





S Let My Name Be SORROW

Beauty, Melancholy and the Songs of Françoise Hardy

by: Gregg LaGambina ❁ photography: Jean Marie Perier

ONLY IN PARIS COULD SADNESS KEEP SUCH EASY COMPANY with romance. It's the birthplace of existentialism and where men and women still suck on Gitanes with vigor, scoffing at mortality along with their duck pate and morning wine. It's where the most admired landmark is a colossal scaffold, a tower of latticed iron; a grimace on the landscape for a hundred years until its very immovability won it favor. It's where on January 17th, 1944, Françoise Hardy arrived into this world and it's hard to imagine a loud, high cry echoing down the hospital corridor on that, her first day—it's more tempting to believe that her famous quiet melancholy began that same moment her life did. So let's romanticize the event and picture her new and alive to this world with wide, sad eyes, silent and watchful, as if that soft face had already seen it all and was mutely pleading, "What now?"

God bless this unhappy child.

This is not her story alone. She, with the absent father and strict grandmother, whose dismissals turned the thin, young Françoise inward, toward music, to carve out a place of her own amidst the rote rules of convent school, and who embraced shyness as a virtue to put a soft and silent space between herself and the world she stumbled into. If you look closely at any adult, you can see their childhood. It's right

there behind everything else, filling up each person like marrow in a bone. With Françoise Hardy, it's no different. Yet her reward (and ours) is that up until this very day (and yesterday and tomorrow), her childhood has held a note—a clean note that's still singing into her days more than a half-century later. A note we can all hear if we only take the time from our own loud lives to go and find it. It's the pure pitch of a reason to live.

A father can't help but act like a father once in a while, so it was on one of his visits that he arrived with the gift of a guitar. There's no need to embellish this as some mythical turning point, because it simply was. By 17 she was signed to the French label Vogue and by 18 had sold over 2 million copies of her debut single "Tous les Garçons et les Filles." The shy introvert, tall and thin, quiet and hidden behind brown bangs, was the most famous teenager in France. The kids were in a fever for France's brand of rock called "Yé-Yé" and Madame Hardy was their favorite pinup chanteuse. But introverts don't like bright lights and if the young Hardy started by building a private shelter behind music, singing songs as a way to give shape to the slow moving air of disillusionment, then she certainly wasn't going to be comfortable as anyone's idol.



With 1967's *Ma Jeunesse Fout Le Camp*, Hardy began infusing the bouncing bubblegum pop that made her famous with the depth of her truer feelings. By 1968, on *Comment Te Dire Adieu*, Hardy was covering the sadder songs of Leonard Cohen ("Suzanne") and Serge Gainsbourg ("L'Anamour"), her melancholic interpretations finding her even more fans, if not the same heated adolescents of only three years before. In fact, it only took her until late 1968 to forsake touring altogether after tireless jaunts through Italy, Germany, England and Spain. Holding fast to the spirit of her quietude, Hardy decided to give a farewell show in London, returning home to rethink a life after "Yé-Yé" and the manic fame she cultivated in so short a time.

It was with 1971's *La Question* that Hardy removed herself completely from the spotlight, and even the chanson tradition, instead making sparse, Brazilian tinged acoustic music with her voice so upfront and emotive, she was now more like a French counterpart to Marianne Faithfull or Nico than a fleeting pop star. Along the way, everyone from the Beatles to David Bowie to Mick Jagger to Bob Dylan would fall under the spell of her songs and image and clamor to meet with her, remaining popular with critics while her record sales continued to dip from their previous heights. Still a darling, if only to the musical elite, she'd continue to change her musical direction all through the '70s and '80s, collaborate with bands like Air and Blur in the '90s and even sing with Iggy Pop at the close of the century.

Never name-dropped by the hipster set quite as much on these shores as the venerable Serge Gainsbourg, maybe the time is nearly nigh to make room on that shelf with Feist or Beth Orton or Cat Power or Keren Ann and slide in a copy of Hardy's *La Question* or *Comment Te Dire Adieu*. A treasure is often just an old thing found, not a new thing admired. It's easy to find comfort in a retro aesthetic. There's no risk. But with Françoise Hardy, the past and the here-and-now are merely ribbons tied around the trunk of a tree older than both. The best music is timeless; timelessness only being earned as time goes by. Françoise Hardy is here now, she's as vital as ever and she's also a treasure. She's a realist and a practicing astrologist. None of these are contradictions because as anyone knows, to live a full life, you should never settle for just one thing. Here, now and yesterday we have M. Françoise Hardy graciously engaged in a rare conversation in the calm confident light of what may be her happy childhood arrived at last.

God bless this Françoise Hardy.

Did music save your life?

Music didn't save my life. It simply brought me out into the open, and cut me off from reality even more than I was already. If I'd never had a guitar, I'd have remained unknown and gone to work in a bookshop, or a library, or a record store. Who knows?

What is it about a song that makes you want to sing it?

What grabs me about a song is the quality of the melody. Nothing else counts.

There's a song on your new album called "Moments," where you sing about "the things we wish for" and "the things we thought we couldn't live without." Do you spend a lot of time thinking about past moments in your life?

This beautiful sad song by Perry Blake evokes those all-too-rare and too-brief moments of happiness with which we must all be satisfied. I actually feel as though I'm living in the past, the present and the future all at once, but when I think about the past, it's mainly the happy times that come to mind. I'm especially nostalgic about the '70s and the '80s, which must have been the happiest years of my life, thanks to my son and his father. [Her son Thomas was born in 1973; she married his father, famed French pop star Jaques Dutronc, in 1981.]

Your songs have probably been described most often as "sentimental" or "melancholy." Do the best songs come from sadness?

The most sublime music draws its beauty out of pain, as you can hear from the slow movements of the Beethoven, Brahms, Rachmaninov, Chopin and Ravel piano concertos.

Would you characterize yourself as a sentimental or melancholy person, or do you get rid of these things by singing?

It seems to me that what we express in song—just like what we appreciate in art—relates to our innermost selves. I'm romantic through and through, as are most of the kinds of music I listen to, the books that I read and the films that I watch.

L'Essentiel Françoise

by: Keren Ann



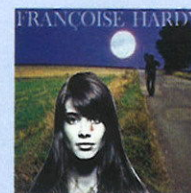
One of my greatest privileges these past five years has been to share, every now and then, a bottle of wine with Françoise Hardy and talk about anything but music. I recognized her voice and singing before I even knew how to speak. Her albums were an unconditional part of the house I grew up in, my mom being her biggest admirer. I believe that she stands out of any French musical scene, along with Serge Gainsbourg. Every one of her records is a marvel in terms of sound and production and her love for melancholic and violently soft melodies goes so perfectly with her writing. Some of her songs can break your heart.

Albums

If you don't know of her music, I recommend starting with...



LA QUESTION
(1971)



SOLEIL
(1970)



IF YOU LISTEN
(1972; reissue, 2000)

Songs

If you want to just listen to a selection of her perfect songs, I would recommend...



"Ma Jeunesse Fout le Camp"
MA JEUNESSE FOUT LE CAMP
(1967)



"Mon Amie la Rose"
GREATEST RECORDINGS
(1999)



"Comment Te Dire Adieux?"
COMMENT TE DIRE ADIEUX?
(1968)

"Fleur De Lune (Song of Winter)" +
"Tu Ressembles A Tous Ceux Qui Ont Eu du Chagrin"
SOLEIL (1970)

"The Garden of Jane Delawney" +
"Until It's Time for You To Go"
IF YOU LISTEN
(1972; reissue, 2000)

"Chanson Sur Toi et Nous"
J'ECOUTE DE LA MUSIQUE SAOULE/STAR
(1977/1978; double disc reissue, 2003)

"La Question"
LA QUESTION
(1971)

Singer/songwriter Keren Ann was born in Israel and moved to Paris at age 11. Her most recent recordings include *La Disparition* (2002), *Not Going Anywhere* (2003) and *Nolita* (2005).

There's far too much suffering in the world, and I find aging, sickness and death unacceptable.



You've made beautiful songs in every decade since the '60s. Do you ever feel nostalgia for the music of any particular decade from your career—either for your own music, or the music of others?

For some years now, musical inspiration seems to have got rather thin on the ground. So much has been done in the pop music field that it's a lot harder nowadays to show any originality, or even how good you are. It's all too easy to look back longingly at the '60s, '70s and '80s, when inspiration was inexhaustible. Incidentally, there are actually FM radio stations in France that broadcast pop music from that period all day long.

You were right there, in the room, with people like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, at the height of the swinging '60s in London. Do people like Noel and Liam Gallagher of Oasis, or a celebrity couple like Kate Moss and Pete Doherty even come close to the unique excitement of what was happening in England back then?

Not for people of my generation. Besides, in all honesty, none of the artists you mentioned there have the staggering charisma of Mick Jagger, or the stunning creativity of John Lennon, Paul McCartney or George Harrison. They're not even in the same league. The awful thing nowadays is that it's really hard to spot good records that don't get enough airplay, in the deluge of indifferent or even truly awful records which are swamping us. These days, lack of quality is drowning out quality, whereas before the opposite was true.

Do you ever resent America for not embracing you as much as the rest of the world?

I'm much too introverted and not nearly showy enough for the U.S.A. I have a voice that is rather limited and not very interesting either. To go down well in the States, you need a more original and more powerful sound. I'm not in the least surprised that I'm not known over there, particularly as I've never made any effort in that direction. Even in France, I've sidelined myself by giving up performing in 1968 and keeping promotion to a minimum when I put out an album.

Some have described you as "pessimistic." Would you say that your pessimism has always been proven true, or have you been more often pleasantly surprised by how well things have turned out?

It's odd to be pessimistic when you lead such a privileged life! It's true that when you expect the worst, you can only be pleasantly surprised. But I think I'm a pessimist because I'm a realist, and I find it so hard to accept the tragedy of the human condition. Even though mankind is to blame, more often than not, there's far too much suffering in the world, and I find aging, sickness and death unacceptable.

Are you still interested in rock music?

Ever since meeting Hélène Grimaud in 2000, I've been listening to a lot of classical music, and I've been lucky enough to get to know other great virtuosi such as Martha Argerich, the Capuçon brothers, Piotr Anderszewski and Nicholas Angelich, and I never miss going to hear them when they play in Paris. That's why in the field of rock music I haven't moved on from bands such as Radiohead, Massive Attack, Coldplay, Muse and so on.

What is your favorite song to sing?

"Que Reste-t-il Re Nos Amours?" by Charles Trenet, because it's one of the most beautiful songs ever written, and it makes me cry. And although it was written during the war, the time it conjures up, the Liberation, is one that fascinates me.

What is the hardest song for you to sing?

I find any song with too much rhythm difficult or even impossible to sing. I'm more comfortable with melody.

What song will you never sing again?

My first song, "Tous les Garçons et les Filles", which was also my biggest hit. Because from every point of view it's simplistic and no longer appropriate for someone of my age.

Is Paris still a place as mysterious, promising, romantic and exciting as it



Seine Change

as told by: Beck

To me, Françoise Hardy is emblematic of that whole '60s period coming out of the Beats and going into the French New Wave and rock and roll and folk and sophistication and all these things. It's that sort of cliché romantic image of kids strumming guitars on the Seine in Paris. That's the image that I get of her and her music, at the most simple level. But then on the other level, there are these amazing albums. They're almost like chamber music. To my somewhat uninformed ear, it just seemed deeply French—going back into the core of French music. I went through a big period about 10 years ago where she was all I listened to.

I probably first heard her music at my parents' house, but I don't think I became aware of her until I was a little bit older. It was one of those things that was playing every once in a while on the turntable when I was a little kid. When I got really into her later, I'd ask my mom about her and she told me about how in the early '60s—she grew up in the Village, in New York—they had these Scopitone [pronounced "scope-a-tone"] machines that were like jukeboxes but they played movies. They had a Françoise Hardy one and she remembers her and her 12-year-old girlfriends playing it over and over and trying to dress like her and trying to look like her.

My mom would take me to Truffaut films when I was 8, so I grew up a little bit a Francophile. But I think, also, maybe what was attractive about her music is that I didn't understand the French and there's a sort of naïveté about what was really happening, so I could kind of graft my own thing to it; my own idea or fantasy of what that world was. I think over the years I've found myself listening to a lot of

Brazilian, French and Japanese stuff—different kinds of music where there isn't the significance of language so maybe I can concentrate on what the singer's intending rather than being cluttered up by the words and the meaning. Can you imagine hearing the Who's "My Generation" and having no idea what they're saying? I think there's a bit of that going on for me with Françoise Hardy. I think that you can still get that there's something interesting and substantial going on and you don't have to totally get it. There is a gravity to her music and if I actually knew what she was saying, it might take that away.

My favorite album is *La Question*. It seemed like it just distilled something about her and her songs. There's another one called *Ma Jeunesse Fout le Camp* and one called *Comment Te Dire Adieu*. Those are the other two albums that I love. I like those mid-'60s albums. All that stuff seems to come out of a certain time, but *La Question* just seems to stand outside of time for me. There are a lot of stripped down acoustic songs on that record and that cover photo is great. You know, it's weird, I hadn't even thought of this until now, but I think that cover and maybe even the mood of the record had a big influence on *Sea Change*.

There's a couple of people who I feel don't get enough attention or notice in America or England, outside of their own country. Serge Gainsbourg definitely got his due over the last 10 years, but I'm glad people are discovering Françoise Hardy now. There's a lot to learn there. She's definitely someone who should be rediscovered.

Beck's most recent album is Guero, a remix of his entire album Guero from 2005.



was when you were discovered and rose to fame?

Although I was born in Paris, I can still never get over the beauty of its streets, buildings, gates, churches, bridges, shops and everything else. But it's impossible to live there these days: too many people, too much traffic, too much pollution, too much dog mess! I suppose the same could be said about all big cities. I love watching French films from the '50s where you see Paris as it was then: it was so much more open and airy, and so much less vulgar!

David Bowie once said he was "passionately in love" with you; Bob Dylan once dedicated a poem to you; Mick Jagger once called you his "ideal woman." What is the best compliment you've ever received?

Those were just superficial compliments only aimed at the way I looked in the '60s. I might have said the same sorts of things about them, except that I was attracted as much or even more by their music as by their looks. (I have to admit that my early songs had nothing to them.) I was much more touched when Suzanne Vega told me that she enjoyed my album *La Question*, which she'd discovered through her brother, who often listened to it.

Have your explorations into music and astrology explained the world to you, or do you still wonder what it all means?

All astrology can do is to tell us about which aspects of our conditioning will take control when reacting to the outside world, whether we're fast or slow, whether we're excited or inhibited. Music magnifies the tragedy of our condition and provides temporary solace. Only spirituality holds the key, but you have to look for it. I believe we were put on earth to learn. Actually, I've often thought that our life on earth is neither more nor less than the Christian purgatory or hell, and that our real life is somewhere else. I found confirmation of this in a sentence from Gitta Mallasz's *Talking with Angels*: "What is seen as Death from below, above is Life." **F**