

Icons

loved it better before.” That was Édith Piaf’s reaction when Charles Aznavour finally followed her advice and got a nose job. At the beginning of his career, it seemed as though the stars would never align. Critics slammed the young performer for his looks, diminutive stature, raspy voice and unrefined lyrics. In an interview with *Vogue Homme* in 2017, he said: “Basically, I had nothing going for me. I wasn’t good-looking, I was short, my songs weren’t popular, and when they did become popular, all of a sudden they were too commercial.” But with resolute tenacity and passion for his craft, Aznavour crooned his way into the hearts of many, leaving a lasting legacy as France’s most renowned *chansonnier*.

On my life

Mischa Aznavourian and Knar Baghdasaryan had fled Armenian genocide and were in Paris awaiting approval of their visa for the United States when their second child, a son they named Shahnour Varenagh Aznavourian, was born on 22 May 1924.

The family stayed in the French capital and lived in relative poverty in a tiny apartment on Rue Monsieur-le-Prince in the bustling and multicultural Latin quarter. Trying to make ends meet, Mischa and Knar (he was a singer and she an actress), opened a small restaurant.

Unfortunately, it did not prove to be a financial success as the generous couple often fed and entertained those in need for free. Nevertheless, little Charles and his sister Aïda grew up in a loving environment full of song and optimism.

At the age of nine, Charles

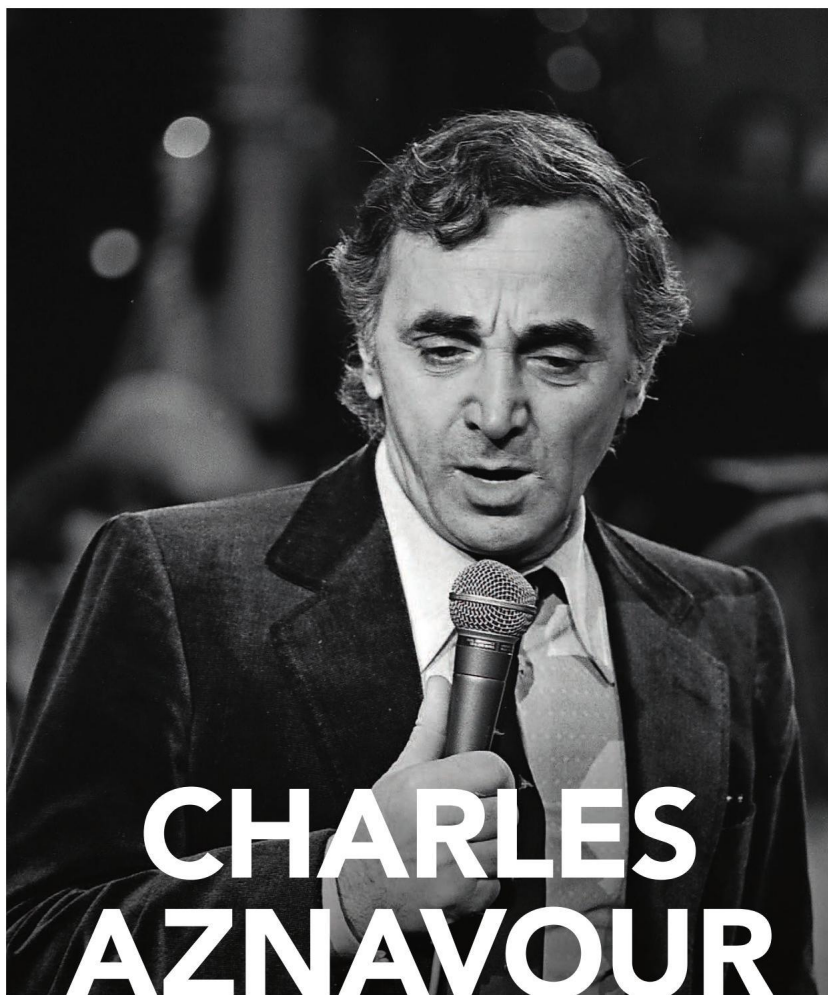
dropped out of school and decided to dedicate his life to singing and acting. He played small gigs in the city’s nightclubs and theatres during his teenage years, but it wasn’t until he formed a duo with pianist Pierre Roche in 1943 that he started to earn some more recognition.

Three years later, Roche et Aznavour caught the eye of Édith Piaf. She was so impressed (especially with Aznavour) that she invited them to tour with

Above: Aznavour’s career spanned nearly eight decades

her through Canada and the United States. Piaf encouraged Aznavour to go solo and would become his mentor and one of the most important women in his life. Though they lived together for eight years, the relationship remained platonic.

Aznavour’s big break finally came in 1956 when he was invited to perform at the Olympia theatre in Paris. The night before his legendary debut, director Bruno Coquatrix asked him to come up with



Mentored by Édith Piaf, the Armenian-born ‘actor who sang’ went on to become France’s greatest *chansonnier*, writes **Paola Westbeek**

something fresh and original. Three hours at the piano and several packs of Gauloises later, Aznavour had penned his first hit, *Sur Ma Vie*.

An actor who sang

In the years that followed, Aznavour charmed audiences across the world with hymns of love, life and the melancholy of days gone by. Not one to censor his lyrics, he also sang about controversial subjects and taboos such as homosexuality (*Comment Ils Disent*), rape (*Trousse-Chemise*), embittered relationships (*Tu t'laisses Aller*) and the culmination of passionate lovemaking (*Après l'Amour*).

An actor first and foremost, he appeared in more than 60 films and knew exactly how to tug at the heartstrings with his dramatic facial expressions, interpreting songs like miniature stories. Just look up *Hier Encore* (about the transience of life) or *Je t'Attends* (about the torment of waiting for love) on YouTube – you can almost feel the sentiment of his lyrics. Yet the poignancy of his voice, once criticised as a short-coming, is enough to elicit a flood of emotions.

It was that raw authenticity that set Aznavour apart from the rest. When compared to Frank Sinatra, he was always quick to point out that the American legend was a singer who acted. He, on the other hand, was an actor who sang.

French and Armenian

During a career that spanned nearly eight decades, Aznavour wrote roughly 1,300 songs and worked with big names such as Juliette Gréco, Elton John, Petula Clark and Fred Astaire. He sold more than 200 million records and sang in eight languages.



Above: The Charles Aznavour Museum in Yerevan, Armenia

Aznavour never forgot his roots. After the devastating earthquake in Armenia in 1988, he set up the Aznavour Pour l'Arménie association and wrote the song *Pour Toi Arménie* to help raise money for those affected. He later took on Armenian citizenship and became the country's ambassador to Switzerland, where he also lived. When he was honoured with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2017, he said: "I am both French and Armenian. It's impossible to separate the two, just like milk and coffee."

Enamoured of his work, he shunned retirement until the very end, writing, recording and effortlessly filling concert halls around the world. On 19 September 2018, he was in good spirits as he handed out autographs to his beloved fans after what would become his final concert in Osaka, Japan.

Aznavour peacefully left the world on 1 October 2018, at the age of 94. Four days later, the country paid homage to the greatest icon of French *chanson*. During the state ceremony at Les Invalides, President Macron said: "His songs were never those summer catchphrases that amuse and are forgotten; for millions of people they were a balm, a remedy, a comfort." ♥

Did you KNOW?

♥ Bob Dylan attended Aznavour's first major US appearance in New York City's Carnegie Hall in 1963 and later told *Rolling Stone* that he regarded him as one of the greatest live performers: "He just blew my brains out. I went there with somebody who was French, not knowing what I was getting myself into."

♥ Aznavour was not only an avid writer, he also loved to read and spent an hour every night absorbed in a good book or memorising poetry. He once worked his way through a list of the top 100 literary classics given to him by his friend, Surrealist poet Jean Cocteau.

♥ After two failed marriages, Aznavour found the love of his life with Swedish model Ulla Thorsell. They met at a nightclub in Paris in 1966, and he was instantly smitten with her natural beauty and calm demeanor. Unlike his previous wives who were in showbusiness, Ulla always avoided the limelight. The couple married in Las Vegas in 1967 and in Paris a year later. They had three children, Katia (1969), Mischa (1972) and Nicolas (1977).

♥ Aznavour's signature song was *La Bohème*, which remembers Toulouse-Lautrec's Montmartre where painters could rarely afford to eat, but where art and love were enough to sustain them.

♥ In 1948, Édith Piaf gifted Aznavour a 16mm Paillard-Bolex camera which he took everywhere, filming snippets of his life throughout the years. Shortly before his death, he pieced some of those clips into a movie, *Le Regard de Charles*.