1948, took the title from Zale at the end of the fourth round. A euphoric Piaf left the arena to sing at the Versailles. The crowd cheered when she went on, and cheered anew when Cerdan entered.

The next autumn she again played the Versailles. Again Cerdan was to fight in New York: Jake LaMotta had challenged him for the title. Cerdan was to travel by boat but Piaf phoned to urge him to take a plane instead.

On October 28, 1949, the Air France Constellation in which Cerdan was a passenger plowed into a mountain peak of the Azores. Cerdan died in the crash, along with the brilliant young French violinist Ginette Neveu. Piaf believed she had killed him, and nearly went mad. She entered onto the most bizarre period of her life. After trying to starve herself to death, she induced Simone to obtain a three-legged table with which to conduct seances. The tapping table told her to resume eating. From then on she consulted it daily. What she did not know is that her half-sister was moving the table, which Berteaut revealed in the 1969 book. She constantly asked it for advice, advice that a terrified Berteaut was forced to give.

It was during this period that she discovered Aznavour, singing in the duo of Roche and Aznavour. The other member of the team was Pierre Roche, who later would emigrate to Canada. Piaf was taken by one of the songs they had written, *J'aime Paris au mois de mai*, *I Like Paris in the Month of May*, a very attractive tune with a charming lyric. Though he was tiny and had a large nose that Piaf immediately criticized (and which later was altered), she thought Aznavour had big talent, and took him into her entourage. He went to live with her at Boulogne, where he slept on a sofa. He became her secretary, chauffer, handyman, and general factotum.

Berteaut says that Aznavour's relationship with her was purely professional. Aznavour's own attitude to Piaf seems to substantiate this. In any case, her bed would not remain empty for long. In still another nightclub, she met a big, rough-looking American, with a pock-marked face, named Eddie Constantine. Constantine's looks, which would stand him in good stead when, later, he became a sort of Humphrey Bogart tough guy in French movies, were at odds with his background.

Born in Los Angeles in 1915 into a family of Austrian opera singers, a prize-winning voice student at the Vienna Conservatory, he had been an L.A. studio singer, doing commercials for cigarettes and chewing gum, a work that he — like so many others before and after him — disliked intensely, as profitable as it was. He went to Paris to take his chances, working for a time as a production singer. Then Piaf found him. The factory began to hum as Piaf relentlessly rehearsed Aznavour and Constantine.

Cerdan remained her great love, no doubt because he had died at the peak of the romance, before she could grow bored with him. This time *le grand amour* could be preserved forever in the shrine of her illusions. Cerdan could never be lined up with her other trophies. Once she had a party for eight of them, all of whom turned up in the blue suits she always bought her men, along with the cigarette lighters and watches.

Piaf flew with Simone to Casablanca, effected a reconciliation with Marinette Cerdan, brought Marinette and Cerdan's children back to live with her at Boulogne, bought her lover's widow Jacques Fath clothes, and undertook the education of his children.

And then the bad days came. With Aznavour at the wheel, her car went off the road and was destroyed. They were unharmed. Three weeks later, asleep with Aznavour in the back seat of a car driven by the bicycle rider who was her current lover, she was in a second accident. This time she got two broken ribs and a broken arm. The doctors eased her pain with morphine, to which she became almost immediately addicted. She took up with another cyclist, a friend of the first. She began to sentimentalize about her lost child Marcelle. Then came Jacques Pills. (It is pronounced Peelse.)

She'd met him in 1939, an elegant man and a gentleman, the husband of Lucienne Boyer and half of Pills and Tabet, the biggest singing team of the time. He'd seemed beyond her wildest aspirations. Now, all these years later, he brought her a song — his lyrics, music by his accompanist, one Gilbert Bécaud. It was *Je t'ai dans le peau — I've Got You in the Skin*, which as always she made her own, in the process helping launch another singer, Bécaud. As for Pills, it was, once again, love at first sight for Piaf. With Pills, she was convinced, she could kick her morphine habit, a habit Pills didn't even know she had. He thought she was on cortisone. Berteaut recalls her crawling around the floor looking for a lost syringe. And the pushers were both supplying her and blackmailing her. Pills, who long since had been divorced from Boyer, proposed to her.

"This woman," Berteaut wrote, "demolished by drink and beginning to be corroded by drugs, dreamed of a first communion dress like a ten-year-old." In July, 1952, Piaf and Pills were married in a civil ceremony in the town hall of the fashionable sixteenth arrondisement. In September, on her fifth trip to the United States, after a fix, she married Pills a second time at the church of St. Vincent de Paul. Marlene Dietrich was her witness. Piaf wore a long dress of pale blue, and in a photo taken as she entered the church escorted by Dietrich, she looks like the radiant child she thought she was. She was thirty-seven. Pills was forty-six.

Pills was soon to learn his bride was both an alcoholic and a drug addict. Three times he put her in a clinic to take the cure. They parted in 1955 but remained close friends.

Her work was deteriorating. Yet she pulled herself together to make a triumphant appearance — her seventh American trip — at Carnegie Hall at a fee of three thousand dollars per night.

She used to speak of "my pals the Americans." But in France she had acquired a reputation for unreliability and bad work. Nonetheless, Bruno Coquatrix, who owned the Olympia theater, decided to take a chance by giving her a one-month engagement. She was a smash. Coquatrix cancelled other contracts to keep her for twelve weeks. Her record sales soared.

She suffered an attack of delerium tremens. Again she was hospitalized. And again she left for the United States, to perform in New York, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Chicago. The tour lasted eleven months, and she was paid a higher fee than anyone in American history excepting Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra.

In the fall of 1959, on her way to the airport to leave on her ninth tour of the United States, she was in her third automobile accident. Her face was badly cut, but she recovered with little scarring. In February, 1960, she collapsed onstage, vomiting blood, at the Waldorf-Astoria and was taken to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital for stomach surgery. Jacques Pills came to her bedside.

A young American fan, a twenty-three-year-old painter named Douglas Davies, sent her flowers. When she left the hospital, she took him back to Paris with her. She collapsed on-stage in Stockholm and returned to Paris for more surgery. She broke up with Davies, who — like so many of her lovers — remained her friend. He died in June, 1962, in a plane crash near Orly Airport.

Simone Berteaut records that in the twelve years from 1951 to 1963, Piaf survived four automobile accidents, an attempted suicide, four drug cures, one sleep treatment, two attacks of d.t.'s, seven surgical operations, three hepatic comas, a spell of insanity, two attacks of bronchial pneumonia and one of pulmonary edema. She had ulcers, arthritis, and jaundice.

She had been blind in childhood. Whether the blindness was hysterical or caused by cataracts, as she believed, is problematical. Considering that she had been hideously neglected and half starved by her mother before being taken to that Normandy bordello, the former seems likely. The nature of the cure further suggests it. The prostitutes were very good to her. They scrubbed and scraped away her encrusted filth. They made rag dolls for her during her blindness. They mothered her. In August, 1921, according to her legend, after the ladies of the house had become aware that she could not see, they shut up shop for a day, dressed like housewives, and paraded through the streets to the basilica of St. Thérèse de Lisieux to burn candles and urge divine intercession for Edith. Four days later she could see. Or so Piaf told Simone, who presumed she must have heard the story from her father, since Edith had been seven at the time of her "miracle".

After that, Louis Gassion took his daughter on the road with him, making her sing in the streets and cafes and teaching her to con money from the gullible. It is hardly a wonder that she hated bathing (when she acquired her luxurious home at Boulogne, she filled the bathtub with goldfish), liked whores and partook of their morality, manipulated people with uncommon skill, was most at home in cabarets and the streets, and sustained a pathetic belief in the supernatural.

The ravages of hard living had taken a toll. Yet she worked in spite of her ill health, touring in France and other countries until one of her periodic collapses would force her to cancel. She had very little money, having given far too much of it to musicians, vagabonds, sycophants, and parasites of various styles and stories.

In the fall of 1962, Piaf opened once more at the Olympia. She was terribly weak by then. A doctor watched from the wings as she tottered toward the microphone, so thin that the cords of her neck and the tendons in her hands stood out conspicuously. Her hair had thinned to a reddish fuzz.

The recording made during that engagement is an incredible testament not only to her talent but to raw courage. There was a new kind of rasp to her voice, the rasp of physical pain. And yet that recording is one of the best she ever made. One of its songs is *Le billard électrique*, about a boy who plays a pinball machine as he waits in a bar for a girl. The song is rhythmically punctuated by a hysterical *ding! ding!* She had recorded the same song some years before. The early version was great Piaf. The latter is even greater Piaf, for her energy had become demonic. At the end of the song she screams *di-i-ii-innnnnng!* The sound is frightening in its intensity.

A male voice is heard in one song on that final album from the Olympia — that of Théo Sarapo, a hairdresser of Greek parentage who was half her age. They had recently been married and she was trying to turn him, like others before him, into a singer. It was as if she could imagine nothing else that one might do with one's life. The French snickered at her and Sarapo, who was seen as a gigolo opportunist. Berteaut says that on the contrary, Sarapo (Piaf gave him the name; it is Greek for *I love you*) loved her desperately and stood to inherit from her only her debts. He came from a comfortable family to whom he very properly introduced Piaf before their marriage. The doctors had told him her life was nearing its end; he married her anyway. Berteaut recalls him hovering by Edith's sickbed, in a house on the Riviera, combing her hair, putting eau de cologne on her face, and washing her hands.

She had had a concerto grosso of illnesses in those last years, but it was cancer that finally killed her at forty-seven. Told she was dying, her close friend Jean Cocteau said, "Piaf had genius. There will never be another Piaf." On October 11, 1963, four hours after he learned she was gone, Cocteau, who had suffered a stroke early in the year, was himself dead of a heart attack. No one doubted that Piaf's death caused his.

The Church at first refused Piaf a religious burial on the grounds that she had lived "in a state of public sin." A few hours later, however, the official position softened, purportedly in consideration of Piaf's deep piety. Her friends no doubt concluded, with French cynicism, that someone had put in the fix.

Mourners at her burial in the cemetery of Père Lachaise included Marlene Dietrich, Gilbert Bécaud, Jacqueline Francois, the faithful Jacques Pills, and Aznavour, along with a very large crowd of very little people: forty thousand of them, mostly from the working class. As Piaf had requested, the souvenirs she treasured most were buried with her. The inventory: three fluffy toy animals, a green silk cravat, some religious pictures, a plaster statue of Ste Thérèse de Lisieux, whom she believed had restored her sight, a silver medallion of the Virgin, the épaulette of a *légionnaire*, a sailor's beret, and a postcard from the chapel of Milly-la-Forêt with a dedication from Cocteau.

Sacha Guitry said, "Her life was so sad it seems almost too beautiful to be true." That's a cute little oxymoron. There is nothing beautiful about arthritis, drug addiction, alcoholism, or cancer. But it is in accord with the general view of her life as tragic. I do not share it. Born literally on a sidewalk from a slut of mother who had no interest in her, this indestructible child of the streets climbed with cunning and courage to the highest levels of the international entertainment world. She had sung for Princess Elizabeth, the soon-to-be Queen of England, who invited her to her table, an honor Piaf could not quite believe. When she was awarded a Grand Prix du Disque in 1952, she was photographed with the *Président de la Republique* and Nobel-prize-winning novelist Colette. Her friends included the rich, the famous, and the fascinating of two continents, actors, playwrights, composers, poets and politicians.

Only a few months before her death, she sang from the top of the Eiffel Tower for the world premiere of the movie *The Longest Day*, the film about the bloody but successful allied landings at Normandy in 1945. Her audience, gathered for dinner in the gardens of the Palais de Chaillot, included Winston Churchill, General and former President of the United States Dwight D. Eisenhower, Viscount Bernard Law Montgomery of Alamein, Lord Louis Mountbatten and General Omar Bradley, the very architects of Germany's defeat, the King of Morocco, Don Juan of Spain, Queen Sophia of Greece, and movie celebrities such as Elizabeth Taylor, Sophia Loren, Ava Gardner, Robert Wagner, Audrey Hepburn, Curt Jurgens and Richard Burton, not to mention all the people of Paris who heard that fierce voice ringing out from the sky such of her songs as *Non, je ne regrette rien — No, I Regret Nothing.*

If in the early years she collected lovers who could help her career, she repaid the debt in the later years by gathering around her men she could — and did — help. She earned and threw away fortunes. She had a remarkable ability to get people to do exactly what she wanted, including the half-sister who lived through her. Although she had a dumpy little body, men were mad about her, one after another, and she lived a sex life far beyond the wildest fantasies of any bored housewife. If she burned her candle at both ends, for a long time it burned exceeding bright. Cocteau said she was like "a terrifying little sleepwalker who sings her dreams to the air on the edge of the roof." Ah, but her father was a juggler and acrobat who had taught her the rudiments of his trade; she had a spectacular sense of balance. If the last years were hard, so they are for many people who have known nothing of the heights she attained. And singing your dreams to the air beats life in a Normandy whorehouse.

A year or two after she died, I got a call from Paris from the New York music publisher Howie Richmond. He had published some of the Jobim songs I had translated from Portuguese. He asked me if I knew French. "Better than I do Portuguese," I said. Howie said he was planning a one-man Broadway show for Charles Aznavour and wanted to know if I would come to Paris to write English adaptations of the Aznavour songs. I left the next day. The first song I did was *J'aime Paris au mois de mai*, which I called *Paris Is at Her Best in May*, as a sort of brand-x refutation of *April in Paris*. I had no idea at the time that this had been the first of Aznavour's songs to catch Piaf's attention.

Aznavour was playing the Olympia, working on the same stage where Piaf had made that last album. We talked in the dressing room, probably the same one she used — the star's dressing room. At the end of each show he would put a table across the door of that room and sit behind it, signing autographs with a star's conditioned automaticity for the lines of people who came by and discussing with me the pending New York show. Naturally, during those weeks, I asked about Piaf. There is much about him that is like her. He is tiny, and works in simple attire. The songs he writes are in her tradition, though not as harsh. He has that same quick vibrato.

He told me that Piaf had a rich and raucous sense of humor, that she was always surrounded by friends, and that she would have liked to sing comic songs, had her public been willing to accept her as anything but a tragedienne.

One of the songs that bears her name, he said, is actually his. When he showed it to her, she said, "Charles, that song is me!" She begged him to let her put her name on it as its writer. She said she would make it up to him if he did.

"And did she make it up to you?" I asked.

"Of course," he said. "She gave me my career."