

IN AND OUT OF TUNE: AN IMPROVISATION

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(BEGIN WITH LAST 8 BARS OF "LES FEUILLES MORTES" ENDING ON 2 LOUD BARS OF "LA MARSEILLAISE").

I have often been asked, and have often wondered myself, how I came to be such an incurable francophile. Since I have also, for the greater part of my life, been a passionate lover of jazz and other forms of popular music, I am speculating that a review of my memories of how and when various French songs entered my consciousness and sensibility might provide an insight into my own French Connection. It is of course entirely plausible that such an insight, even if it should prove to be illuminating to my own *for intérieur*, might remain opaque to others, without transferable light, as it were. Such a risk is inherent, however, in improvisation. Following the conceptual model outlined by a recently deceased doyen of French psychoanalysis in his distinction between image and symbol, that is, between what is merely individual expression and what reaches out into the codes of the collective imagination, you will appreciate that improvisation cannot avoid threading along the very thin line between articulate transmission of the experience of a profound truth, on the one hand, and on the other, what is these days so frankly called a *wank*.

To begin then: when did I first hear a French melody? I think it unlikely that it was during my early childhood, which was spent in Yantanabie, near Streaky Bay, on that part of the coast known as the Great Australian Bight, some 800 kilometres west of Adelaide. Not that we were without music. On the contrary, my grandfather was obsessively fond of music. He had had a pianola hauled over from the city, and he owned a fine and varied collection of rolls from which he used to treadle all sorts of tunes. He was, as they say these days, heavily into light opera, and my earliest memory of being *moved* by music was when my mother sang the following to me to put me to sleep. (HERE PLAY 8 BARS OF "TIT WILLOW".)

Not at all French, but the existence of a lullaby tradition in my family could lead us to believe that the first French song I heard was (HERE 2 BARS OF "FRERE JACQUES"). Not so. I believe, rather, that it was not until I got to secondary school in Adelaide that it happened, and I am inclined to think it was the song about the chap who, one moonlit night, goes to his friend Pierrot to borrow his pen to write a letter. (HERE A FEW BARS OF "MON AMI PIERROT".) I remember being intrigued by this song, partly because French pens always seemed to be in the wrong place — my aunt's, for example, *sur le bureau de mon oncle*; and partly because of the strange logic by which the narrator, in the first verse, makes a causal link between needing to borrow the pen, and being cold because his fire has gone out. Had I had some Freudian training,

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it might all have been clearer, but I had no knowledge of Freud in those days: I was an innocent.

They were interesting times, though. In school, our French teacher was drilling the stuffy grammar into us, while beginning each lesson with a puffy-cheeked "Bonjour! Comment vous portez-vous?" At home, on the other hand, my parents were both involved in helping New Australians settle in, and among other visitors to the house was an ex-Wehrmacht boxing champion who, in his new job as tram-driver, had little other-opportunity to practise his French, which was quite fluent and colloquial, the sort you might pick up on a stroll down the Champs-Élysées, for example, or by meeting native French in their regular occupations. It was from him that I learned "Comment ça va?" And it was in that context, where French had suddenly become a language spoken by real people, that other pieces of French music began to make themselves heard above the general noise of the world. I remember one song about a woman who washed dishes at the back of a café, and who had too much to do to be able to dream: (HERE PLAY A FEW BARS OF "LES AMANTS D'UN JOUR".) And there was another one which hung around somewhere in the background: (HERE PLAY A FEW BARS OF "PADAM".)

At least as important as any of this, and probably more so, was the fact that at that time, in my early adolescence, I discovered French cinema. The first film I saw was strictly forbidden for children unaccompanied by adults, but since the age for paying adult entry was 14, I managed to get in as the adult accompanying the 13 year old friend whom I had persuaded to skip afternoon sport to join me in this adventure. I do not, now, remember many of the images of that film; and in particular, I have entirely forgotten the scenes which made it unsuitable for my eyes; but I have never forgotten the music: (HERE PLAY 32 BARS OF "LA RONDE".) I shall always be grateful to the entrepreneur who ran Adelaide's *Curzon* cinema, which showed almost entirely so-called "continental" films, and where I saw another film whose story I have remembered, and whose music was to be taken up by every guitarist who advanced to using fingers rather than fists. (HERE PLAY 24 BARS OF "LES JEUX INTER-DITS".)

Of course, everyone's adolescence in that era was a time of "forbidden games", so that these two films, the one daringly open about the joys of physical love, the other a heart-stirring meditation on death, were revelations for me. Although I still knew nothing about Freud, it was thus through French songs that the most serious part of my sentimental education was being achieved, and my sensibility being formed in an understanding of the Eros and Thanatos nexus. I had not had much practice at either, but when one of my University teachers had a group of us singing madrigals with lines such as "Une puce j'ai dans mon oreille, hélas", I was aware of what the real subject-matter was, and

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highly suspicious about why that flea was in the singer's ear, of all places. Likewise, when the same teacher had us sing traditional folk-songs, although some of them, like "Le bon roi Dagobert", were innocent enough, I was right onto, as they say these days, anything having to do with love or death. Thus, the little tune (HERE PLAY "J'AI DU BON TABAC DANS MA TABATIERE"): with its lines about fine or roughly rubbed tobacco in a tobacco-pouch, this song held no secrets for me, and nor did this one (HERE PLAY 1 VERSE OF "IL ETAIT UN PETIT NAVIRE"): I had won a scholarship to go to France, and like the little boat in the song, I had never been anywhere before. It was a clear warning of what could happen to me: a journey ending in a young man being consumed by other people's appetites for life. This gloomy view was moreover reinforced by a song that was heard frequently in the University French Club, sung by a young French migrant girl with a sweetly nostalgic voice. (HERE PLAY THE LAST 8 BARS OF "PLAISIR D'AMOUR", MERGING INTO LAST 8 BARS OF "LA MER".)

I nonetheless left my native land, having been taught through French songs to be very sceptical about the serious things in life. And of course, the Paris I found was not the one I had expected, which was like this: (HERE PLAY A FEW BARS OF "SOUS LE CIEL DE PARIS"). It was more like this: (HERE PLAY A FEW BARS OF "TOUS LES GARCONS ET LES FILLES DE MON AGE"). It was a disorienting experience for a boy from Adelaide. I became even more confused when I discovered, beyond the Freudian dimensions that I had by now mastered, that music was enrooted in questions of ideology, to the point that some songs were being banned from the airwaves. Such was not the case for this one (HERE PLAY ONE VERSE OF "LES BANCS PUBLICS"). Even though this song about lovers nibbling at one another on public benches veils a biting criticism of the bourgeoisie (you see, by that time I had learned to distinguish social *classes*), the singer could get away with it because he had dressed his attack up so nicely. But when the same singer sang about a woman being violated by a gorilla in the zoo (which for any student of literary exegesis, as I was at the time, was obviously a representation of bourgeois society being savaged by the singer), it resulted in the song being censored. I learned from this a great deal about encoding and decoding, before it became fashionable. For example, who would have thought that this little song, which was played in the middle of a popular film of the period, was so important? (HERE PLAY 1 VERSE OF "LE TOURBILLON DE LA VIE".) It is a happy little tune, and it still has nostalgic power for those who can remember the dark blond actress with the husky voice who sang it. But the whirlwind in the film's microcosmic tea-cup contained already the aborting of the new wave of energies that had spawned it, and the little tune was nothing less than the guiding system of a missile which bore a message much less optimistic about the future of national

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identity than the so-called "force de frappe".

There was another song of the time that was banned on the radio. One which I didn't get to hear until much later, when I was living in California. It went like this: (HERE PLAY 1 VERSE OF "LE DESERTEUR"). The song is about a young man who writes to the President to tell him that he is not going to answer the call to military service. Its author was already dead, and his grave had been spat on many times, and the war against which he had protested had been over for five years. But there are plenty of wars to go round, and plenty of presidents (and governors who are going to be presidents), so it was worth knowing the song, and humming it along with all the other, more local songs that one sang in those days in order to get by, if not to overcome.

And so it was through French songs that the little boy from Streaky Bay learned about love and death, about Freud and Marx, and about survival in hard times. And they also taught me that sceptical, analytical spirit that got me through structuralism, and post-structuralism, and to the point where I am now able to deconstruct my own reminiscences. If that were the end of the story, it would be rather flat, and I am happy to say that I am still learning new tunes. One that particularly took my fancy is this one: (HERE PLAY THE THEME FROM "DIVA"). It comes from a film not about a velvet gentleman musician of the beginning of the century, but about a young postman at our end of it, who falls in love with a Black American opera-singer, and who, thanks to his own faith, and the help of a mysterious, rather mystical stranger, escapes from the threat of various violent deaths, and realizes his dream of meeting and forming a friendship with the opera-singer. It is a fanciful tale, hardly believable, and more than a touch "rétro", as they say these days. But isn't "rétro" in the spirit of the times? Some look back to the great colonial adventures: (HERE PLAY A FEW BARS OF "INDIA SONG".) Personally, still incurably franco-ophile, I realize that my own "rétro" tendencies are just one sign in a whole semiotic system proving that, even if I have lost my naïveté, I have never really lost my innocence. I now just let the music drift to the surface as it will: (HERE PLAY 1 VERSE OF "PADAM".)

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