

# A muse of postwar France: singer and actress Juliette Gréco (1927-2020)

By Paul Bond  
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Singer and actress Juliette Gréco's considerable achievements are bound up inextricably with the problems of postwar French intellectual and cultural life. Being "the muse of existentialism," which she gave its most glamorous face, is a complicated legacy.

She was born in Montpellier in southern France in 1927. After her policeman father walked out, she and her sister Charlotte were largely raised by their grandparents and nuns. When she was seven, her mother took them to Paris. They lived in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the area she later joked that "turned me into a marketable commodity."

Like fellow performer Charles Aznavour, Gréco was largely shaped by her wartime experiences. When France fell to the Nazis in 1940, the sisters were sent away to school in Bergerac. A couple of years later, they rejoined their mother, by now working for the Resistance.

In 1943, all three were arrested. Juliette responded: "A French Gestapo officer humiliated me. I became so upset that I punched him on the nose. Well, that cost me!"

She later wrote that she would never forgive the man who interrogated Charlotte and her: "I know that I will fight until my last day for happiness, against terror, against intellectual terrorism, indifference, and the removal of the only treasure that it is necessary to preserve at any cost: the freedom to live as we want, to think, to laugh, to give, to change, and to love without constraint whatever and whomever we love."

She remained loyal to this credo. She later became a vocal opponent of the wars in Algeria and Vietnam.

Her mother and sister were sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp, where 50,000 women died. Juliette, just 15, was sent to the women's prison at Fresnes, near Paris.

Gréco was released into a bitterly cold autumn, wearing her summer cotton dress and sandals. She had no home to go back to. She walked the eight miles back to Saint-Germain-des-Prés and knocked on the door of her former teacher Hélène Duc, now an actress. "I spent the next two years in bed."

Duc housed the penniless teenager, but also encouraged Gréco's drama lessons and search for theatre work. Thanks to Duc, Gréco worked as an extra at the Comédie-Française.

Gréco had no idea what had become of her sister and mother. After liberation, she went daily to the Hôtel Lutétia, where camp survivors arrived. Months after the war ended, she finally saw them both.

Charlotte was so thin she could barely walk. Juliette took them

home, where she fed Charlotte milk and tiny scraps of food, "the way you do a kitten."

Ineffably glamorous and cool, as she would remain her whole life, Gréco was becoming a symbol of Left Bank bohemianism. She disliked the "uncomfortable position" of "becoming famous without really having done anything."

Desperately poor—she said she smoked strong tobacco to forget her hunger—she was still best known for acting as hostess-cum-bouncer at the Saint-Germain-des-Prés jazz club Le Tabou, which opened in 1947. Gréco later pondered to what extent the taste for underground clubs was a combination of wartime air-raid memories and a desire to "remain outside the daily grind."

The Paris political landscape was dominated by the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF). At the first post-war legislative election, in 1946, the PCF won the largest share of the vote (28.6 percent). Masses of French workers desired a revolutionary change and a settling of accounts with the hated French bourgeoisie, but that aspiration was channelled behind a party determined to restabilise capitalism rather than challenge it.

Gréco herself had joined the PCF's Communist Youth Movement, studying playwrights approved by the party. In 2004, she was one of the high-profile supporters who bailed out the ailing Stalinist party financially, having often played its annual festival.

The political domination of the working class by Stalinism, which demoralised or made cynical many artists and intellectuals, helped lay the ground for the emergence of the nihilist, irrationalist philosophy of existentialism.

In a PR stunt, Gréco's friend, writer Anne-Marie Cazalis, openly identified their bohemianism with existentialism. The story cemented the iconography with a photograph of Gréco and Roger Vadim. Gréco, wearing hand-me-downs out of poverty, said later that "Black provides space for the imaginary."

Existentialism's notion of individualised freedom was appealing to the intellectuals who had returned to Paris and now joined the bohemian scene. Speaking of controlling the door of Le Tabou, Gréco said, "There were nights when I only let philosophers in!"

Although it later became an international attraction, Le Tabou began as a close-knit social scene. Existentialist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, an early admirer, danced there. Visitors also included Marlon Brando, Orson Welles and Marlene Dietrich.

It had a dedicated jazz scene. The resident band was writer Boris Vian's combo, and there were visiting American musicians like

Miles Davis, with whom Gréco had a passionate relationship.

Cazalis, who encouraged Gréco to sing, introduced her to other writers. Many, like Jean Cocteau, who would later cast her in his film *Orphée* (1950), encouraged her vocalising.

The decisive step was taken by Cazalis and the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre gave Gréco a selection of poems to sing, and the lyrics to a song he had not used in the play *Huis Clos* [*No Exit*, 1944]. For melodies, he sent her to composer Joseph Kosma.

Along with Sartre's "Rue des Blancs-Manteaux," she chose a Raymond Queneau poem, "Si tu t'imagines," another paean to the transience of youth. Kosma wrote the music and gave her a song he and Jacques Prévert had written for *Les Enfants du Paradis* (Marcel Carné, 1945), "Je suis comme je suis." These were her first recordings.

Sartre paid tribute to Gréco's qualities: she "has a million poems in her voice. ... It is thanks to her, and for her, that I have written songs."

She always devoted herself to modern poetry in song. Her work is a catalogue of great poetry, from Paul Verlaine, through Robert Desnos, to Jean-Claude Carrière. She continued to look for interesting new writing and poetic voices, like rapper/poet Abd Al Malik or Miossac. She was proud that she still predominantly drew young audiences.

She also recorded many songs by contemporary chansonniers. Léo Ferré's "Jolie Môme" became a defining number, exemplifying Gréco as the hard-nosed Paris bohemian kid. Her recording of Aznavour's "Je hais les dimanches" was his making as a songwriter, and there were important covers of songs by Guy Béart ("Il n'y a plus d'après"), Georges Brassens ("Chanson pour l'Auvergnat"), Serge Gainsbourg ("La Javanaise") and her friend Jacques Brel.

At her best, as on "Déshabilitez-moi," for example, she is an intelligent, witty and sensual presence, wholly independent. It is extremely appealing.

Gréco was always her own woman, who sometimes seemed courted for her glamour. After her first marriage ended, she had a long relationship with Hollywood producer Darryl F. Zanuck. It coincided with, but did not survive, her Hollywood career. She looked more comfortable in a Paris setting, as in the television series *Belphégor* (1965).

Shortly afterwards, she met the actor Michel Piccoli, whom she married in 1966. Piccoli, who died earlier this year, was of a similar political and cultural mould, being a PCF member who worked with many of the leading French directors of the 1960s and 1970s. They were married for 11 years.

Her third and final marriage was to the composer Gérard Jouannest (died 2018), who had worked extensively with Brel. Jouannest became her accompanist and musical director on tour until a 2016 stroke and the death of her daughter from her first marriage to Philippe Lemaire put an end to live performances.

There was about all of her work a strong sense of refusal to be cowed, to submit to the intolerable inequalities of life, that is admirable, even where tempered and limited by an existentialist individualism.

At times this took her into dangerous territory, personally and politically. In 1981, she accepted an invitation to give a command

performance in Santiago for the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. She saw it as political engagement, an attempt to reach out to the people and tell them "words they wanted to hear, and which were not those the junta wanted them to hear."

As part of her commitment to "never give up on people," she performed a set entirely of songs banned by Pinochet and left the stage to silence. She described it as "the greatest triumph of my career."

Gréco was fiercely egalitarian, and perhaps personally at her finest in discussing her relationship with Miles Davis. When Sartre asked why Davis did not marry her, he said "Because I love her too much to make her unhappy." He told her that "You'd be seen as a Negro's whore in America. It would destroy your career."

Years later, Gréco invited Davis to dine with her at the posh Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in midtown Manhattan. The *maitre d'hotel* looked disgusted, the food took hours to arrive and "was more or less thrown in our faces." Gréco took the waiter's hand as if to kiss it, and spat in his palm.

That night, Davis rang her in tears, saying, "I don't ever want to see you again here, in a country where this kind of relationship is impossible." They remained close until his death.

She was initially diffident about singing in Germany, because of her family's experience with the Nazis. After her first appearance in 1959, however, she returned repeatedly, performing her own material and that of her friend Dietrich. She eventually also recorded a German album, *Abendlied* (2005). She continued to record until 2014, when she made another album of Brel's songs.

That determination to continue, reflecting a commitment to life and music, enabled her to transcend to some extent the limitations of the political environment that shaped her.

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