

LIFE&TIMES PEOPLE

Her voice, her legacy

She may have passed on but the voice of Edith Piaf continues to transcend time and touch the soul, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

WATCH a clip of legendary French singer Edith Piaf singing *La Vie En Rose* on YouTube and this is what you see.

The curtains part and a petite but frail woman stands in the middle of a stage. She smiles as though it's the first time she's on a stage. Shuffling her feet, she comes closer to the microphone. She nods to the conductor of the orchestra. When she sings, you can't help but close your eyes, utterly immersed in the sound of her soulful voice. You needn't understand the words to find that the sound of Piaf's voice transcends space and time to touch your soul.

"That's exactly how we feel," says Dany Picot, 62, a French-speaking volunteer at Muzium Negara. "You know how every child learns nursery rhymes? Well, for me, *La Vie En Rose* was like a nursery rhyme. Everyone just knew it." Indeed, Picot says that the first time she met her husband at a cafe in Paris in the late 1960s, *La Vie En Rose* was playing in the background.

TIMELESS TUNE

La Vie En Rose is one of Piaf's signature songs and was performed for the first time in 1946. Close to 70 years later, the lyrics of this song and its timeless tune still appeal to lovers regardless of colour, creed or faith.



Dany and 85-year-old mother, Marie-Thérèse Seguin.

Although biographers such as Robert Belleret (author of *Piaf, A French Myth*) have disputed the veracity of some of the stories in Piaf's life, there are facts which can't be altered. For one, on Dec 19, 1915, Edith Giovanna Gassion was born to Annetta Giovanna Maillard and Louis-Alphonse Gassion. She spent much of her early life with her grandmother. In her early teens, Piaf set out as a street singer in and around Paris, and at 17, had a daughter named Marcelle. Unfortunately, the child died when she was 2.

In 1935, Piaf was discovered by Louis Leplee, who owned the successful club Le Gerny off the Champs-Élysées. It was he who gave her the nickname of Piaf, which means sparrow. Piaf was no more than 1.5m tall. When Leplee died in 1936, she took the name Edith Piaf. Thereafter, while her career took off and she became an international success, her personal life was described by another biographer as a "volcano in constant eruption" for it was sad, depressing, and full of sorrow and tragedy.



Piaf remains a legend in music.

Piaf was involved in three serious motor vehicle accidents — she was addicted to morphine and alcohol — she had many high-profile romances, which included some of the biggest celebrities in France. She married twice and died when she was 47, from cancer on Oct 10, 1963. It's said that the Archbishop of Paris denied requests for a memorial service in her name, citing Piaf's lifestyle as being full of sin.

NATIONAL SYMBOL

"Piaf's songs always touched the common people. She sang about her life," says Picot. "For my parents, Piaf was 100 per cent part of their youth. They met during the war and married in 1951. At the time, Piaf wasn't so famous. It was the end of the War and everybody was slowly recovering from their emotional wounds. Food was still scarce, with ration tickets. And not everybody had a radio. Nevertheless, mum had just married my dad and they lived in a big house with the rest of the family. They had a radio and this song was on all the time. She could hear it when my



Restaurant La Vie En Rose at Jalan Raja Chulan Kuala Lumpur.

uncle wasn't listening to the news all. News was the priority. But mum wasn't concerned anymore with war and news. She was in love. She was happy. The song reflected her feelings. *La Vie En Rose* reminds her of bad and happy times together.

"The way Piaf sang, she put her soul into it. Like in *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*." Piaf dedicated this song to the French Foreign Legion as France was engaged in military conflict with Algeria at the time it was recorded. Picot says that it's a song that's bound to make anyone who has lost in love have no regrets and emerge an optimist again.

Softly, Picot says: "I remember when Piaf died, my mother was very sad and cried." Apparently, it was the one time traffic came to a grinding halt in Paris because many of Piaf's fans came out to pay their last respects to this songstress who later became the national symbol of France.

In her Oscar-winning performance, Marion Cotillard portrayed Piaf in the 2007 French biographical film *La Vie En Rose* directed by Olivier Dahan. One of the most memorable scenes in the movie is the one when

Lyrics to La Vie En Rose in English — as sung by Crisitin Milloti in the 200th episode of How I Met Your Mother.

Hold me close and hold me fast
This magic spell you cast
This is la vie en rose
When you kiss me, Heaven sighs
And though I close my eyes
I see la vie en rose
When you press me to your heart
I'm in a world apart
A world where roses bloom
And when you speak, angels sing
From above
Everyday words seem to turn
into love songs
Give your heart and soul to me
And life will always be
La vie en rose.

a journalist asks Piaf three questions: "What advice would you give a woman? What advice would you give a young girl? What advice would you give a child?" To each, Piaf answers: "Love." Perhaps this is Edith Piaf's single-most important legacy.

Links to Edith Piaf singing *La Vie En Rose* and *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien* on YouTube:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Og4NIHef4Ks>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpHAsb2XQOY>

WIN THE FRENCH VOICE

HERE'S your chance to sing and be in the running for some great prizes. Fancy a return trip to Hanoi with 2 nights in a 5-star accommodation? Or a French language course for 11 weeks at the Alliance Française de Kuala Lumpur? Or maybe a hamper filled with Yves Rocher cosmetic products?

PAS DE PROBLÈME! HERE'S THE CATCH

You have to sing in French... the universal language of love!

As part of the 2014 French Language Week, a French singing competition has been organised for Malaysian talents of 18 years old and above, to showcase their vocal abilities in French. Only French or Francophone songs are allowed. Translations, contestant's creations and adaptations will not be eligible.

Contestants will be judged by a panel comprising representatives from Alliance Française de Kuala Lumpur, Francophonie organisation committee in Malaysia, and the local and French

music scene. Judging criteria includes vocal ability and quality, appearance, stage presence, knowledge of song, pronunciation, rhythm, and overall impression.

Contestants must register between Feb 8 and March 1, 2014. Video recordings have to be sent in by noon on March 1, 2014 and must be in .mp4, .avi or .mpg format. The final competition will take place at Help College Auditorium, KL on March 15, 2014. Finalists must pay the registration fee of RM15 cash to the organisers on the day of the finale.

TO REGISTER

- Fill in the registration form on the website www.alliancefrancaise.org.my and email to french.singing.malaysia@gmail.com
- Send via email or by post a CD or video recording of you performing one (1) song in French to french.singing.malaysia@gmail.com by using www.wetransfer.com to upload your file
- Or by post a CD to Alliance Française de Kuala Lumpur - Singing Competition, 15, Lorong Gurney, 54100 KL. If sending by post, attach a print-out of the completed registration form. Confirmation email will be sent once file or CD has been received. Visit: www.alliancefrancaise.org.my for info

The French Language Week 2014, from March 15 — March 23, 2014, is organised by 23 Francophone diplomatic missions and members of the Malaysian-based International Organisation of Francophony, as well as the Alliance Française, KL and Penang, the French School of Kuala Lumpur, Museum Volunteers Association, French Language Malaysian Teachers Association and Francophone Association, to promote the use of the French language.

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