

In the steps of Elie Béjard - Urban chabretaire and shooting star

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For my new album, *Chabretas #2*¹, I wanted to look for 18th century tunes, really old repertoires that undoubtedly correspond to what chabretaires of Limousin played before the French Revolution. This was a time when the social status of these popular musicians was much more complex than the romantic and reductive vision of “musicians from a rural and pastoral world”. Historical reality shows us, on the contrary, that these professional musicians (the “ménétriers”), moved with ease between diverse social classes, between villages, towns and cities, and were as comfortable with peasants as with the bourgeoisie, and, sometimes, with aristocrats. And their repertoires reflected this ambiguous complexity. Musicians of town and country, the chabretaires of Limousin and elsewhere, were not assigned to a particular social genre or to limited repertoires. This social complexity was preserved until the last hours of the traditional life of these bagpipes, and particularly in the city of Limoges. I would like to discuss how we found rich accounts of urban chabretaires, who were still close to us in time, some of them not disappearing until the 1960s. And I would like to explain how this research was very similar to a police and anthropological investigation, using clues, such as names written on a list, snippets of memories and testimonies, mysterious photographs, and fascinating bagpipes without a story. And I'm going to tell you how I found myself following in the footsteps of Elie Béjard, a chabrette player, chabrette maker and circus



performer, who died at the age of almost 90, hit by a bus in a Limoges street in 1960².

It all began with a list of names given to me by my old friend André Pangaud, the last chabretaire of Limoges. (Photo p.8) I used to visit him regularly in the late 1970s and he had already opened up so many doors for me of this ancient, vanished world. André had drawn up a list of names of former bagpipe players that one of his teachers, François Denis, who had also been a bagpiper in Limoges in the 1930s, had told him about.

This list included the names of famous players from the city and my work was to track down these musicians one by one: Faurilloux, Gabirou, Barret, Beulet, Brachet, Beaubiat, Béjard, Gabet, "the great Piarri", Marquet, and many others... One day in 1979, André

Pangaud took me to see the daughter of François Denis, the famous Limoges chabretaire. The old woman gave me a photo of her father taken at a gathering in



the Casseaux district of Limoges, surrounded by children, flowers, flags, on a feast day... and in the middle of this crowd, there were two chabretaires. (Photo above) One is François Denis, easily recognisable, dressed to the nines, left-handed, elegant, he was a butler. (Photo left) But another bagpipe player appears among the children, a little man she doesn't remember (Photo p.10). As I walk through Casseaux, a street cleaner to whom I showed the photo, told

me that he remembers that time well, and the many chabretaires who played at the café "La Crotte de poule". According to him, the photo was taken at Mas Goulet, now demolished. I kept this photo for several years, a magnificent testimony to what the Fêtes des Ponts were like in Limoges before and after the war of 1914 - but that's another story.



On January 17, 1982, a few years later, still on the trail of the Limoges players, André took me to a collector's house, rue Fustelle de Coulanges, a former communist newspaper editor who owned several vintage chabrettes. Mr. Gayot informed me about several chabretaires, who had played in his childhood. He gave me some names. In a hurry, he told us about a Mr. Couderc, living nearby, very much alive, and who probably played the chabrette. And another chabretaire, Béjard, in the years 1927-28, who made chairs, "*died around 1935*". I know this name: a Béjard was a competitor in several chabrette competitions, according to the newspapers of the time, including the one in 1912 in Limoges, where Gabirou won, ahead of Beulet and Béjard. Gayot advised me, above all, to go and see the daughter of the chabretaire, who still lives a few streets away. We went with Thierry Boisvert - with whom I did most of my investigations at the time.

In the footsteps of the chabretaire Béjard in Faubourg d'Angoulême

It seems that this chabretaire was a celebrity in the neighbourhood. The wife of the mechanic Sardin knew Béjard well, telling me that the bagpiper's two daughters still lived in the area: Mrs. Vauzelle on rue de l'Egalité, a house with hydrangeas, and Mrs. Lathière on rue Armand Dutreix. Mrs. Vauzelle, a charming lady, welcomes us into her home with her daughter, Mrs. Réjasse,



therefore the granddaughter of the chabretaire, and she shows us a beautiful black and white photo, where Béjard is walking in the street with his bagpipe. (Photo left) Flash Thought! : I recognise this chabrette - it is in the collection of Mr. Lerat, a former police officer of Limoges. The family immediately recognised Béjard from my old photo, the one taken with François Denis at Les Casseaux. *"The old man died in 1960, he was about 85 years old. He was born in Dournazac, Dordogne, and his first name was "Elie". His great friend was Beaubiat, they played two chabrettes together. Béjard was an excellent tuner of other people's instruments. The grandfather Elie had three chabrettes, perhaps a certain Mr. Couderc took them?"*

The next day, January 18, we meet his other grandson, Mr. Béjard, aka "Le Sioux," in the same district of Limoges. *"My grandfather died at the age of 91, around 1958. He could hardly see. He was a little fellow. His chanter was longer than yours, and his chabrette was covered in brown velvet. He played as far as Verneuil (on the road to Angoulême), at weddings and balls. His chabrette must be at Lathière's, the chabretaire's other daughter, whose son-in-law is a heating engineer on rue Armand Dutreix. Previously, this chabrette belonged to me, I played in it a little. My grandfather had three chabrettes at the end of his life: one went to Mr. Couderc, his student, another to me - so to Lathière?, and one to an unknown owner."*

Béjard, and his student Mr. Couderc

We quickly find Mr. Couderc, who would have learned to play the chabrette with Béjard, in the neighbourhood, when he was around 10-12 years old. He also recognises him in the photo of the Casseaux. Béjard gave him a Limousin-type chabrette, *"with a single mirror on the front, to practice. Béjard taught me how to make reeds: he said "le pilet" for the copper staple, mounted with cane, and waxed wire "Au Conscrit." He put a brass wire around it. We tried the chanters with our mouths. Béjard was a good player, he did the vibrato with the key."* He shows me a photo of Béjard with him as a child. (Photo p.12) He no longer knows where this chabrette is because he later moved on to play the Auvergne bellows cabrette. He

tries to play a folk classic on my own chabrette, "Un Jour dins l'Eitoulia." Later then he hums two waltzes Béjard played with his friend Beaubiat from Cognac, two café-concert waltzes that were probably heard on a 78 rpm record: "J'ai tant pleuré pour toi" et "Reviens." *"Béjard knew Beaubiat well, they played together on Sundays, sometimes they went from rue de la Borie (Cognac) to the Faubourg d'Angoulême, they played in all the bistros! Besides, Béjard only drank red wine, and he always wiped his moustache, which tilted toward the left! The poor old man died in an accident on rue Armand Dutreix around 1960."* And then as we leave he gives us a surprising piece of information: *"Béjard had played in a circus in his youth, he had fallen in love with an acrobat, who did a cannonball act."*

January 18th, late afternoon:

We go to Lathière, 170 rue

Armand Dutreix. Mrs. Lathière is the second daughter of Elie Béjard : she confirms his dates, 1870-1960. *"They were chabretaires from father to son: his father Georges Béjard played the bagpipes, also made them, and had played them in Limoges at the end of his life. My grandfather Georges was from Latterie, a small village near Dournazac in the Dordogne. Elie Béjard, his son aka "Louis", lived at 87 rue Armand Dutreix. He was a lumberjack in Dournazac in his youth, later he had made chairs in Limoges, and also worked in the porcelain factory."* The story becomes astonishing: *"My father, Elie Béjard, had done his military service in Tunisia, in the Zouaves, in 1890, he thought he would never return to France. Then he toured Europe with a circus he met in Marseille. He played the chabrette for children, and fell in love with a young girl who did a "woman-cannon" act!"*

Ms. Lathière gives us more details: *"My father used to make chabrettes, he had a trunk full of chanters and chabrettes, at least 7, which were rotting in boxes at the end of his life. Elie collected everything, and put it in "gabias", chicken coops. He had a pedal lathe, and used "dau boè de pudé" (boxwood): a yellow wood, which he kept in quantity. He sewed the skin of the chabrette, which he called "La pédoire". He made the reeds of course, and sang at the same time as he played."* She saw a photo at a wedding in 1950 in Cussac, "Adrien's wedding", where Béjard held a large chabrette. She





gives us a beautiful photo of Béjard with his instrument, on which we can clearly see the details. *"This chabrette was certainly given to a folk group"*. But I know where the instrument is and I had already seen it in another photo that very morning: it was bought several years before by the police officer and collector Lerat. (Photo above)

This beautiful chabrette is now in the collections of the MUCEM in Marseille. In 1999, for the exhibition "Souffler c'est jouer" at the Musée national des ATP in Paris and St-Yrieix-la-Perche, I suggested to Florence Gétéreau, who was organizing the exhibition with me, to have this famous chabrette by Béjard purchased from Mr. Lerat, by the Museum. Lerat had a second chabrette of the same maker, probably also by Béjard, which was also bought by the Museum, and kept in the MUCEM's reserves but never exhibited. (Photo left).

Elie Béjard and The Ring of Stars

The life of Béjard was like one found in a novel... So the young chabretaire left Limousin at the age of 20, and on his return from military service in the Zouaves in Tunisia he joined a circus, where he played the bagpipes, doubtless on show amongst the "phenomena". Elie

Béjard had fallen in love with a little circus artist who was a human cannonball, a gypsy girl he met probably during a stopover of the travelling circus. The most famous of the cannonball women at the time was Matilda Richter, known as "Zazel", and she was the first person to do this spectacular act, being propelled

into the air by a spring-loaded cannon. After a glide of more than ten metres, she was caught in a net... but sometimes the net was missed, or the net was pierced. Moreover, after a few landing mishaps, Zazel's career came to an end, as it was said that she had broken a few bones. Later several artists took up Zazel's name to perform the same act all over Europe. (Photo above). Finally, Elie Béjard returned to Limoges where he worked as a chair maker and bagpipe turner, telling his epic stories far from Limoges to his dying days. His daughter, whom I met in 1982, remembered his beautiful Limousin chabrette with its star-shaped head-box and mirrors, made by him, perhaps in memory of the Circus and its star-studded ring. (Photo left).



"My mother's name was Mathilde, but no one knew where she came from," she told us. We can imagine this little man, 1m 49 tall, photographed several times with kids not much taller than him, an entertainer and circus artist, amidst clowns, acrobats and children's laughter.

"Exhibitor of phenomena"

Searching through the online civil status archives, hoping to verify all this – because life is sometimes stranger than fiction – I discovered Bédard's military

ÉTAT CIVIL

Nom : *Bédard*
 Prénoms : *Elie*
 N° le *3 Mars 1870* à *Dournazac*, canton
de la Haute-Vienne, département de la *Haute-Vienne*, résidant
 à *Châlus*, canton *des dits*, département
de la Haute-Vienne, profession de *sculpteur*
 fils de *Grosas* et de *Marie Grosas*, domiciliés
 à *Châlus*, canton de *dit*, département de la *Haute-Vienne*

N° *10* de tirage dans le canton de *Châlus*

DÉCISION DU CONSEIL DE REVISION ET MOTIFS.
 (Indiquer la nature du dispense, s'il y a lieu.)
Exempté de service par suite de son état de sculpteur.

Compris dans la *1* partie de la liste du recrutement cantonal (..... parties).

SIGNALEMENT.

Cheveux *et*, sourcils *châtains*
 yeux *gris bleu*, front *modeste*
 nez *petit*, bouche *modérée*
 menton *arrondi*, visage *ovale*
 Taille : 1 m. *49* cent. Taille rectifiée : 1 m. cent.
 MARQUES PARTICULIÈRES :
 Degré d'instruction : (général) (), (militaire) (x).
 Dans l'armée active.

official record, established up until the war of 39-45. (Left) All these things are confirmed there: Elie Bédard was born on March 3, 1870 in Dournazac, to Georges Bédard and Marie

Grosas, residents of Châlus. Height: 1m49, gray-blue eyes. He was in Tunisia

with the Zouaves regiment from 1891 to 1892 and later joined the reserve army. We read that in 1903, "he travels to France with exhibitors of phenomena" ("Exhibiteurs de phénomènes"). This was his adventure with the travelling circus, which seems to have

Dates.	Communes.	Subdivisions de région.	Domicile ou à résider.
<i>23 Janv 1903</i>	<i>Voyage en France avec les exhibiteurs de phénomènes</i>		
<i>10 Nov 1905</i>	<i>Limoges, g. d'Angoulême n° 87</i>		

lasted a long time. The type of gypsy circus, documented in Europe as early as the 16th century, featured "fairground freaks": bearded ladies, dwarves and giants, Siamese twins and knife throwers, in addition to clowns, acrobats and wild animal tamers...In 1905, Bédard settled in Limoges at 87 Faubourg d'Angoulême (at the end of the Second World War this street became rue Armand-Dutreix, where his daughter still lived when I met her). He was mobilised in the Great War of 14-18 and was at the front against Germany from

1915 to 1917. But him coming back was a miracle. Protected by his lucky star, even if he was a wandering star. What a phenomenon Béjard was!

Béjard's bagpipes

Béjard's chabrette, the one he carries in family pictures, is distinctive and easily recognisable as the box had a 7-pointed star made of mirrors. Based on identical stylistic features, we've been able to attribute several other chabrettes to this maker.



In particular, the one bought in 1943 from an antique dealer in Limoges by Georges-Henri Rivière, then the director of the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires. I found it around 1988 in the reserves of the Paris Museum during my university studies, thanks to my thesis supervisor, who was head of the museum's music department at the time. The historical context of the ATP Museum, financed by funds from the Vichy government under the Nazi occupation during the war of 39-45, undoubtedly pushed the successive directors of the Museum not to exhibit this type of acquisition, because it referred to a

controversial era. This is all the more unfortunate since in 1943, Béjard was still very much alive and kicking. A serious ethnomusicological investigation after the war would have yielded important details on the bagpipe world in Limoges. Today, this chabrette is on display at MuPop, the museum of popular music in Montluçon. (Photo previous page).



A **fourth chabrette** by Elie Béjard appeared a few years ago, when the family of the chabretaire, Beulet, came to offer it for sale. This happened during an exhibition of the contemporary maker Claude Girard in St Junien. This fine instrument was bought by an amateur musician from Limoges. Beulet appeared in some chabretaire competitions at the beginning of the 20th century, alongside Béjard and Gabirou. You can see the star-shaped box that he loved, and his very clean turning style. (Photo above, G. Polteau).

A fifth chabrette that can be attributed to him is kept in Scotland, at the Royal Scottish Museum of Edinburgh. This instrument and others will be the subject of a future *Chanter* article.

Coda : I still hope to find an old photo of Béjard in his circus around 1900. But my investigations drove me to this unknown piper, playing in the Christy Bros Circus in the 20's, touring USA, showing "the world's most complete congress of strange people". Any suggestions for a name? (See photos overleaf!)

Translation with the kind help of Jane Moulder and my beloved Karin.

¹ See the review by Andrea Kirby in this issue of *Chanter*

² All information recorded in my investigation diary since 1975.

³ See the wonderful book “La Fête des Ponts, Limoges 1906-1914” by Jean-Pierre Cavaillé and Jan-Francès Vinhau, with lots of incredible photos of *chabretaires* playing in the streets. IEO Limousin, 2013

