

At 70, this celebrated French entertain

remisces about his fabulous career—but don't think he's retiring.



“WHAT

A LIFE

IVE LED!”

by Maurice Chevalier



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A FEW DAYS AGO, a journalist joined me for lunch. I thought we had a very enjoyable and enlightening discussion—till I read in his story a few days later that I was a lonely old man.

If you can call 70 old—and I don't—he may be correct on that point. And certainly there are times at my age when a man wants to be a little lonesome, to reminisce, to get prepared for where everyone goes.

But I'm not a lonely old man. On the contrary, I'm a very happy man who has had a rich, wonderful life—and still has.

So please, don't feel sorry for me. I wouldn't want to trade places with anyone!

Besides, I still carry on the love affair of my life—my work. And I'll keep at it till I read three times in the paper that I bore people, or till I get tired of it. I don't think there's much chance of the latter; I wouldn't know how to get along without my work.

I quit school when I was only 10. My father was a painter who drank heavily and left my mother when I was barely eight. I didn't know what ever became of him. At first I heard from him occasionally, and when I could afford it, I offered to help him financially. He never embarrassed me by accepting my help.

I started out as an engraver's apprentice, but in short order became a carpenter's assistant, a doll painter, and a pen maker. One day I persuaded my older brother Paul that we should become circus acrobats. But I broke so many bones that I went back to the carpenter's bench.

Early in life I had discovered an ability to attract a crowd whenever I sang, so I cajoled myself an audition at the Casino des Tourelles and got my first singing job—at 12 francs a week. That was a few days before my 12th birthday.

My fortunes improved slowly. I began to tour the “café circuit” of the Paris suburbs, where I became known as “Le Petit Chevalier.” But my big break came when I was 17 and singing at the Eldorado Theatre. The fabulous music-hall queen, Mistinguett, saw me and insisted I join her act at the Folies Bergere.

I don't think any woman could do more for a man than Mistinguett did for me. She deserves credit for some of my success and much of my happiness. I have never admired anyone more.



In 1909, Maurice Chevalier appeared with Mistinguett—and a doomed topper.

That's why I was so heartbroken three years ago, when she died in Paris at the age of 82.

Next to Mistinguett, a good share of the credit for my success should go to my straw hat. When I started in show business, I was what is known in my country as a “low comedian.” I wore a funny wig, a big red nose, and baggy trousers. One day a woman from the audience came to my dressing room after the show and said, “Why do you make yourself ugly, monsieur? You'd be a far bigger success if you looked better.”

So I got myself tails and a top hat, but the hat didn't feel right. I wanted something gayer.

Then I remembered an Englishman who looked very good in a tuxedo with a straw hat, so I got myself a straw hat, too. It has been my trademark ever since, even after it went out of fashion. For years I was the only entertainer in the world who wore one—except for the people who imitated me.

All this time I have used the same hat maker in England, who makes up a half-dozen hats for me every year. At the end of each year, I give them to charitable groups which auction them off.

My career came to a temporary halt for army service in World War I. Although I was seriously wounded and taken prisoner by the Germans in 1914, I can't consider the war years completely wasted so far as my career was concerned.

I had always known that my future would be limited unless I spoke English. Fortunately for me, one of my British fellow prisoners was a teacher in private life.

He was just as anxious to learn French as I was to learn his native language, and so we agreed to give each other lessons. When the war was over, I spoke English with only a trace of an accent.

The study paid off. In November, 1918, I left for London to co-star with Elsie Janis in “Hello America.” And because I spoke English so well, I was able to come to the United States in 1928, to star in such wonderful motion pictures as “The Love Parade,” “The Smiling Lieutenant,” “Love Me Tonight,” “The Merry Widow,” and many more.

I returned to France in 1935 and kept appearing in films, musicals, and night clubs till one day I told myself: “Maurice, maybe you should retire. You are one of the old generation. They know you and like you in Paris, but most likely they have forgotten you in the United States. Certainly the young people don't even know who you are.”

Suddenly it struck me that I should come back to the United States to see where I really stood. If I still had something to say, if my style meant anything at all—and I'm a stylist, not a singer—then I would continue my career.

I put on a two-and-a-half-hour show in New York, which was so successful that I took my revue on tour, even to Las Vegas, where I performed before a type of audience I never knew existed!

People seemed interested in me as a person, and in my opinions on subjects ranging from rock 'n' roll to the difference between French and American women! Incidentally, to the first question, I usually answer that I don't think it stands much of a chance to last in its present form. No one can do a double somersault every second!

If the rhythm is to survive, it must calm down

considerably. Only natural artists stay in vogue.

As to how American girls compare with French ones, all I can say is that no woman should be compared with those in another country. What counts is how she is brought up, what kind of heart she has, how good she is inside. And that has nothing to do with the country of her birth.

Not long ago I received a wonderful opportunity which has given me a brand-new interest in life. When director Billy Wilder offered me my first non-singing role in an American film, that of



Always a hero to his mother (above), he won medal in World War I (left).



At 20, he was a seasoned performer in French night spots.

Audrey Hepburn's detective father in “Love in the Afternoon,” I knew I had found a new love—acting.

I don't know when I enjoyed anything more than working with Audrey, or with Leslie Caron in “Gigi,” or, just recently, with Deborah Kerr and Rossano Brazzi in “Count Your Blessings.”

People often ask me whether it's my career that keeps me young, or whether I have any special gimmicks. I tell them that any mental stimulation keeps a person alert. Beyond that, I have no secret formulas.

For instance, I don't watch my diet other than restricting myself to two meals a day—and I have done that most of my life to keep down to a comfortable 160 pounds. I go for walks every day because I enjoy walking, not to exercise. I never have done that!

True, when I'm not working, I usually stay in bed until two in the afternoon, although I'm awake at seven every day. But not for reasons of health: I love to read and write in bed, and there's no better time for it than when one is fresh. Besides, what else can a man like me do in the morning?

I think one of the reasons people think I'm lonely is because I have no wife or children. I've been divorced for many, many years, and my wife and I had no children—but I do have a family.

First of all, there's my brother Paul, who lives with me in Marnes La Coquette. Also some nephews and grand-nephews, and a few great friends.

Then I have Francois and Madeleine Vals, my secretary and his wife. They travel with me wherever I go and couldn't be closer to me if they were my own children.

So you see, there is no reason for anyone to feel sorry for me, because I have been very lucky all my life. Although I was born into a poor family, I was blessed with a very wonderful mother who inspired me even when we had little to eat and I had to stuff paper into the holes in my shoes.

I have been able to follow my profession with some success, and I have enjoyed the friendship of some fine men—and beautiful women. I feel very thankful for everything.



Chevalier was a trim athlete at 26 and after 44 years still weighs in at only 160 pounds.



Francois Vals, the entertainer's secretary, and Mme. Vals are like his son and daughter.