

Juliette Gréco, the Grande Dame of Chanson Française, Is Dead at 93

By Anita Gates



The singer and actress Juliette Gréco in 1965. Jean-Paul Sartre once said, “Gréco has a million poems in her voice.” Keystone/Getty Images

Juliette Gréco, the singing muse of bohemian postwar Paris who became the grande dame of chanson française and an internationally known actress, died on Wednesday at her home near Saint-Tropez. She was 93. Her family announced the death in a statement sent to the news agency Agence France-Presse.

For almost seven decades, Ms. Gréco was a loyal practitioner of the musical tradition known as chanson française, a specific storytelling genre of popular music. The songs are “like little plays,” she told The New York Times in 1999, adding: “They’re typically French. We’re a people who express our love in songs, our anger in songs, even our revolution in songs.”

She was the darling of critics, as well as of the intellectuals whose world she inhabited. Ms. Gréco’s ultimate rave review came from a friend, the Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who said simply, “Gréco has a million poems in her voice.”

Her signature hits included “Sous le Ciel de Paris” (“Under Paris Skies”), “Les Feuilles Mortes” (which English speakers know as “Autumn Leaves”), “Déshabillez-Moi” (“Undress Me”), “Jolie Môme” (“Pretty Kid”) and “Je Suis Comme Je Suis” (“I Am What I Am”).

In an essay for The Times in 1952, the pianist and composer Ernest Lubin analyzed Ms. Gréco’s greatness. He praised her “deep, throaty voice that ranges from a near whisper to raucous abandon,” her ability to “create a mood of astonishing intensity and conviction,” her stage presence and even her repertoire, with its “feeling for literary values.”

Juliette Gréco was born on Feb. 7, 1927, in Montpellier, France, near the Mediterranean coast. Her parents, Gérard Gréco, a Corsican-born police officer, and Juliette (Lafeychine) Gréco, who was from Bordeaux, soon separated, and Juliette was brought up partly by her grandmother. She was 12 when World War II began in Europe and 13 when Hitler’s troops marched down the Champs-Élysées.

Both her mother and her sister worked in the Resistance and were arrested and shipped off to Nazi camps (they survived); because of their association, Juliette spent a short time in a French prison. After the war, still in her teens, she lived alone in Paris.

With the help of a family friend, the actress Hélène Duc, she took drama lessons while working as a sort of combination hostess and bouncer at Le Tabou, a jazz club in the heart of St.-Germain-des-Prés, the Left Bank neighborhood that had become the city's center of bohemian life. During this time her habit of wearing men's clothes, including rolled-up pants, was necessitated by poverty and made possible by the hand-me-downs of male friends who lived in the same pension. The style caught on. Though she had yet to garner attention as an actress, her distinctive look — she dressed all in black, wore her dark hair straight and long, had thick bangs and liberally applied black eyeliner — got the attention of leading French photographers, who took and published pictures of her. "I was becoming famous without really having done anything," Ms. Gréco told The Guardian in 2006, "which is a very uncomfortable position."

As a fixture in the neighborhood, she became close friends with some of the most admired philosophers and authors of their time: Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Boris Vian and Albert Camus. And, she said, she learned just by listening to them.

"I was all curiosity, but I felt I didn't have anything to give in return," she said. "I was at that age where all one does is take."

By the time the renowned prewar Right Bank cabaret Le Boeuf sur le Toit reopened in 1949, Ms. Gréco had decided to try singing. She was offered a job helping to organize the first show and — after seeking musical suggestions from artistic friends like Jacques Prévert, Joseph Kosma and Sartre — she cast herself.

That was the beginning. The first song she recorded, "Je Suis Comme Je Suis," was released in 1951. Her first album, "Juliette Gréco — Chante Ses Derniers Succès," appeared the next year. But her star-defining triumph was her 1954 concert at Olympia Hall in Paris, after a tour of the United States and South America. During the performance she introduced "Je Hais les Dimanches" ("I Hate Sundays"), a new number by a young songwriter, Charles Aznavour.

Ms. Gréco had made her film debut even before her singing career began — as a nun in "Les Frères Bouquinquant," a 1948 drama. She went on to appear in almost 30 films, mostly in the 1950s and '60s. They included

Jean Cocteau's "Orphée" (1950), as Aglaonice, an astronomer-witch; "The Sun Also Rises" (1957), an American adaptation of Hemingway's novel, with Tyrone Power and Ava Gardner; "The Roots of Heaven" (1958), a drama set in Africa, in which she starred opposite Errol Flynn; and "Crack in the Mirror" (1960), with Orson Welles.

Ms. Gréco sang the title song, on camera, in "Bonjour Tristesse" (1958). Her final acting role was in "Jedermanns Fest" (2002), a multinational drama with Klaus Maria Brandauer, and she appeared as herself in "Dan les Pas de Marie Curie" (2011), a French-Polish documentary.

She also made a lasting impression in a 1965 French mini-series, "Belphegor, Phantom of the Louvre." When it was made into a feature film in 2001, she was cast in a small role as a tribute to her influence.

In 1953, Ms. Gréco married the actor Philippe Lemaire; they divorced in 1956. Their daughter, Laurence-Marie Lemaire, died in 2016. She was married to the French actor Michel Piccoli from 1966 until their divorce in 1977. She was with the pianist and composer Gérard Jouannest, her third husband, from 1988 until his death in 2018.

Information on survivors was not immediately available.

Her longest and best-known romantic relationship may have been with Miles Davis, the celebrated jazz trumpeter, whom she met when he was appearing in Paris in 1949. Sartre reportedly once asked him why he and Ms. Gréco were not married. According to Ms. Gréco, Mr. Davis replied, "I love her too much to make her unhappy."

In 2014, Ms. Gréco told The Guardian, "We saw each other regularly until his death" in 1991.

Ms. Gréco's last album, "Gréco Chante Brel," was released in 2013. She announced her farewell tour in 2015, telling the regional newspaper La Dépêche that retirement was "very complicated for me." She said she did not want to create the sight of "an old woman hanging on."

The last tour date was in May 2017 in Paris.

In her later years, Ms. Gréco was unapologetically nostalgic for the good old days.

"Today there is much less magic," she told The Montreal Gazette in 2015, lamenting, among other things, the current distance between intellectuals and their students. "Things have changed. Perhaps the young have been taken hostage by money."