

An Anthology
of French and
Francophone Singers,
from A to Z,
2nd Edition

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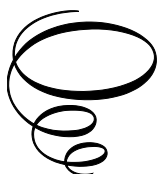
Singin' in French

Edited by

Michaël Abecassis, Marcelline Block
and Felicity Chaplin

With caricatures by Jenny Batlay, Igor Bratusek
and Ewa Szypula

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To Jenny H. Batlay, PhD

“Vitam Impendere Vero”

Jenny Batlay received her PhD from Columbia University, and won first prize and the gold medal in portraiture at the *5ème Grand Prix de Noël* Exhibition of Painting (Nice, 1968-69). Her publications include *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Compositeur de chansons* (1976). She is the co-illustrator of *French Cinema in Close-up: La Vie d'un acteur pour moi* (edited by Michaël Abecassis and Marcelline Block, 2015).

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Jenny Batlay in her Studio at GalleryOne, SoHo (New York City), 1990s
and her paintings

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PREFACE

Few linguists have paid attention to French song and its linguistic uses. This mini-dictionary looks to fill this gap, for even if song is vastly quoted in popular culture and referenced in newspapers or scholarly manuals, it is perhaps not taken seriously enough by researchers and universities to warrant more in-depth research. However, throughout the world, songs in the French language are used in the acquisition of French in schools as well as at the university level: teachers or professors can incorporate songs into the curriculum in order to illustrate differences of register and linguistic variation as well as to raise lexical or grammatical questions. In scholarly works, on account of the quality of the lyrics, it is common for extracts of songs – spanning the spectrum from Jacques Brel to MC Solaar to Alain Souchon – to make an appearance, including, of course, legendary figures of French *chanson* such as Georges Brassens and Francis Cabrel. Song is often perceived, at first glance or listen, as a distraction and as something light-hearted – which is in fact not a complete assessment. Is it this light-hearted and spoken quality that causes song to be relegated to the margins of the canon, or that renders it inferior to a written text that is deemed more literary? More than the oral nature of song, its association with music poses the problem: song is a form of popular expression, but, rather like popular literature, which had long been looked down upon by scholars and the academy, this genre has now become a focus of serious academic scholarship and criticism.

French popular songs of the 1920s and 1930s retrace the traditional forms characteristic of popular language. The songs of Aristide Bruant,

Félix Mayol, and Maurice Chevalier, which were circulated widely after the invention of radio, are rich in linguistic information and vocabulary that had previously been exploited only very infrequently. The example of La Bolduc is indicative of this phenomenon, as she is one of the iconic voices of Quebec from the 1930s. La Bolduc's speech, distinguished by a mixture of slang and vernacular that became a hallmark of the tradition of French singers, has rarely been studied from the point of view of pronunciation, syntax, or lexicon. More broadly, French song appears to be a vector of cultural, social, and stylistic values.

Many critical and scholarly analyses have been written about Francophone cinema, where song is omnipresent. This field also richly benefits from analyses based on a linguistic perspective. Musical sequences have made certain films genuine popular success stories. In the transition from silent film to talkies, the use of silence was often alternated with singing; examples include *Sous les toits de Paris* by René Clair (1930) or Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* (1937), which features performances by music hall stars Fréhel and Jean Gabin. In the films that mark the 1930s and 1940s, music was used by directors such as Jean Renoir, Marcel Carné, and Julien Duvivier as an integral component of their films, and more often than not, it carried a message or a moral. Song holds an equally important role in contemporary cinema, where it is integrated in the soundtrack. Song continues to hold the aesthetic and ideological value that it once did in musical films (examples such as *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* by Jacques Demy and *On connaît la chanson* by Alain Resnais come to mind). French cinema is not alone in making great use of music. Francophone African cinema, for example, frequently dips into a musical register inspired by popular culture (tales, words, chants) as a means of communicating the emotions felt by the characters to the audience/listener, like in the films of

Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène. This also brings to mind the role of music as one of the components of visual anthropology. Dances and chants accompany a fair number of documentaries by Jean Rouch (*L'Afrique* (1960), *La Chasse au lion à l'arc* (1967), *Le Dama d'Ambara* (1974), *Un lion nommé l'Américain* (2005)) and also make up the subject of ethnographic and anthropological studies.

This book offers a collection of portraits, often very personal, of the greatest singers of the French language, who have constructed the musical landscape as much in France and in the larger francophone community, as in the world as a whole. Every musical form, be it rock and roll, pop, rap, slam, or *nouvelle chanson à texte*, has had an impact on the linguistic practises of our society. By discovering and rediscovering these artists – both former icons and those of today – who contribute to the creation of the sonorous universe of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this volume aims to determine to what extent these musical genres influence the French language and nourish our collective imagination. Every portrait is accompanied by a caricature by Jenny Batley, Igor Bratusek or Ewa Szypula, who, with their own original artistic flair, have presented in sketch the way in which they perceive each singer.

The scope of our corpus is intended to be as varied as possible, oscillating between performers and singer-songwriters with an extremely variable relationship to language depending on their often Protean careers. Each entry is meant to be a consideration of the artist's relatively concise biographical sketch, much like a dictionary entry. Some authors have sought to complement their entry with an interpretation of the work, presenting the major themes and how they fit into the context of the time, as well as the artist's way of working with language. The reader will find rappers, rockers, rai singers, and traditional song singers. When creating such an anthological

work, choices must be made and these choices were made not only by the editors but were requested by contributors from all over the world who, according to their sensibility and their own cultural backgrounds, formulate their own selection to constitute the present corpus. As this book goes to press, new albums will be in preparation. It is not a question of giving the most exhaustive vision possible for each entry but of presenting what makes the originality of the singers that we have selected at a given moment.

By plunging into francophone song, one can achieve a better understanding of the culture and the language of its native speakers. It is within the intertextuality of these texts put into music that one comes across literature and poetry, formative for a generation or for generations. When a song withstands the test of time, it becomes an integral part of our heritage and allows us to understand a little more of who we are. Song is a vital element accompanying every step of our lives.

The influx of young new artists on the francophone music scene has made it necessary to revisit and update the content of this anthology with additional entries and drawings to give a true picture of the musical landscape today.

Michaël Abecassis, Marcelline Block and Felicity Chaplin, Editors

The Editors of this volume wish to gratefully acknowledge the editors at Cambridge Scholars Publishing and especially Amanda Millar for her assistance throughout the copyediting process, as well as Sam Gormley for proofreading this new edition.

ABD AL MALIK (1975-):
[RÉGIS FAYETTE-MIKANO]
THE URBAN POET, PREACHER OF PEACE AND LOVE

SÉVERINE REBOURCET
(THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON, USA)



“Abd Al Malik is a man of conversion”,¹ writes Mazarine Pinget in her preface to Abd Al Malik’s book *Le Dernier Français* (2011). Malik’s idiosyncratic conversion transcends religion. It embraces his mutations of identity and his maturation as an artist and writer. The hip hop artist, who comes from the poor suburbs of Strasbourg, has the ability to shift between slam poetry and written texts, both with powerful social messages. Abd Al Malik, a son of Congolese immigrants, is an urban poet who unravels the power of reconstruction and rebirth through love, religion, and the inclusion of others.

¹ Pinget, Mazarine, “Préface” in Abd Al Malik, *Le Dernier Français* (Paris: Le Cherche Midi, 2011), 8.

Throughout his fatherless teenage years, the artist shed many identities in hopes of finding himself. These identities are central to his work. His alienation originates from the very Fanonian description of the conscience of blackness. In France, Abd Al Malik felt that he was black first and French second. In numerous lyrics he criticises the gaze of otherness, the gaze that makes a man of colour aware of his difference. His personal quest led him to multiple religious beliefs and practices, and he converted twice. After Catholicism, he embraced Islam, a “suburban Islam”² that he described as being based upon a binary conception of the world.³ However, he ultimately found answers to his existential questions in Sufism, a branch of Islam. As an artist, Abd Al Malik began a solo career as a slam poet in 2004 after leaving the rap group – NAP (New African Poets) – that he had founded with friends and family members. This decision to pursue a solo musical adventure follows several life-changing events. It came after his marriage to female rapper Wallen (real name Naouale Azzouz) and was contemporaneous to his conversion to Islam. His solo albums *Le Face à face des cœurs* (2004), *Gibraltar* (2006), *Dante* (2008), and *Château rouge* (2010) became increasingly successful in France. *Gibraltar* was unanimously acclaimed by the French press and music critics, and Malik won myriad prominent prizes.⁴

Abd Al Malik may have benefitted⁵ from the social incidents – violent urban riots in poor suburbs – that occurred in France in the autumn of 2005. The gritty reality of youths living on the outskirts of Paris, Lyon, and Strasbourg was a catalyst. Thanks to his soft-spoken texts that defy the

² Malik, Abd Al, *Qu'Allah bénisse la France* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2004), 87.

³ Ibid., 96.

⁴ Bourderionnet, Olivier, “‘Picture-Perfect’ Banlieue Artist: Abd Al Malik or the Perils of a Conciliatory Rap Discourse.” *French Cultural Studies* 22:2 (2011): 152.

⁵ Ibid., 151-61.

aggressiveness and impropriety of typical rap lyrics, Malik came under media scrutiny as an example of a potent success story. His music raised the possibility of a non-violent dialogue between the French hip hop world and the mainstream media.⁶ This interest was complemented by a pioneering collaboration between two distinct musical genres. In *Gibraltar* (2006) and his subsequent albums, Abd Al Malik worked with Gérard Jouannest, who was Jacques Brel's pianist and arranger and who was Juliette Gréco's husband. Malik's association with one of the major twentieth-century singer/troubadours of the *chanson française* elevated him and his slam poetry to the "Cercle of French Chansonniers."⁷

Malik's choices of musical arrangements have progressively evolved into hybrid genres. In *Le Face à face des cœurs*, his past experience as a rapper impacted his slam and music. *Gibraltar* marked a radical change, with Malik opting for simple arrangements: voice/piano and jazz sounds. As mentioned above, the tunes are reminiscent of the works of major French *chansonniers* (Jacques Brel and Claude Nougaro). In *Dante*, Malik introduced African beats and sounds. Finally, *Château rouge* is a *métissage* of musical genres (world music (African), soft punk, electro). In this latter album, numerous refrains are sung in one of the dialects from Congo-Brazzaville, the country of Abd Al Malik's parents. The slam artist also sings in English. In *Château rouge*, Abd Al Malik takes a more inter/transnational approach. This international group of sounds and languages echoes the social and racial diversity of the eighteenth arrondissement of Paris, where a metro station bears the same name as the album's title. The station is located not too far from the multicultural district

⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁷ Ibid., 154.

of La Goutte d'Or. Clearly, Malik has a universalist agenda. Malik has repeatedly shown this remarkable capacity to enrich slam poetry with classical music traditions in concerts and festivals.

In his overall work, Malik reflects on his own life and on the place of urban youth in French society. He offers thoughtful and caustic social commentaries upon the way France treats minorities. He reveals primarily fatalist trajectories of suburban youths and unfolds the rough reality and the tragedy of their lives. Premature and violent deaths of friends due to drug overdoses, suicides, and police blunders darken their existence. Malik also meditates on religion, race, otherness, and integration, engaging ardently with issues related to identity and multiculturalism in France. Despite the recurrent description of the *banlieue*, Malik praises love because the “religion of love”⁸ has helped him forge his new self. The artist writes odes expressing his deep love for his wife Wallen and his children, his love for his faith and his mentor, his devotion to life and justice, and, most interestingly, his adoration for his country: France. Abd Al Malik is a proud Frenchman. His take on Frenchness, however, diverges from its traditional conception. It is entrenched in the very contemporary idea of multiculturalism, diversity and *métissage*. “Vive la France arc-en-ciel unie débarrassée de ses peurs”⁹ (Long Live France, a united rainbow, rid of all its fears). Malik’s Frenchness is patriotic, but not conservative and narrow-minded. In a sense, Malik infuses his conception of French identity with the Sufist message of tolerance and love. Through his work and discourse, the artist aims to endorse multicultural France.

Malik’s visions can be seen as idealist and utopist, but should also be

⁸ “Ode à l’Amour” in *Face à face des cœurs* (2004).

⁹ “Le Soldat de plomb” in *Gibraltar* (2006).

considered within the scope of his personal experience. He is fiercely opposed to racism, prejudice, and religious extremism. A form of racial and religious conciliatory idealism and cultural romanticism emanates from his work. Abd Al Malik conveys an honest message of love and hope. But despite this hopeful and assuaging discourse, the artist is fully aware of life's tragedies and struggles, especially for minorities.

AKHENATON (1968-):
[PHILIPPE FRAGIONE]
A RAPPER WITH A PROTEAN CHARACTER

STÉPHANE NARCIS
(ACADÉMIE DE LA RÉUNION)



Philippe Fragione, also known as Akhenaton, was born in the eighteenth arrondissement in Marseille, in the South of France. He is well-known as a rapper and hip-hop producer. He has also been known throughout his life under the aliases Akh, Chill, Sentenza and Spectre. Today, Akhenaton is without a doubt one of the most listened-to rap artists on the French rap scene. He spent his childhood in Plan-de-Cuques, a small village on the outskirts of Marseille. His family is of Italian descent, originating from Naples. At the age of eight, his parents bought him an encyclopaedia; inspired by a love of Ancient Egypt, he later adopted the stage name Akhenaton, in reference to the tenth pharaoh of the eighteenth dynasty.

Until the age of sixteen, Philippe was known by the name Chill. He spent most of his teenage years hanging out with friends, playing football, and reading. He lived with his brother Fabien and their mother, who worked for EDF, the French national electric company. Philippe discovered rap music when he went to visit his father's family in New York. From that moment, his life took a different path. At the age of seventeen, he moved to live with his father, who was an employee of the National Health Services. Philippe was at the time studying for a degree in biology but quit during his first year. This was when he told his father that his passion was rap music and he wanted to become a rap artist. Back in Marseille, Philippe met Eric Mazel, a French DJ also known as Khéops. When Philippe gathered for a meeting with Khéops, Imothen and Shurik'n (Geoffrey Mussard), they decided to form a rap group under the name of IAM in 1989.

Each member of IAM chose Egyptian-inspired stage names. In his spiritual life, Akhenaton converted from Catholicism to Islam. He officially converted in 1993, taking the name Abdel Hakim, just before he married Aicha, a young Moroccan woman. Musicologists explain that there is a hidden meaning in the use of IAM's Egyptian names, as they draw a parallel with the modern Arab world and consequently North Africa. As opposed to many rap artists, IAM did not intend to focus on violence, which was the case with *NTM*. IAM had a different vision of rap music and wanted to remain true to their hometown of Marseille. According to Akhenaton, rap music in Marseille is described as being peaceful. Rappers in Marseille are for him more peaceful and socially aware because of their strong sense of community.

In 1993, IAM encountered national success with their single *Je danse le Mia*. IAM consequently became a key influencer of rap music in France. In October 1995, Akhenaton released his first solo album whilst his group put

a halt to its activities. His solo album, entitled *Mètèque et Mat*, demonstrated his loquaciousness perfectly. He made allusions to the Mafia in his song *La Cosca* and also had catchy songs such as *Je rêve d'éclater un type des ASSEDIC*, which was about rebellion. The song *Une femme seule* was inspired by the life of his own mother. The album sold 300,000 copies.

In 1998, Ahenaton and Khéops wrote the soundtrack for *Taxi*, starring the well-known actor Sami Nacéri and produced by Luc Besson. The following year, they were awarded the *Victoire de la Musique* for best soundtrack of the year. At the end of the 1990s, Akhenaton co-wrote a film entitled *Comme un Aimant* with Kamel Saleh. It was a full-length film set in a district of Marseille. During that time, Akhenaton got himself involved in many different activities. He worked on a record of electronic music in which about fifteen DJs were involved. The album was called *Electronic Cyphen* and was released in 1999. This album was heavily influenced by the German group Kraftwerk and the Zulu Nation of Afrika Bambaataa.

Akhenaton's second single was simply named *AKH*, while his new album *Sol Invictus* was released in October 2001. His second album took a different trajectory to his first. He produced *Mètèque et Mat* entirely on his own, whereas *Sol Invictus* was released and produced by Chien de Paille and Dadou from KDD. This eighteen-track album had many lyrical themes drawing a link with the past. It also dealt with nostalgic ideas and thoughts, and had a strong 1980s groove to it. The album sold more than 175,000 copies. Akhenaton's new album was then released in March 2006 on his own independent label *361 Records*. Even though the IAM crew were not properly involved in the making of the album, they all contributed in one way or another. For instance, Shurik'n provided backing vocals on *Sur les murs de ma chambre*. This new solo album was praised as Akhenaton's most mature album to date. Akhenaton went back to basics and rediscovered

his original self. He dealt with current issues in French society, such as in the song entitled *Comode "Le Dégueulasse"*. In addition, Akhenaton showed how a citizen of France should be an example for the young population. He included with the album a mini booklet showing the importance of voting in the next elections, instructing fans on how to vote. However, his song *La Fin du Monde* did not encounter the success expected. The music video of *La Fin du Monde* showed real images illustrating the lyrics; however, none of the music channels seemed to show it on television. The music video was then shown on the internet on different blogs, all of which criticised the censorship of the videoclip.

Akhenaton is one of the most successful and atypical French rappers, and does not restrict himself to one activity. He is certainly known as *une tête pensante* owing to his ability to develop his art through different forms, whether in the cinema with the box office hit *Taxi* and co-writing a film with *Comme un aimant*, or in music by collaborating with his group IAM and producing rappers such as Freeman, Forky Family, Passi and Stomy Bugsy. He has always used rap music to convey meaningful ideas. Every word in his lyrics has a purpose. Akhenaton's music is a vehicle through which he seeks to explain and analyse the social reality of France, whether it's the riots in the *banlieue* or the worrying rise of Islamophobia.

Akhenaton has been able to demonstrate that rap music can be seen as a form of art. Far from all the different clichés that rap music can offer, he has always offered his public meaningful texts mixing memory and poetry within his songs. We can still feel that Akhenaton has not told his public everything yet. He has not lost his authenticity or his innocence. Through the eyes of an adult person, he has accepted his duties as a grown-up person but this does not prevent him from having the same desire as in the beginning of his career – the desire to illuminate contemporary issues.

ALIZÉE (1984-):
[ALIZÉE JACOTEY]

A MODERN-DAY LOLITA
STÉPHANE NARCIS
(ACADÉMIE DE LA RÉUNION)



Alizée is a popular French pop star who quickly managed to conquer the hearts of millions of listeners. Her songs combine beautiful melodies and highly polished vocals that have the power to win over large audiences. Yet, this artist's music has also matured and evolved over time and has drawn a fiercely loyal fan base.

Alizée Jacotey was born in Ajaccio, on the coast of Corsica. Her father worked in the field of information technology, and her mother was a small business owner. Alizée displayed her creative abilities early on in her happy childhood. Already dancing well at the age of four, she began attending a choreography school. This form of artistic expression would remain an integral part of her entire career. Other artistic outlets also revealed her talents and influenced her work. In 1995, at the age of eleven, Alizée won a

drawing contest by painting an airplane on the back of an order form. Not only did this result in a magnificent trip to the Maldives, her drawing was also reproduced in full size under the airplane cockpit, which was called “Alizée!”.¹

In December 1999, Alizée first appeared in *Graines de Star*, a television program which showcased young rising talents. Although she did not pass the qualifying round, Alizée spent several weeks of intense preparation before entering the same competition once again. This time she sang *Ma prière* (*My Prayer*), made famous by the French singer Axelle Red, and eventually went on to win the *Meilleure Graine* award for most promising young singer. The popular French singer Mylène Farmer and composer Laurent Boutonnat both noticed the talent exhibited by this young artist. They were sufficiently impressed to offer her a collaboration project that provided Alizée with a break out song entitled, *Moi ... Lolita*.

Alizée’s debut song reached the top of the charts in only a few days, making her an overnight sensation. The success of the song allowed her to go on tour immediately. Soon, the scandalous image invented by her producers had sexualized her youth and created much controversy. Yet, all the media attention helped distinguish the young singer from other French artists and propelled the growth of her popularity.

This public presence led Mylène Farmer to ask Alizée if she would become the protagonist of a new musical project. This project created an image that shocked the audience with its contrast between the presumed innocence of her young age and a highly defiant public persona. As Alizée herself recalled, it was this aspect of her career that proved the most difficult

¹ Biografie (n.d.). *Alizée*, retrieved from <https://biografieonline.it/biografia-alizee>

for her, as she had always led a quiet, modest, and shy private life.²

Subsequently, Alizée's musical career developed rapidly, and the performer has tirelessly pleased her fans with new and unique compositions. The artist's debut studio album titled *Gourmandises* was released in 2001. The public greeted this collection with enthusiasm, securing her status as a genuine pop star. Songs such as *L'Alizé* and *Parler tout bas* were played on many radio stations in France for some time.

In contrast to the short turn-around time of her debut album, Alizée's second album took almost three years to complete. The collection *Mes Courants Électriques* appeared on store shelves in 2003, but failed to replicate the success of her debut album. Only a few compositions won significant playtime on French radio. Furthermore, by the time this album appeared, Alizée had matured and decided to change her style to reflect a more serious tone. She stopped dressing defiantly and her lyrics took on deeper meaning³. Then, in 2004, Alizée announced that she wanted to suspend her creative activity and take a break from work. She not only stopped recording new music, but also stopped communicating with her audience. Her silence lasted more than two years, but loyal fans still waited for the return of their idol.

In 2006, Alizée stopped working with Mylène Farmer and Laurent Boutonnat. She switched from her former provocative child-like persona to a lady-like image, wearing feminine dresses in soft, romantic shades. A more independent career allowed Alizée to experiment with different styles of music, with each successive album being different from the previous one. Among her many new compositions, the most striking songs include

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.