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David Looseley, *Édith Piaf: A Cultural History*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015. vii + 254 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. £25.00. (hb). ISBN 978-1-7813-8257-8.

Review by Jonathyne Briggs, Indiana University Northwest.

David Looseley's deft analysis of Édith Piaf as both an artist and a cultural icon situates "the little sparrow" within the context of twentieth-century French history. Piaf's career symbolized not only the changes within French popular song, but also changes in the nature of national identity. Within the history of *chanson*, Piaf stands apart from other iconic figures and is undoubtedly the most internationally renowned figure among French singers. Borrowing from Pierre Nora, Looseley asserts that Piaf serves as a *lieu de mémoire*, as her social, cultural, and political meanings in French society constantly changed during her life and continued to change after her death in 1963. Complicating and contributing to the various viewpoints concerning Piaf was her own role in self-invention and fashioning personal myths to make her life an extension of her stage persona. Looseley observes that, while Piaf has garnered much attention from biographers, much of her life was obfuscated by her own efforts to fabricate her life story and, even in her death, these myths were reinforced through commemorations, fan culture, and hagiographies. Looseley circumvents the biographical approach, allowing a deeper investigation of the symbolic Piaf and how her celebrity encapsulates a number of transformations concerning gender and femininity in French society, class, national and international identity, religion and morality, and the nature of celebrity culture.

Looseley divides his work into three distinct sections that address specific aspects of the cultural history of the Piaf legend. The first, "Narrating Piaf," focuses on the early life of Piaf, as well as her early career working within the genre of *la chanson réaliste*. Looseley situates Piaf's early aesthetic within the cultural geography of the Paris of the 1920s, especially in the music emerging from the cabarets. Piaf began her career through street singing, but soon capitalized on opportunities in the narrative conventions of *chanson* to recreate her past and to codify her experiences as a distinct part of her repertoire, her rags to riches story becoming an essential part of her image as a chronicler of street life in working-class Paris. Piaf would eventually connect with professional managers and songwriters to help refine her sound but, as Looseley observes here, she was clearly in charge of this process from the outset of her career. The remainder of this section covers how the events of the 1930s and 1940s, in particular the Occupation, led Piaf to an apolitical stance, even as her songs became important symbols of French identity.

In the second section, "Piaf and Chanson," Looseley unravels the relationship between Piaf and *la chanson française*, that peculiar French genre of poetic song. Traditionally, critics and music historians understand Piaf as part of an earlier tradition of interpretation, unlike the more contemporary *chanson* of the postwar era rooted in the work of singer-songwriters.[1] Looseley notes how Piaf certainly can claim authorship of many of her works, but she is hardly considered a musical author in the same respect as Georges Brassens, Leo Ferré, or Jacques Brel, whose work is the foundation of *chanson*. Certainly, Piaf's gender factors into this perception, as does her celebrity rooted in the public consumption of her love affairs. Piaf, in this sense, does not match with the image of the serious, intellectual artists, as her

songs often resonate through their sentimental and emotional power. Nevertheless, Looseley underscores the significance of Piaf's postwar work in the development of the *chanson* as a distinct new cultural form, namely in her shift from the realist style of her earlier work to the universalist approach of her songs after the war. This shift brought her international fame, which in turn reified her national stature as the ambassador of French culture in the transatlantic 1950s.

Looseley adroitly connects Piaf's international fame to radical transformations in the nature of the international music industry and the emergence of the star system in France (building off of Edgar Morin's work).^[2] Here is where his focus on Piaf's invention explored in the first section pays off, as he notes that her ability to reinvent her narrative and incorporate her imagined life story into her music pays off with a different type of authenticity that resonates with international audiences. In this final period of her career, Piaf records several songs that would come to define her lyrical balance of romanticism and tragedy. This authenticity would all become a critical part of the cultural positioning of Piaf (and *chanson*) as minor art (to use Bourdieu's term) that sits between low culture and high culture.^[3] Piaf's origin story as a street singer provided a patina of authenticity concerning her experience, but her ability to perform these songs in highly emotive concerts in larger settings revealed the artistic nature of her *métier*.

In the final section, "Remembering Piaf," Looseley notes how Piaf's death ossified many of her inventions concerning her image and her life by creating a commemoration culture that celebrated the curated image that she had worked her entire life. With her death, the reimagining of Piaf emphasized a type of nostalgia for the France of the *chanson réaliste* that often downplayed the changes in her images (or one that conflated all of her styles together). As commemoration milestones appeared in 1973 and each decade after, Piaf's death took on a type of mythic status, and her grave at Père Lachaise serves as a type of pilgrimage site for her numerous fans. Looseley keenly observes how her death has reinforced a religious fervor that her performances elicited among French audiences, remarking that her funeral had the attributes of a state funeral in all but name. He closes the book by looking at how Piaf has become a last benchmark for artistic success and continues to draw the interest of performers, filmmakers, and fans while simultaneously marking the end of an artistic era for French popular music.

Looseley's book offers a compelling way of rethinking the mythology of Piaf while still addressing its power through narratives, especially his analysis of her early career. He nimbly moves between the dramatic narratives of Piaf's affairs and scandals, while at the same time addresses how their public consumption reflected significant changes in French society. The symbolic permanence of Piaf within French popular music has remained a stable aspect since her death and reveals the continued fascination both in France and internationally in her voice and life, even as the reality of the latter is unclear. What Looseley helps us to understand is how those narratives continued to change as Piaf took on multiple meanings as a cultural figure. As we continue to wait for the next "Piaf," Looseley rightly suggests the unique nature of the little sparrow as a singular French icon for a France often grappling with transformations in society and seeking solace and shelter in the emotional worlds of her songs.

NOTES

[1] See Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000); David Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France: Authenticity, Politics, Debate* (New York: Berg, 2003); and Jonathyne Briggs, *Sounds French: Globalization, Cultural Communities, and Pop Music, 1958-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[2] Edgar Morin, *The Stars* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

[3] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, transl. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

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