

“I am a poet who has the ability to sing his poems” – Charles Aznavour (1924-2018)

By Paul Bond
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French-Armenian Charles Aznavour, who has died aged 94, was the last of the great post-war *chanson* singer-songwriters. He leaves a legacy of some 1,200 songs, innumerable recordings and some notable film appearances.

He was not classically handsome, and his striking tenor, rich and textured in its lower register and impressively clear in its higher range, was not immediately valued because of what he called its “little frog.” He listed the things holding him back as “My voice, my height [5 feet 3 inches], my gestures, my lack of culture and education, my frankness and my lack of personality.” Some of these were vital in what was best about his work.

Aznavour’s parents, Mish and Knar, fled Armenia after the 1915 genocide. Charles’ older sister Aida was born in Salonica, and the family were awaiting US visas when Charles was born in Paris on May 22, 1924. His name at birth was Chahnour (or Shahnour) Varenagh Azavourian, or Aznaourian. Legend has it he was called “Charles” by a nurse who could not pronounce his name.

Both parents had theatrical backgrounds. Unable to travel to the US, they settled in the Latin Quarter of Paris, where they continued to appear in Armenian productions. Charles grew up with a love of music and theatre.

Aged nine, Charles heard a recording by Maurice Chevalier and announced that he wanted to become a *chansonnier*. That year he was enrolled in an acting school, soon touring with a troupe of child actors, and began making theatre and film appearances.

Aznavour later recalled the inspiration of three singers, Chevalier, Charles Trenet and Édith Piaf: “Trenet for his writing, Piaf for her pathos and Chevalier for his professionalism—and all three for their tremendous presence on stage.” This is a good summary of Aznavour’s strengths.

Aznavour was proud of having taken up Trenet’s mantle as “a songwriter who happens to sing his own songs,” saying Trenet’s three heirs were “Myself, [Jacques] Brel and [Georges] Brassens.”

He left school in 1939, although he had already been mostly out of education for about five years. As refugees, struggling for work with poor French, Mish and Knar found money for the children’s education limited, and Charles and Aida were both

looking for ways to earn money.

Aznavour worked as a nightclub dancer and touring actor, and began writing songs. His experiences then of “The jokes, the squibs, the madness, the orgies” were the basis of his song “Mes Emmerdes” (“My Troubles”).

The family remained in Nazi-occupied Paris through the war. As the Nazis classified the Armenians as Aryan, they were not themselves under immediate threat. They took advantage of this to shelter individuals escaping the Nazis.

The first was a Romanian Jew who had deserted from the Wehrmacht in 1940. His brother brought him to his friend Mish. Aida wrote later that “It was extremely dangerous for our family. If the Nazis found us, we would disappear in a second. We knew it... However, my father did not hesitate even for a minute.” The escapee slept in the same bed as Charles.

The Aznavours were not, apart from Charles, French citizens. When the French government distributed gas masks to every man and woman in Paris, Charles received one because he was French. Mish, Knar and Aida got one between them.

Aida said the family’s response came from their experience of the 1915 genocide. Their house was constantly filled with sheltered escapees, including Jews who had escaped the concentration camp at Drancy and Armenians fleeing conscription into the Wehrmacht.

Mish’s restaurant became somewhere fleeing Armenians could seek shelter, and the family also forged crude documents for them. Many left the house and joined the partisans.

Charles and Aida were involved, burning the uniforms of the soldiers who had escaped. Many neighbours knew they were sheltering escapees, but kept silent when the police inquired.

Among their friends were the Armenian poet Missak Manouchian and his wife Meline. When Missak was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943 for his part in the resistance “Manouchian Group,” Meline stayed with the Aznavours until the group was executed.

Mish and Knar eventually sent the children to Normandy, Knar joining them later.

Aznavour wrote two paragraphs on his family’s wartime role in a 2013 memoir. He told an interviewer he had written so little about it because “sometimes I am shy.” More convincing, however, was his insistence that “Actions are important, not

words,” and his comment that “Everything that we have, we got it from our parents.”

Aznavour was not as explicitly a political songwriter as Brecht or Léo Ferré. *Chanson* is marked by its realism, which Aznavour mostly used for emotional states rather than social ones, but the grit and truthfulness of his best work clearly owe much to this background. The director Jean Cocteau, who cast him in *Le Testament d'Orphée* (*Testament of Orpheus*, 1960), joked that “Before Aznavour, despair was unpopular.”

Some of Aznavour’s songs, like the post-coital “Après l’Amour” (“After the Love”), were initially banned from broadcast in France for their subject matter. He determinedly connected poetry and reality: “Nothing is dirty, everything is poetic—but moral hypocrites never admit this.” He summarised his work well saying “I am a poet who has the ability to sing his poems.”

In 1944, he joined singer-composer Pierre Roche in a nightclub act. They toured for eight years, giving Aznavour his first successes. They backed Édith Piaf, who recorded his songs, as did Ferré and Gilbert Bécaud.

Piaf was a mentor, although hardly an easy one. She advised him to have a nose job, then announced she had preferred him before. She inadvertently gave him one of his earliest breakout successes by turning down “Je Hais Les Dimanches” (“I Hate Sundays”), which he offered to Juliette Gréco, who had a great hit. Piaf was furious, shouting “What, you gave it to that Existentialist?”

Watching his theatrical performance of one of his finest songs, “La Bohème,” it is clear how much he owed to Piaf’s stagecraft. He remained a compelling performer to the end: in concert before his 90th birthday, his voice showed his age, and he admitted using an autocue against declining memory, but his power remained undiminished.

In the mid-1950s he finally achieved recognition in his own right, which coincided, too, with success as an actor with Cocteau and Georges Franju. At his best onscreen, as in his brilliant performance in François Truffaut’s *Tirez sur le Pianiste* (*Shoot the Piano Player*, 1960), he showed the same clear-eyed qualities that marked his better songs.

By the 1960s he was an international star, filling venues around the world, and producing some of his most extraordinary songs, numbers like “La Bohème,” “Il Faut Savoir” and “Hier Encore.” The latter, translated as “Yesterday Once More,” gave him one of his biggest successes globally. He said he preferred the English to his original.

Aznavour performed in several languages. By the 1970s this was spreading him a little thin artistically: the absence of a local *chanson* context made some of his anglophone recordings sound rather cheesy and wilfully old-fashioned. In Britain he is still probably best-known for songs from this period, like “She” and “The Old-Fashioned Way,” that are not the best of his work.

At the same time, however, he was also touching a sharper

social edge in his writing, largely through spending more time in the United States. “Comme Ils Disent” (“What Makes A Man,” 1972) is a tour de force theatrical performance about a lonely gay man dealing with his marginalisation. In 2014, Aznavour spoke of singing it on American primetime television 25 years earlier: “They were not happy about that, but I received many grateful letters.”

Any tendency latterly towards too much glitzy showbiz stuff and too many celebrity duets did not destroy his strengths as a songwriter. His 2003 “Je Voyage,” from the album of the same name, was a shamelessly moving song about aging, performed as a duet with his daughter Katia.

There was a fine line between commercial success and cynicism, but Aznavour negotiated this in part through *chanson* itself. He once spoke of the choice between “a successful life as a man, or show business. Now it is too late even to make a choice. I belong to the public or to my pride. My only salvation is to become a greater artist.”

In 1988, he responded to an earthquake in Armenia by setting up a charitable fund to donate to the victims. The Republic of Armenia later appointed him its ambassador to UNESCO and to Switzerland. In 1976, he wrote “Ils Sont Tombés” (“They Fell”) about the 1915 genocide, and he was active in calling for governmental recognition internationally. He was often criticised for his appeals to the Israeli government for its recognition.

In 1992, Aznavour said that the period when French song was seen as uniquely realistic was over: “Everything is *réaliste* now.” He saw the future of “my kind of song” then as being in country music for its storytelling: “Sure, I’m a country-music writer,” he said, “but my country is France.” He was pleased that younger artists had sought out his song writing. His influence can certainly be heard in the work of the young Belgian artist Stromae, whose “Formidable” echoes Aznavour’s “For Me, Formidable.”

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