

Edith Piaf: Classroom Activities

Short Biography:

Edith Piaf (1915-1963) was a French singer and one of France's best-known cultural icons. She was so popular that 100,000 people attended her funeral in Paris and traffic came to a standstill. There is a museum in Paris dedicated to her memory, and thousands of people still visit her grave in the Pere Lachaise cemetery every year.

She was born Edith Giovanna Gassion in Belleville, a poor suburb of Paris. Her mother, also a performer, named her after Edith Cavell, a British nurse who had just been executed as a spy by the Germans. Piaf's father was a soldier, and when he was off fighting at the front, her mother abandoned Piaf and she lived with her maternal and then with her paternal grandmother. Edith was blind for much of her childhood, and even though she couldn't see, she spent many hours at the piano, teaching herself songs and singing. When she was 14, Edith teamed up with her acrobat father. She toured France with him and sang in the streets and in pubs and cafes. Two years later, she 'adopted' her half-sister, Simone Bertheaut, and they became street singers.

In 1935, Piaf was discovered by a nightclub owner, Louis Leplée, who asked her to sing in his club. He gave her the nickname Little Sparrow (*La Môme Piaf*) because she was so small. Piaf was an instant success. She sang at Leplée's nightclub several times, and began to mix with the rich and famous of Paris. However, a few months later Leplée was murdered (Edith was a suspect in the murder at first, but was later acquitted.) When WWII began, Piaf stayed in Paris and performed for the Germans, which led many people to suspect that she was a Nazi sympathizer. However, that was never proven, and in fact she helped the French Resistance on several occasions.

Piaf became famous worldwide after the war. However, her personal life hit many low points: The love of Piaf's life, boxer Marcel Cerdan, died in a plane crash in October 1949, while flying from Paris to New York City to meet her. In 1951, Piaf was seriously injured in a car crash along with French singer Charles Aznavour, breaking her arm and two ribs. Two more near-fatal car crashes followed, and Piaf became addicted to morphine and alcohol.

Piaf married Jacques Pills in 1952, and in 1962, she married Théo Sarapo, a Greek hairdresser-turned-singer and actor, 20 years her junior.

Edith Piaf is probably France's greatest singer. Her songs include: 'La vie en rose', 'Milord,' 'Hymne a l'Amour', 'Padam, Padam', 'l'Accordeoniste,' 'Under Paris Skies' 'Je ne Regrette Rien', and 'La Foule.'

1- Comprehension Questions

The above text can either be read aloud by the teacher, or students can take turns reading it. Then students respond to the following questions – either written or speaking aloud, in English or French.

- 1- What year was Edith Piaf born?
- 2- What was her real name?
- 3- Who was Edith Piaf named after?
- 4- What did her father do?
- 5- What did her mother do?
- 6- Who raised her?
- 7- What happened to her when she was a child?
- 8- What did she do during WWII?
- 9- What was the name of her sister?
- 10- What happened to Louis Leplée?
- 11- How many times was Piaf married, and what is one interesting thing about each husband?
- 12- How many car crashes did Piaf survive?
- 13- What are two of Edith Piaf's famous songs?
- 14- Do you know anything interesting about Edith Piaf that was not mentioned in this biography?

2- Interviews

In this activity, the students form groups of two, with each student interviewing the other. Responses can be in English or French, and can either be written down or spoken aloud.

For the first set of questions, students are interviewing each other about Piaf, for the second set of questions, one of the students responds as if she is Edith Piaf:

QUESTIONS about EDITH PIAF

1. What are three interesting facts about Edith Piaf?
2. Would you like to have met Edith Piaf? Why or why not?
3. What else would you like to know about Edith Piaf and why?
4. What questions would you like to have asked Edith Piaf?
5. Why do you think her parents abandoned her? How did this affect her later life?
6. Was Edith Piaf happy?
7. If Edith Piaf was alive and singing today, would she have still become such a big star?
8. _____

QUESTIONS for EDITH PIAF

1. What was your favorite song? Why?
2. What was the hardest part about your life? The best part?
3. What was it like, being blind as a little girl?
4. Why did you sing so many songs about love?
5. Many of your songs are about Paris. Why is Paris such a special city?
6. Why were your songs so important to so many people?
7. Is it true, that you 'ne regrette rien', or are there things that you do regret?
8. _____

3- Edith Piaf Poster

Create a poster featuring Edith Piaf. This poster could either:

- Show the different stages of Piaf's life
- Advertise a concert featuring Piaf
- Represent a CD or a record cover for a Piaf recording



For this activity, the text on the poster should be in French. Students should research the historic posters featuring Piaf – how she is represented artistically, as well as her actual image.

4- Magazine Article

Write a magazine article about Edith Piaf. Include an imaginary interview with her. Include questions about what she did every day, as well as what she thought about. This interview could be with an older, famous Edith Piaf, or a young, struggling Edith Gassion (before she was a star).

Depending on the student's level of French, these articles could be written in either French or English. Students can take turns reading their articles aloud, and give each other feedback on what they've composed.



Le photographe Hugues Vassal dit d'elle succédant :
« Elle m'a tant appris. Je lui dois tout. »

SAGAS D'ÉTÉ
J'AI AIMÉ UNE STAR



Edith PIAF
PAR HUGUES VASSAL

Entre le photographe stagiaire et la star de la chanson, la relation ne devait être que professionnelle. Mais la Môme voulait plus. Et l'a obtenu !

on, rien ne me prédisait à vivre dans l'intimité de la plus grande star de la chanson française. Rien de rien. Nous sommes en 1957. Par hasard – et nécessité –, je suis stagiaire assistant-photographe pour France Dimanche. Je peine à payer chaque mois le loyer de ma chambrette de la porte de Saint-Ouen. Miki, le train dans les couloirs du journal. Les bureaux sont déserts : mes collègues sont partis déjeuner, comme à leur habitude, dans les brasseries chics des Halles, moi, je suis au régime sandwich maigre. Le téléphone sonne. C'est Edith Piaf. Elle vient de changer d'amant et voudrait qu'un photographe vienne officialiser ce nouveau flirt. Je suis présent, disponible : on m'emmène à Dijon, où elle est en tournée, ouverte ce soir. A 17 heures, je grimpe dans *Le Métal* (un train de luxe), une jeune d'argent en poche et mon ambition en handkolette. Lorsque j'arrive, il fait déjà nuit. Je me penche et parviens au théâtre municipal local avec beaucoup de retard : le spectacle est commencé. La salle est plongée dans l'obscurité. Piaf chante *Salut d'adieu*. Guidée par sa voix, je me fraye un chemin et me retrouve dans le trou du souffleur. De là, son petit 1,48 mètre me paraît immense. Elle irradie dans son éternelle robe noire. Entre l'excitation d'être là, si proche d'elle, et la déception d'avoir raté mes premières photos – de l'endroit où je me trouve, impossible d'imaginer réussir un cliché –, je pense. J'ai chaud. Le rideau se ferme. Je me gisais dans la fosse. Galvaudant par l'enthousiasme des fans, stressé par ma mission : il me faut des clichés du nouvel amant de la star !

IL PHOTOGRAPHE SES AMANTS AVEC FÉBRILITÉ, LA MÔME LE GRATIFIE D'UN « TU ME PLAIS ? »

Mon appareil photo sous le blouson, j'avance, prêt à « voler » une image. Edith Piaf est au bout du couloir. Elle me respire, file droit sur moi et m'apostrofe : « C'est toi le nouveau ? Rembrouste service : va dire au gitanier la-bas qu'il me lâche le mollet. Ensuite, va voir le gars en bleu marine, c'est Félix Marten, il fait ma première partie. Invoile à ma table ce soir. Et puis, évidemment, on boit le mal dans ta boîte. C'est maigre comme un clochard. Tu vendras aussi, je vais te faire plaisir : » Je m'excuse. Photographie les amants d'Edith – Funcken et le nouveau –, avec difficulté. La Môme me gratifie d'un « Tu me plais ? » J'ai vingt-quatre ans et je viens, sans le savoir, d'intégrer « la bande des gâteaux » du 67 bis, boulevard Lannes. Autour de la chanteuse gravite tout un aréopage. Des auteurs, compositeurs, réalisateurs, des fachos, des pannes, c'est la cour des miracles, à l'image de la propriétaire des lieux, recaptée de la rue. Ma chance, c'est d'avoir la légende d'un ouvrier de Saint-Ouen, Piaf ricane ma présence. Faut de moi un photographe averti, témoin de son quotidien. La consigne est claire : je dois la photographier. ➤➤