



Me and the Kiki song, Part B

Now where was I? This is part B of a Google journey, about a song that has haunted me since boyhood. Sometimes you have to stop and ogle those old familiar songs that swim just below the surface of your life, breaching like whales now and then: the folk songs of your own personal mythology.

To summarize last month's column: My wife's nickname is Kiki; she is a francophile. My sister Mary, when we were kids, got hooked on a strange song called "Kiki." In high school I became interested in the artists of 1920's Paris. The name "Kiki of Montparnasse" kept coming up. Some of the song lyrics of my sister's song fit with the life of this Parisian Kiki, who was a model and lover for many artists, an artist herself, a charismatic and erotic focus of the artistic enclave of the time, and a cabaret singer. Recently I found a coffee table book called *KiKi's Paris* -- an exciting title for both me and my wife for reasons noted -- full of photographs of the scene and additional information about Kiki of Montparnasse (real name: Alice Prin). I also found, via Google, a recording of Kiki herself, singing six songs.

I covered a bit more about the song and included two verses, and promised a third verse this month. The third verse is not part of the version of the song I linked to last month, but since then, I have found the version idolized by my sister. Sung by Betty Clooney, sister of Rosemary Clooney, as of this writing is on YouTube (see link at end). Clooney sings the verse my sister and I remember that was not on the Winterhalter recording I quoted in the last WZ:

Then from Deauville a count named Louie

With a glint in his one good eye
He just flipped when he looked at Kiki
And he got on one knee and cried

I've got franks in the banks for you
And a castle in old Bordeaux
And remember at 82

Louie didn't have far to go

Merci merci beaucoup no no
Said Kiki to Louie and Mo Mo
But they both wouldn't take no no
It was Kiki they wanted so

Kiki, Kiki, there's nobody like Kiki

Though I haven't nailed down "Rene," "Louie," or the one-eyed count, it would be mighty strange if this song were NOT about Kiki of Montparnasse, as she died in 1953, and Clooney's recording -- lyrics by Charles Tobias -- was released in 1955. It mentions her cabaret singing, her "fiery charms," her being "Venus with loving arms," referring to the Venus de Milo statue whose pose was mimicked closely by Kiki in one of the many art photos taken of her by Man Ray.

Anyway, so not only did I find this recording, but I located a copy of Kiki's memoirs -- with the Venus de Milo-like pose on the cover -- written mostly in the 20s. The little book has a weird intro by Hemingway, said to be the only introduction he ever wrote. It's in the Madison Public Library, if you're in the area and interested. The book was banned for many years, though these days it only seems charmingly suggestive in places.

I also found a RECORDING of Kiki singing, accompanied by an accordion. As of this writing, this is available on Amazon as an mp3 album, or as individual tracks (see footnote). She's a good singer, and, with the accordion accompaniment, reminds me of a subdued Edith Piaf, who was fourteen years younger than Kiki. I wonder if they ever met...

So. This may all have seemed a little tedious, I'm afraid, but two things about the exercise have struck me.

One, how lucky we are to have the internet; that with meager research skills, it is easy to find a digital recording of this obscure song, to find a used copy of a glorious book about the song's subject and her environment, to find her actual memoirs in the local library via a digital library catalog, and then to locate and download tracks of the woman herself singing, to locate and view dozens of her artworks and hundreds of portraits of her by scads of artists of almost a hundred years ago, to find articles about her in old magazines and newspapers online, to view footage of Kiki in vari-

ous surrealistic films of the day, why, it's absurdly wonderful to a geezer like me who has thumbed through many a paper card catalog of yore.

The second but more diffuse point is how folk music, in my mind, has much to do with the songs that haunt us throughout our lives, that butt in conveniently as musical answers to mundane daily questions, that bubble up for no good reason in the shower or on a walk, that trigger odd memories of days gone by or places we've been, that are, in other words, lodged in our craw ready to spring forth appropriately at a moment's notice, sometimes welcome, sometimes not. I guess by that definition any music could be thought of as folk music, which renders the term pretty useless, I suppose. Ah well.

Incidentally, for anyone interested in these wild and creative years in Paris in the first third of the 1900s, the book *KiKi's Paris*, subtitled "Artists and Lovers 1900-1930," by Kluver and Martin, is truly spectacular.

Betty Clooney singing Kiki:
<http://youtu.be/M83ZqCdLiTE>

Kiki singing: Go to Amazon.com and search for "Kiki Chante"

Book: *Kiki's Memoirs*, edited by Billy Kluver and Julie Martin, Ecco Press

Book: *Kiki's Paris*, by the same Kluver and Martin, Harry N. Abrams Inc., pub.

Kiki in film: Go to YouTube and search for "Alice Prin"

Artwork OF Kiki and artwork BY Kiki: search Google Images for "Alice Prin."



Kiki photos by Man Ray:
Above L, 1924, *Le Violon d'ingres*. Above R, early 1930's, Kiki and Andre Laroque. Left, 1929, *Queen of Montparnasse*.

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