

Parlez-moi d'amour:
Themes in French Popular Song from
the Commune to World War II

Caprices 25



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Ambassadeurs (1892)

Benjamin Ivry

Parlez-moi d'amour:

Themes in French Popular Song from
the Commune to World War II



Adrien Barrère, Dranem (Armand Ménéard), (ca. 1903)

Contents

Preface

7

I Paradoxes of French popular song

13

II Confronting authority

23

II The allure of gloom

29

IV Disdaining outsiders

35

V Liberating sexualities

47

VI Suggested reading

53



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Polaire from La Rire, Brooklyn Museum, ca. 1895

Preface

The beauty of French popular song is haunting, belligerent, and pessimistic, like Parisian allure in the modern era. It is unlike the sprightly stiff-upper-lip British music hall numbers intended to cheer listeners at times of adversity.

Naturally, there are mindless giddy frolics among Gallic café concert and music-hall melodies, but downbeat numbers are more emblematic. Indeed, the French word *complainte* means a popular song recounting personal misfortunes.¹ One might conclude that French people are most lyrically inspired when grouching that their low expectations of life have been validated.

One example is *Where Are All My Lovers* (*Où sont tous mes amants?*; 1935),² by Charles André Cachant (Charlys) and Maurice Vandair. A half-millennium earlier, the medieval French poet François Villon asked a similar question.³

The singer recounts how once she was beautiful, but former admirers have vanished, departed to other assignations. Still, her

1 See Philippe Darriulat, “Chanter le crime à l’heure de l’invention des cafés-concerts parisiens sous le Second Empire,” *Criminocorpus*, 17 | 2021, posted 1 March 2021, last consulted 19 December 2022 (<https://journals.openedition.org/criminocorpus/8806>)

2 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZBcu3INKpE>; last accessed 14 January 2023.

3 See James W. Bright, „The ‘ubi sunt’ Formula,” *Modern Language Notes* 8 (3): 1893, p 94. *Ubi sunt* (where are they) is a motif named after a rhetorical question in the Book of Baruch (3:16–19) in the Vulgate Latin Bible. The question was frequently asked in medieval literature, including in verse by the 13th-century French poet Rutebeuf. In the 15th century, François Villon inquired in his *Ballad of the Ladies of Times Past* (*Ballade des dames du temps jadis*) “Where are the snows of yesteryear?” (*Mais où sont les neiges d’antan?*); see <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/4144>; last accessed 14 January 2023.

heart has not aged, she claims poignantly. *Où sont tous mes amants?* was recorded by Fréhel, a performer who fell into drug and alcohol abuse after her paramour, Maurice Chevalier, left her for another star, Mistinguett.

The notion of being driven to desperation by thwarted love for Maurice Chevalier might seem risible today, invalidating the very concept of passion.⁴ But by the 1930s, at the peak of Chevalier's Hollywood career, Fréhel provided evidence that such a fate was possible. For years she was a familiar presence in French films as a galling ruin.⁵

Similarly, captivatingly mournful, bitter, and ironic French songs were written about subjects seen elsewhere as ridiculous. The UK music hall standard, *Why am I Always a Bridesmaid?* (1917), spoofed the notion of a bridegroom stolen by another woman. Decades later in France, Michel Emer's *Bal dans ma rue* (*Public dance on my street*; 1949)⁶ written for Edith Piaf, is wholly serious on a parallel theme.

Sometimes the sustained lachrymosity of French songs makes them timeless, or at least difficult to date with precision. *My Heart's Home is Ready* (*La maison de mon coeur est prête*; 1927) was written by Gaston Dumestre for Fréhel.⁷ The ostensible theme is that the singer has carefully prepared for a new relationship; she explains in detail how the metaphoric bridal chamber has been tidied.

4 Woody Allen's screenplay for his comedy film *Annie Hall* (1977) contains the line: "Boy, those guys in the French Resistance were really brave, you know? Got to listen to Maurice Chevalier sing so much." See Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman, *Annie Hall*, typescript, p. 19 at <https://www.public.asu.edu/~s-rbeatty/394/AnnieHall.pdf>; last accessed 19 January 2023.

5 It may have surprised listeners to Radio-Lausanne in November 1950 that Fréhel had survived the Second World War and was available for interview; she died in February of the following year. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JvRVdWH0L0>; last accessed 14 January 2023.

6 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XC6u9n5TKx8>; last accessed 14 January 2023.

7 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsyOqxBh57Y>; last accessed 14 January 2023.

These stout-hearted assertions by Fréhel with piano accompaniment hearken back to an earlier, more naïve era of emotional candor. Dumestre began his songwriting career at the turn of the century. Perhaps this number was written before 1927, the year it was recorded by its ideal interpreter.

Fréhel had a powerfully rhythmical approach to music, as if accompanying herself on an imaginary hurdy-gurdy while swaying back and forth. She brought out a folksy sound that is inherent in many French popular songs. This traditional flavor extended to material for other performers.

Émile Spencer's jaunty *Wooden Leg* (*La jambe en bois*; 1908)⁸ was sung by the music hall comedian Dranem. It was cited repeatedly by Igor Stravinsky in his 1911 ballet *Petrushka*, reportedly because he believed it was an ancient melody free of copyright. After a court case, Stravinsky was required to pay one-tenth of every performance fee for *Petrushka* to Spencer for having used his tune without permission.⁹

Sociologists and historians have discerned diverse societal impact on French songs over the years. Many publications have focused on performance venues or art by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, among others. The iconography of early French popular song performers spread their renown internationally, even among those who had never heard their recordings.

Art historians have focused on this extraordinary visual legacy, while relatively neglecting aural evidence, even when it is readily available. This may be because fully appreciating French song ideal-

8 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSE6Aop14WU>; last accessed 14 January 2023.

9 See Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Memories and Commentaries* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), pp 89-90. Stravinsky blamed his plagiarism on his colleague the composer Maurice Delage. When Stravinsky heard a melody constantly played on a hurdy-gurdy, Delage opined that it "must be very old." Stravinsky concluded: "I do not cite this to grieve about it, however: I should pay for the use of someone else's property."