Piaf! Her name is legendary. Her voice is unmistakable. She is a cultural icon universally regarded as France’s greatest singer and its most recognized international star. Her remarkable life was filled with love, triumph and tragedy. Her poignant and heartbreaking story is told in her songs. When she sang \textit{Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien} (No Regrets), Piaf defied anyone to pity her. In her book \textit{NO REGRETS: THE LIFE OF EDITH PIAF}, Carolyn Burke calls her “the singer who reached across social, linguistic and national divides to voice the emotions of ordinary people.”

Her life was one of sharp contrasts: the range of her fame as opposed to her tragic personal life, and her small fragile figure on stage contrasting with the resounding power of her voice. Piaf embraced life passionately, even at its cruelest; as long as she could express it in her songs she felt the suffering was worth it. Her music reflected her determination in the face of tragedy with songs like \textit{La Vie en rose} (1946), \textit{Hymne à l’amour} (1949), \textit{L’Accordéoniste} (1955), \textit{La Foule} (1957), \textit{Milord} (1959) \textit{Padam} (1951) and \textit{Non, je ne regrette rien} (1960).

When Piaf died in 1963, although forbidden a Mass by the Roman Catholic archbishop of Paris because of her lifestyle, her funeral procession drew hundreds of thousands of mourners onto the streets of Paris and the ceremony at the cemetery was jammed with more than forty thousand fans. Singer Charles Aznavour recalled that Piaf’s funeral procession was the first time since the end of World War II that Parisian traffic came to a complete stop.

Her life has been the subject of many films and plays, most recently \textit{LA VIE EN ROSE} in 2007. The film stars Marion Cotillard in the role that won her the Academy Award for Best Actress as Piaf. Numerous songs by Piaf are used in movies such as \textit{SAVING PRIVATE RYAN}, \textit{INCEPTION}, \textit{BABE:PIG IN THE CITY} and the animated film, \textit{MADAGASCAR 3}.

There is a museum dedicated to Piaf, the Musée Édith Piaf at 5, rue Crespin du Gast, 75011, Paris.

She was born Édith Giovanna Gassion in 1915 in Paris. Her father, Louis Alphonse Gassion, a traveling street acrobat, was rarely at home. Her mother, Anita Maillard, of French, Italian and Moroccan heritage, was pre-occupied with her career as a singer on the local cabaret circuit. It was not surprising that Édith’s childhood was lonely.

The family’s fortunes deteriorated during the first World War when Louis Alphonse left to serve at the front and Anita was forced to earn her living singing on street corners. When Louis Alphonse returned from the war two years later, he sent his daughter to Normandy to be raised by her paternal grandmother, Maman Tine who ran a brothel near Rouen.

While these were the happiest years of Édith’s childhood, they were also mixed with sadness. She developed acute keratitis, an inflammation of the cornea, which made her temporarily blind from the ages of three to seven. The story is that Maman Tine shut down the brothel for a day so the “girls” (who doted on Édith) could take her to Lisieux where they prayed to St. Thérèse. Ten days later Piaf’s blindness was cured. Most likely, the passage of time and the drops the doctor put in Édith’s eyes cured her. But Piaf was never adverse to using the “miracle” story.

Edith returned to Paris as a young girl to live with her father, who incorporated her into his street act. The father and daughter team toured the country together for several years, earning their living in the streets. After he performed, Edith would pass the hat around the crowd. But soon
Edith discovered that she had a powerful singing voice that could mesmerize an audience and left her father to begin her own singing career.

When she was 15, she met Simone Berteaut, who became her lifelong companion and partner in mischief. Soon, it was Simone who passed the hat while Edith sang. In spite of her scruffy street urchin appearance, Edith proved extremely popular; her amazingly expressive voice moved even the most impassive listener.

In 1932, Edith fell in love with Louis Dupont, a local delivery boy. Dupont moved in with Edith and Simone, but he was never happy with the idea of Edith roaming the streets. He persuaded her to take jobs he found for her but she resisted whenever possible, until she became pregnant. At age 17, Piaf had her only child, a girl named Marcelle.

Raising the child in a small apartment with barely enough money to pay the rent was hard, but Edith made a serious effort to be a good mother even though she had little maternal instinct nor domestic ability.

Before long, she returned to street singing and Marcelle was often left alone. Edith was devastated when Marcelle died of meningitis just after her second birthday. Shortly after Marcelle's death in 1935, Edith was performing her act on a street corner in Pigalle (the neighborhood's raunchy reputation led to its World War II nickname of "Pig Alley" by Allied soldiers) when Louis Leplée, the director of a cabaret on the Champs Elysées happened to walk by. He was bowled over by the young singer's voice and offered her a job in his club, Le Gerny, which was frequented by the upper and lower classes alike. It was Leplée who invented Edith's famous stage name, La Môme Piaf, which in street slang meant little sparrow.

Leplée taught her the basics of stage presence and told her to wear a simple black dress, which became her trademark costume. While Edith Piaf might have appeared tiny and fragile, when she performed on stage, she exerted an extraordinary power over her audience with her raw, emotional vocals. Leplée ran an intense publicity campaign leading up to her opening night and the unknown street singer was an immediate hit with chic Paris audiences who flocked to the Champs Elysées to hear La Môme Piaf sing. Encouraged by this overnight success, Piaf recorded her first single, Les Mômes de la Cloche, penned by Marguerite Monnot, a collaborator throughout Piaf's life.
also launch a film career, starring in Jean Limur’s film LA GARÇONNE. A few months later, Piaf appeared at the Bobino, another famous Paris venue, now as the headlining act.

In 1940, Piaf met French actor Paul Meurisse. The couple’s passionate relationship lasted two years with Meurisse acting as a kind of Pygmalion figure in Piaf’s life, educating her about French culture and teaching her how to behave in society. Soon the singer was the darling of Paris’ intellectual elite, becoming a close friend of Jean Cocteau, the famous French playwright and film director. Cocteau wrote a play especially for Piaf and Meurisse, LE BEL INDIFFÉRENT, which revealed the full extent of Piaf’s acting talent. It proved to be the hit of the season.

During the Second World War, Piaf continued her career engaging in her own form of resistance by employing Jewish musicians to accompany her on tour. During this time, she was in great demand and very successful. Singing for high-ranking Germans earned Piaf the right to pose for photos with French prisoners of war, ostensibly as a morale-booster. In reality, it enabled her to forge ID cards which were distributed along with maps and money, allowing 118 POWs to escape.

By the time the war ended in 1944, the 30-year-old Piaf was at the height of her fame in France and she began using her celebrity to help launch the careers of up-and-coming artists.

She discovered Yves Montand in Paris, made him part of her act and became his mentor and lover. In 1945 Piaf and Montand formed a famous double act in Marcel Blistène’s film ETOILE SANS LUMIERE. When he became one of the most famous singers in France and almost as popular as Piaf, she broke off their relationship.

La vie en rose, her signature song, was written by Piaf in 1945 with the melody composed Louis Guglielmi, known as Louigué. Encouraged by its phenomenal success, Piaf would write 80 more of her own songs during her career.

In 1946, Piaf met a group of young singers called Les Compagnons de la Chanson. Piaf recorded a single with them entitled Les trois cloches (The Three Bells). The song was an enormous hit, selling over a million copies. Les Compagnons accompanied Piaf on her first American tour the following year.

Piaf’s tour of the U.S. proved to be a real challenge. American audiences were less receptive to her melodramatic style. Her first concerts at the Playhouse Cabaret in New York failed to attract large audiences until she received a rapturous review of her concert in a major New York paper. Encouraged by this favorable press, Piaf signed up for a week of shows at the Versailles, an elegant cabaret in Manhattan. The week was extended to four months.

During her stay in New York Piaf would begin two important relationships, striking up a lifelong friendship with Marlene Dietrich and falling in love with boxing champion Marcel Cerdan. Their romance made international headlines, with newspapers around the world picking up on the fairytale story of “The Queen of French music and the King of the Ring”.

After so many years of personal tragedy, Piaf appeared to have finally found happiness. She paid tribute to Cerdan in her classic L’hymne à l’amour, written with frequent collaborator Marguerite Monnot.

But Piaf’s life was struck by tragedy again on October 28, 1949 when Cerdan was killed in a plane crash over the Azores Islands. Piaf, distraught by this new loss, spiraled into a deep depression. She began visiting mediums and dabbling in spiritualism. She threw herself into her work, expressing her personal suffering through tragic and increasingly melodramatic songs.

In 1950, barely a year after Cerdan’s death, Piaf was back on stage in Paris where she met French singer Charles Aznavour. She helped the singer get his first bookings and in return Aznavour would remain devoted to Piaf, acting as her chauffeur and private secretary as well as her most intimate confidant. Aznavour would also write a number of hit songs for Piaf including Jézébel and the legendary Plus bleu que tes yeux.

1951 proved to be another year of tragedy for Piaf. She was involved in two serious car accidents, amazingly, surviving both without sustaining any serious injuries. However, while recovering from the second crash she was given heavy doses of morphine as a pain-killer and...
she became addicted. Combined with her increasing drinking habit, the drug would gradually destroy her mental and physical health.

Despite her problems, in July 1952 she married French singer Jacques Pills at a private ceremony in Paris. The couple then flew to the States for Piaf's fifth American tour. While Piaf returned to the prestigious Versailles, Pils performed a series of concerts at a smaller cabaret in New York. He was accompanied on the piano by Gilbert Bécaud, who would team up with Pills to write Piaf's classic hit, *Je t'ai dans la peau*.

As Piaf continued her dizzy rise to international stardom, drugs and alcohol were beginning to take their toll on her increasingly fragile health. In the early 50s Piaf would begin a long series of treatments at a health clinic in an attempt to wean herself off alcohol and morphine.

Ironically, while her health continued to decline, her studio recordings in 1952 and 1953 were absolutely magnificent, and her concerts surpassed many of her previous performances. Meanwhile, Piaf's close friends rallied around and hid her tortured private life from the press, encouraging the singer to keep out of the limelight. Piaf disappeared from the French music scene at the end of 1953, shutting herself away from the world for most of the following year.

In 1955 Piaf made a triumphant comeback, giving the performance of a lifetime at L'Olympia, the most famous venue in Paris. Despite her waning health, Piaf's voice was as powerful as ever, washing over her audience in a tide of incredible emotion.

In 1960 Piaf began working with the young French songwriter Charles Dumont who wrote one of the most famous songs of her career, *Non je ne regrette rien*. When Piaf premiered the song at her next major concert at L'Olympia, her performance would go down in music history as one of the most legendary concerts of all time.

In the summer of 1961 Piaf met a young Greek singer, Theophanis Lamboukas. Piaf preferred to call him Sarapo, which is Greek for "I love you". He would be the last of Piaf's husbands and lovers. Just as she had done with so many of the previous men in her life, Piaf would take charge of Sarapo's career, using her name to launch the young unknown.

Piaf married Sarapo in a private ceremony in October, 1962. After a long honeymoon, the couple performed their famous duet, *A quoi ça sert l'amour* at the Bobino in February 1963.

Two months later Piaf fell into a coma and the singer spent the last months of her life slipping in and out of consciousness in her villa near Cannes. Piaf passed away at age 47 on October 11, 1963. Her last words were "Every damn fool thing you do in this life, you pay for."

It is said that Sarapo drove her body back to Paris secretly so that fans would think she had died in her hometown. She is buried in Paris in Père Lachaise Cemetery next to her daughter Marcelle. Her grave continues to be among the most visited.

In September 1958 Piaf and Moustaki were involved in another serious car crash, which would only serve to weaken Piaf's declining health. Just a few months after the accident Piaf collapsed halfway through a concert in New York and was rushed to the hospital for an emergency operation.

Ignoring the advice of her doctors and her closest friends, Piaf refused to abandon her singing career. In spite of the fact that she collapsed on stage several times in mid-performance, Piaf could not imagine her life without music.
L’ACCORDÉONISTE

LA FILLE DE JOIE EST BELLE
AU COIN DE LA RUE LÀ-BAS
ELLE A UNE CLIENTÈLE
QUI LUI REMPLIT SON BAS
QUAND SON BOULOT S’ACHÈVE
ELLE S’EN VA À SON TOUR
CHERCHER UN PEU DE RÊVE
DANS UN BAL DU FAUBOURG
SON HOMME EST UN ARTISTE
C’EST UN DRÔLE DE P’TIT GARS
UN ACCORDÉONISTE
QUI SAIT JOUER LA JAVA

SUIVENT LE JEU NERVEUX
ET LES DOIGTS SECS ET LONGS DE L’ARTISTE
ÇA LUI RENTRE DANS LA PEAU
PAR LE BAS, PAR LE HAUT
ELLE A ENVIE DE PLEURER
C’EST PHYSIQUE
TOUT SON ÊTRE EST TENDU
SON SOUFFLE EST SUSPENDU
C’EST UNE VRAIE TORDUE DE LA MUSIQUE

LA FILLE DE JOIE EST SEULE
AU COIN DE LA RUE LÀ-BAS
LES FILLES QUI FONT LA GUEULE
LES HOMMES N’EN VEULENT PAS
ET TANT PIS SI ELLE CRÊVE
SON HOMME NE REVIENT PLUS
ADIEUX TOUS LES BEAUX RÊVES
SA VIE, ELLE EST FOUTUE
POURTANT SES JAMBES TRISTES
L’EMMÈNENT AU BOUI-BOUI
OÙ ’Y A UN AUTRE ARTISTE
QUI JOUE TOUTE LA NUIT

ELLE ÉCOUTE LA JAVA...
...ELLE ENTEND LA JAVA
...ELLE A FERMÉ LES YEUX
...ET LES DOIGTS SECS ET NERVEUX...
ÇA LUI RENTRE DANS LA PEAU
PAR LE BAS, PAR LE HAUT
ELLE A ENVIE DE GUEULER
C’EST PHYSIQUE
ALORS POUR OUBLIER
ELLE S’EST MISE À DANSER, À TOURNER
AU SON DE LA MUSIQUE...
...ARRÊTEZ!
ARRÊTEZ LA MUSIQUE!

The Accordionist

The “daughter of joy” is beautiful on the street corner over there, she has a client who fill her stockings. When her work is finished, she looks for a little dream at a dance hall outside of town. Her man is an artist, a strange little man an accordionist who can play the java. She listens to the java, but she doesn’t dance, she doesn’t even see the dance floor. But her loving eyes follow the nervous playing, the artist’s long, dry fingers. it’s under her skin, from the bottom, from the top. She feels like singing, its natural. She is tense, she holds her breath she is crazy with the music.

The girl is sad on the corner over there. Her accordionist left to be a soldier, when he returns from the war, they will open a house. She will be the cashier, and he will be the boss. Life will be so beautiful, they will be true pashas, and every evening, he will play the java for her. She hears the java that she hums very low, She sees, once again, her accordionist, her loving eyes follow the nervous playing, the artist’s long, dry fingers, it’s under her skin, from the bottom, from the top. She feels like crying, it’s natural. She is tense, she holds her breath she is crazy with the music.

The girl is alone on the corner over there- men don’t want girls who sulk. And so what if she dies- her man won’t return Goodbye to all the beautiful dreams. Her life has flown away. However, her sad legs carry her to the dive where there is another artist who plays all night. She hears the java. She listens to the java, she closes her eyes, The dry, nervous fingers It’s under her skin from the bottom, from the top and she yells it’s natural. Then to forget, she starts to dance, to turn to the sound of the music, Stop! Stop the music!
Like Me

Perhaps somewhere else, a woman has a heart, desperate for happiness like me, and with one happy gesture, she raises, a little, the curtain of blue silk like me, to look for her lover, who comes to take her in his arms, like me, she waits for her lover, for the eyes of her lover, for the arms of there lover, like me.

Perhaps then, as well, for an instant, she lives the best of her life, like me, and closing her eyes, she touches her hair, like me, perhaps she pins a flower over her heart and then looks at the time, like me, and thinks of her lover, of the eyes of her lover, of the arms of her lover, like me.

Perhaps then again, she hears even louder, her heartbeat, and then, like me, she will want to scream in hearing a step on the stair,like me, like me in the instant where my heart, in suspense, stops for a moment in front of you, and then dies, my love, in your eyes my love, in your arms my love, my love.

PADAM

That song which haunts me day and night, That song is not born today, It comes from far as I come, Dragged into the present by a hundred thousand musicians. One day that song will make me crazy, A hundred times I've wanted to say why, But it cuts my words. It always speaks before I do, And that voice cuts off my words. Padam... It runs up behind me, Padam... It forces me to remember, Padam... The song points it's finger at me, And that I drag behind me like a bad joke, That song which knows everything by heart. It says "Remember your love, Remember, since it's your turn, now. There is no reason not to cry, with the memories you carry around." And me, I see all the rest, My twenty years beat the drum. I see amid all the fighting, the comedy of love, in the song which always plays Padam... The 14th of July "I love you." Padam... The cheaply bought "Always" Padam... The gift-wrapped "Want yous" Listen to the fury within me, As if all my past was parading by, I must keep some trouble for later, I have an entire diagram of that song Which beats like a heart of wood!
MILORD

ALLEZ VENEZ! MILORD
VOUS ASSEOIR À MA TABLE
IL FAIT SI FROID DEHORS
ICI, C’EST CONFORTABLE
LAISSEZ-VOUS FAIRE, MILORD
ET PRENEZ BIEN VOS AISES
VOS PEINES SUR MON CŒUR
ET VOS PIEDS SUR UNE CHAISE
JE VOUS CONNAIS, MILORD
VOUS NE M’AVEZ JAMAIS VUE
JE NE SUIS QU’UNE FILLE DU PORT
UNE OMBRE DE LA RUE...
POURTANT, JE VOUS AI FRÔLÉ
QUAND VOUS PASSIEZ HIER
VOUS N’ETIEZ PAS PEU FIER
DAME! LE CIEL VOUS COMBLAIT
VOTRE FOULARD DE SOIE
FLOTTANT SUR VOS ÉPAULES
VOUS AVIEZ LE BEAU RÔLE
ON AURAIT DIT LE ROI
VOUS MARCHIEZ EN VAINQUEUR
AU BRAS D’UNE DEMOISELLE
MON DIEU! QU’ELLE ÉTAIT BELLE
J’EN AI FROID DANS LE CŒUR...

ALLEZ VENEZ! MILORD
VOUS ASSEOIR À MA TABLE
IL FAIT SI FROID DEHORS
ICI, C’EST CONFORTABLE
LAISSEZ-VOUS FAIRE, MILORD
ET PRENEZ BIEN VOS AISES
VOS PEINES SUR MON CŒUR
ET VOS PIEDS SUR UNE CHAISE
JE VOUS CONNAIS, MILORD
VOUS NE M’AVEZ JAMAIS VUE
JE NE SUIS QU’UNE FILLE DU PORT
UNE OMBRE DE LA RUE...

DIRE QU’IL SUFFIT PARFOIS
QU’IL Y AIT UN NAVIRE
POUR QUE TOUT SE DÉCHIRE
QUAND LE NAVIRE S’EN VA
IL EMMENAIT AVEC LUI
LA DOUCE AUX YEUX SI TENDRES
QUI N’A PAS SU COMPRENDRE
QU’ELLE BRISAIT VOTRE VIE
L’AMOUR, ÇA FAIT PLEUER
COMME QUOI L’EXISTENCE
ÇA VOUS DONNE TOUTES LES
CHANCES
POUR LES REPRENDRE APRÈS...

ALLEZ VENEZ! MILORD
VOUS AVEZ L’AIR D’UN MÔME
LAISSEZ-VOUS FAIRE, MILORD
VENEZ DANS MON ROYAUME
JE SOIGNE LES REMORDS
JE CHANTE LA ROMANCE
JE CHANTE LES MILORDS

QUE N’ONT PAS EU DE CHANCE
REGARDEZ-MOI, MILORD
VOUS NE M’AVEZ JAMAIS VUE...
MAIS VOUS PLEUREZ, MILORD
ÇA, J’L’AURAIT JAMAIS CRU.

[Spoken]
EH! MAIS VOYONS, MILORD
SOURIEZ-MOI, MILORD
MIEUX QUE ÇA, UN P’TIT EFFORT...
VOILÀ, C’EST ÇA!
ALLEZ RIEZ! MILORD
ALLEZ CHANTEZ! MILORD
[Sings] TA DA DA DA...
MAIS OUI, DANZEZ, MILORD
TA DA DA DA...
BRAVO! MILORD...
TA DA DA DA...
ENCORE, MILORD...
TA DA DA DA...

Milord

Come on, Milord, sit at my table,
It's cold outside,
In here, its comfortable,
let me talk you into it.
Take your ease,
Put your troubles on my heart
and your feet on my chair.
I know you,
You've never seen me,
I'm only a girl of the harbor,
A shadow of the street.

And to think,
All it takes is a ship,
For everything to fall apart.
When the ship goes away
it takes with it the sweet girl
with tender eyes,
who wasn't able to understand
that she shattered your life.
Love makes you cry,
Like the life that gave you all the luck,
Just to take it back.

Come on, Milord,
you're acting like a kid,
Come into my realm,
I heal remorse,
I sing about romance,
I sing about milords
who never had any luck
look at me, Milord,
You've never seen me.
But you're crying, Milord,
I never expected that.
Ah well, look at me, Milord,
Give me a smile,
Better than that-
A little effort!
You see that's it!
Come on, laugh, Milord!
Come on, sing, Milord!
Bravo, Milord!
Again, Milord!
From Leslie Fitzwater:

This year I was asked, “Why is Edith Piaf important?” I found myself tongue-tied as all the reasons rushed forward yelling, “Me! Pick me!” Now that I’ve had some time to reflect, let me share a few, selected thoughts.

Until Piaf, France had its national stars (Damia, Fréhel, Mistinguett), and its international stars (Chevalier, Boyer, Gabin), but it had no super star. Piaf fit the bill. She was talented, daring, pushy, hyper-focused on perfection, choosy about her repertoire, scandalous, and most important, had a clear vision of each step of her career with the fortitude to stick it out till the vision was realized.

Piaf’s songs and orchestrations remained current with the times: in the 20s she sang chansons réalistes; the 30s were jazzy; the 40s were big band style; the 50s sounded loungy; the 60s had rock ’n roll beats. She insured her legacy by inspiring composers (Emer, Dumont, Monnot, Contet) to write for her, and by association with her, elevated their careers. She mentored other singers (Yves Montand, Charles Aznavour, Les Compagnon), and jump-started their international careers.

When Piaf died, the loss was so greatly felt, that there was a search to find her replacement. Mireille Mathieu was handed that awesome, dubious honor. Edith Piaf created the French singing style clay from which subsequent singers (Jacques Brel, Barbara, Juliette Greco, Ute Lemper, Ziaf, Caroline Moreau) have ripped their portion to mold singing styles of their own.

For further reading:
NO REGRETS:  THE LIFE OF EDITH PIAF by Carolyn Burke
PIAF by Margaret Crosland
WHEEL OF FORTUNE by Edith Piaf
TORCH SINGING:  PERFORMING RESISTANCE AND DESIRE FROM BILLIE HOLIDAY TO EDITH PIAF by Stacy Holman Jo

For further listening:
Piaf au Carnegie Hall:  1956-1957
Voice of the Sparrow
Piaf: 30th Anniversaire
Hymne to Love – Piaf’s recording in English

French Connections in Milwaukee
by Mary Emory, Past President, Alliance Française de Milwaukee and Past President of the Skylight Board

If PIAF ON STAGE has piqued your interest in the French language, there are many opportunities to connect with French in Milwaukee. The Alliance Française de Milwaukee is a chapter of a worldwide organization based in Paris. Our mission is to promote, share and enjoy the culture, language and friendship of the French speaking world. We hope that our presence in Milwaukee enriches the cultural fabric of our community and we welcome all as members.

No need to speak French – you might even learn some!

The Alliance Française, 1800 East Capitol Drive, 53211, has classes for all levels and many programs and events. A casse-croûte brown bag lunch each Wednesday from noon to two, luncheon downtown with a business topic the second Tuesday of odd months, evening programs on the third Thursday are a few examples. Visit our website, www.afmilwaukee.org, or call 414-964-3855.

The Festival of Films in French runs at the UWM Union February 8 – 17, 2013, and all films are free thanks to various fund raising efforts including a dinner February 4 at Chez Jacques.

Bastille Days on Cathedral Square in East Town will be July 11 – 14, 2013. One highlight will be the French Mass at 5:15 on Saturday, July 13 at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist. Also, this year a choir of forty 13 to 18 year old French children will be performing each day. We are looking for host families for the four days to welcome the children and their parents into your home. If you would be willing to entertain young people from France for four days, please contact: Anne Leplae, Executive Director, Alliance Française de Milwaukee, 414-431-0952.

MERCI BEAUCOUP for your interest in French, and I hope you enjoy hearing Edith Piaf by Leslie Fitzwater.