

# My Friend

# Maurice Chevalier

# at 75

An American comedian pays a birthday tribute to the Gallic charmer with the straw hat

**T**HIS WEEK my good friend Maurice Chevalier celebrates his 75th birthday. I could write a book about him—but let me briefly go back to the 1920s.

Paris in those days boasted "the girl with the most beautiful legs in the world," the Folies Bergère beauty, Mistinguett. She had all France at her feet and her choice of counts, princes, dukes, and multimillionaire business tycoons. Yet Mistinguett passed up all of them in favor of a penniless young man who, when she met him, was 22 years old and many years her junior.

The young man idolized her, and for the rest of their lives each was to be the other's only true love. But they didn't "live happily ever after." No, sadly, they went their separate ways when the man realized that part of his heart was irrevocably lost to another more capricious love—audiences all over the world, audiences that one day would return the adoration of Maurice Chevalier.

In 1929, I appeared in Ziegfeld's "Midnight Frolic" on the roof of the New Amsterdam Theater, New York's most expensive night club of the era. One evening, the Great Ziegfeld asked me to introduce someone in the audience. I had never heard the name before, nor had the audience, but after introducing him, he stayed onstage for more than an hour singing in English and French.

He could have sung in Chinese: that Parisian twinkle in his eye, that mischievous lower lip, the rakish angle of that now-famous straw hat hypnotized the audience. When Maurice Chevalier started taking bows, the applause shook the room.

This was my first meeting with the fascinating Frenchman, but through the years we became close friends. Just the other day I received a letter from him in his unmistakably bold, energetic handwriting. His letters, no matter how long, are always handwritten.

Following his recent television special, "The World of Maurice Chevalier," I gave a party for him. One guest was particularly hilarious and happy. Maurice whispered to me, "Eddie, who is he?"

I whispered back, "The leader of a big labor union." Maurice laughed. "He's certainly having a wonderful time-and-a-half."

By the early 1930s, Chevalier was France's favorite and America's adopted son. During that period he was in Hollywood much of the time and visited me frequently.

One evening he pedaled up to my house, as usual, on a bicycle. "Maurice," I said, "you're too famous to be riding around on a bicycle. It's time you got a Rolls-Royce."

Chevalier chuckled, "Eddie, if I make good pictures, people will think I have a Rolls-Royce. If I make bad pictures, they will think I have a bicycle even if my garage is packed with Rolls-Royces."

One night after attending a movie, Maurice and I went to a nearby spot for doughnuts and coffee. At the sight of



this continental charmer even the waitresses, who were used to Hollywood stars, lost their heads and their holds on the china. They broke more dishes than a new bride. And when Maurice dipped a doughnut in his coffee, one waitress yelled, "Look, girls! He dunka!"

Chevalier had the same deep passion for his country that he had for Mistinguett and for his audiences. A soldier in World War I, he was wounded in the right lung, captured by the Germans, and spent more than two years in a prison camp.

When he finally returned to Paris, he found it difficult to pick up the pieces of his career. Still weak and ill from his wound and his siege in the prison camp, he couldn't re-establish his old rapport with audiences. Just when things looked blackest, Mistinguett came to the rescue, and he once again appeared with her in the Folies Bergère. Now it was as if he never had been away.

As a veteran performer, Mistinguett helped Maurice in many ways. In the early days Chevalier affected a clown-like costume with rouged cheeks, a red nose, an ill-fitting suit, and a silly cap. It was Mistinguett who pointed out that, with his talent, he needed none of these things.

But it was in the midst of his rediscovered happiness, appearing in the Folies Bergère with Mistinguett, that things began to go wrong between them. When Mistinguett finally accepted the fact that her promising pupil had graduated and was now a performer of ever-increasing stature, her protective attitude was replaced by treatment usually reserved for rivals. As Chevalier grew more popular, he and Mistinguett grew further apart.

The climax came when the brilliant American actress, Elsie Janis, asked Maurice to play in a London revue with her. The decision to leave Paris and Mistinguett was an agonizing one, but when he made up his mind, Mistinguett's only comment was, "Well, Maurice, this is what you always wanted."

**F**ROM THEN ON, Chevalier's success exceeded his wildest dreams. He was a happy man. Then came World War II. In love with a Jewish girl, Chevalier risked his life by hiding her and her parents from the Nazis.

But a bitter moment came at the end of the war. Listening to the radio one night, Chevalier heard his name listed among those who had collaborated with the Nazis. Everybody in France seemed to have heard this broadcast, but few heard a later one with the news that Chevalier's name had been included in error. The damage was done. Chevalier's beloved France hunted him as a collaborationist, accusing him of entertaining German troops.

The truth was that the Germans had urged him to accept an engagement in Berlin. He refused, but he did agree to appear just once at Alten Grabow, the camp where he had been a prisoner during World War I. His fee: the release of 10 French POWs. German news reports implied that he had performed in troop camps and had