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Yvette Horner: Dancing queen of the caravan

History 09.07.19

Yvette Horner, world accordion champion, with sales of over 30 million records, and friend to the peloton stars

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Photographs: Offside/L'Equipe

Open any book on the history of the Tour de France and at some point you'll come a picture of Yvette Horner perched on top of a van, playing an accordion. Or she'll be shown at the stage finish, handing over a yellow jersey to the race leader. Unlike today's blandly attractive, anonymous podium girls, whose only apparent job is to hand over jerseys and trophies and offer pecks on cheeks, Yvette Horner was an award-winning, celebrated musician who, by the time of her death last June at the age of 95, had sold more than 30 million records in the course of her 70-year career.

For more than a decade, from 1952 until 1963, she was the unofficial Queen of the Tour. With her wide skirts, her tiny cinched-in waist, her somewhat buck-toothed smile, hoop earrings and wide sombrero perched on top of a pile of black curls, she was as instantly recognisable, and as emblematic of the Tour, as the yellow jersey itself.

She was beloved by the fans but also the riders, with whom she developed firm friendships. They included the stars of the day: the great sprinter André Darrigade, Raphaël Géminiani – who sometimes asked her to play to him while he had his post-stage massage – and Louison Bobet, who gave her one of his yellow jerseys. When she heard Ferdi Kübler was in low spirits, she gave an impromptu concert in his room to cheer him up. She developed a particularly warm friendship with Jacques Anquetil, who invited Horner and her husband to his house in Normandy where he opened up his cellar of fine wines.

Perhaps at the heart of those friendships was not just a mutual respect, but also recognition that they had a lot in common. Yvette didn't sweat it on the bike, but like them, her success was built on sheer hard slog.

Her early years as a teenage accordionist involved moving from one short term contract to the next, playing in cabarets and theatres in Pyrenean spa towns and in fancy old brasseries in their last days of pomp and glory. During the pre-war era, there were no motorways and the buses were unheated. Travelling in winter with an orchestra, Yvette and the other musicians would pile into cafés along the route in attempts to warm up. They stayed in cheap hotels with no heating or hot water, and sometimes they all ended up having to wash in the kitchens.

Yvette won many awards as a young woman, such as the prestigious Grand Prix du Disque de l'Académie Charles-Cros for her first record. Her most significant victory, however, was the World Accordion Championships when she was 26. The next day she was dismayed to discover a Parisian newspaper reporting that she'd won (an inexistent) women's competition: it had seemed inconceivable that a woman—female accordionists were almost unheard of—might beat the world's best men.

Despite such plaudits, she struggled to break through. She played in Parisian nightclubs and restaurants for a living, and in cinemas, which in those days offered musical entertainment before the main film. Yet wherever she played, she gained fans. Some of them were very famous, such as the singers Mistinguett, Maurice Chevalier and Yves Montand, the actor Jean Gabin and the great cellist, Pablo Casals.

Her first, and most significant fan, however, was her husband. René Droesch was playing for Girondins de Bordeaux football team when the fourteen year-old Yvette Horner took up her

first professional contract at the Café du Commerce, a grand old brasserie with an orchestra in Bordeaux. Every night, René would sit in front of the stage to watch Yvette play. Two years later she had a contract to play in another city and as luck would have it, René was also there, playing for the local team. Once again, a smitten René would come every night to watch Yvette play. Eventually they got talking, and finally one evening he walked her back to her hotel.

Tour de France 1954. Stage 3 – Lille to Rouen. Yvette Horner plays an accordian from the publicity caravane as it heralds the arrival of the Tour.

When he proposed, she confessed that she would make a useless wife, warning him; “I can’t even cook two eggs”. “Don’t worry, I’ll look after all that,” Réné said. And he did: Yvette was free to focus on her music, while Réné did the cooking, the cleaning, the shopping and the ironing. Eventually he became her manager and agent. When they moved to Paris, he would hold her hand and gently shepherd her across the street, because she was so daunted by the traffic.

It was her husband’s idea that she branch out by playing at the Tour de France. As an avid reader of L’Equipe, he knew that everyone followed the Tour. It was clear to René that Yvette’s audience was there, at the stage finishes where tens of thousands would turn up for the afterparties that featured the great accordion stars of the day and their orchestras. One of them, Maurice Alexander, was so successful, he made his way between events by private plane.

Her experiences those first few years were frustrating, not least because she had to deal with the egos of established stars. On one occasion she was supporting one of the top players at her record label. The first time she played, she was supposed to do three tracks to warm up the audience. The encores from the crowd were so insistent, however, she ended up playing seven. That was too much for their headline act: for the rest of the Tour, Yvette patiently waited every evening for her turn, only to discover she'd been left off the programme. One day, she hid behind one of the team buses and wept bitter tears of frustration and humiliation. Eventually she got to play once more, on condition she only did one piece.

After a few years of being held back by other artists' egos, Yvette decided she needed to be in the publicity caravan itself, playing directly to the picnicking fans. In 1954, Vins de France offered her a contract that afforded few luxuries, but gave her the use of a Ford Vedette,an American saloon car. She would stand up through the sunroof and play her accordion, while René drove—and then at post-stage parties.

Finally, Yvette got her audience. But at some cost. Her accordion weighed 12 kilos, so standing for five hours straight playing non-stop was quite a feat of endurance. Then there was the sunroof: every time René had to slam on the brakes because the car in front had suddenly slowed, Yvette was thrown against the hard edge of the opening. No matter how much care he

took, this happened repeatedly, every single day. By the end of the Tour her back was black with bruises and covered with angry red welts.

Then there was the raging sunburn, the insects which stuck to her thick yet ineffective sun cream, together with the grime of exhaust fumes and dust, and the blinding glare of the sun: conscious of her audience, she didn't want to hide behind dark glasses. While her eyes puffed up, every time she smiled, she felt as if her face was splintering. To crown all the suffering, one day a friend asked, "but why do you only pretend to play?" The publicity caravan was so noisy that it drowned out the sound of her accordion.

A doctor insisted she abandon the Tour and go home. But Yvette wasn't the abandoning type, not least because they were entering the Pyrenees where she had grown up. So she forged on.

Sometimes she would climb out of the car and play a few tunes at the roadside. On one such occasion they had reached the summit of the Col d'Aspin when a representative from Suze, a French brand of bitters, asked her whether she wouldn't play a few tunes from their van. Ever obliging, she climbed into the luxurious Suze-mobile, which was rigged up with a microphone and speakers. As her music was broadcast for hundreds of metres around, the mountainside started to waltz.

Yvette Horner and Louison Bobet

The next year, Suze offered Yvette a major contract and she finally hit the big time. As 'Miss Suze', her music was properly broadcast through speakers and she was given a comfy seat in a Perspex box that protected her from the worst of the elements. It was exhausting,

nonetheless. With all the post-stage balls, she often wouldn't get to bed until 3am, only to get up the next day at 6am.

One evening she collapsed after a concert. Once again, a doctor advised her to pack it all in. Once again Yvette stuck with it. The people from Suze made up a mannequin, which they stuck on the roof of her van so that Yvette could take a break, while loud speakers played her recordings. But as the caravan slowly wound up a mountain pass, spectators soon cottoned on and there was nearly a riot. Stones and snowballs were thrown, one of which hit Yvette on the temple, giving her migraines for the next few weeks. Gino Bartali, who'd abandoned the 1950 Tour after allegedly being attacked in the Pyrenees, would no doubt have felt vindicated in his claims that French fans were mad, bad and dangerous. The mannequin was relegated to the boot.

With the money that came in, Yvette and René eventually bought a large house in Nogent-sur-Marne, a leafy suburb just east of the Bois de Vincennes outside Paris. She commissioned an interior designer to make it just so: with door handles and chair backs in the shape of treble clefs, while accordions appeared wherever you set your eyes: on a fire place surround, in the shape of a mirror, as wall sconces, on windup toys and porcelain figurines and on cherub sculptures in the garden. Her father came up to Paris and inlaid a mosaic accordion into the crazy paving of her garden path. Her bedroom, meanwhile, was decorated in the colours of the French flag.

Read: Tour de France – The Caravan of Love

Whatever her own personal connection to music, Horner saw her primary role in life as a purveyor of happiness. "I hope [to bring the public] a bit of gaiety, a bit of joy," she told an interviewer in 1973. "There are so many problems in life, so many difficulties. Today we all lead lives that are far from stress free."

The French often praise great champions as being 'generous' riders, who understand that a race is also a performance, and that the public expects its heroes to act with courage and panache. Raphaël Géminiani once explained that as a rider on the French team at the Tour, it wasn't the team manager he was accountable to, but the public.

Horner understood this too. She was generous to the end, appearing as a guest of honour at the Tour de France in 2012, shortly before her ninetieth birthday. She performed her last concert in 2011, and released her last album, *Hors Norme*, the following year. It features a poem read to music by Yvette, a tribute to her beloved René who died in 1986. Yvette herself

passed away on 11 June last year. She suffered no illness, her agent explained, but died “as a consequence of a life fully lived”.

“The most important thing to understand,” she explained in 2012, “is love. Music is love.”

This is an extract of an article that was originally published in Rouleur 19.4

Isabel Best is the author of Queens of Pain, published by Rapha Editions

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