



OFFICIAL BIOGRAPHY OF SACHA DISTEL

Such a handsome guy.

Classy as well. Real class!

Dark haired with greenish grey eyes edged by a faint pattern of crow's feet. One of those keen looks that reflect an impudent masculinity. A boyish, whiter than white grin with those disarming dimples. An eternal silhouette of a young fit man, dressed in a pale shirt, dinner jacket and bow tie. A certain slightly old fashioned aura of what was considered elegant in the century just gone.

A popular cool guy, with evident magnetic charm but made real by his politeness and kindness. He could sing too!

The sort of guy that one thinks of always having seen around. A far off cousin that one doesn't know very well but is fond of even though we envied him. For finally, whether one likes it or not, cares or doesn't care, Sacha Distel is part of every family in France and elsewhere.

Mine and yours.

Because one day there was « Scoubidou », because another « La belle vie (The Good Life) », because of the « Sacha Show », Chantal, Brigitte and les ragots, because of « Uncle Ray », Quincy Jones, Dionne Warwick, Henri and jazz...

Because of all that and much more, we all have the impression of knowing this ideal « son-in-law », finally beaten at the end by his illness one awful day in July 2004...

However.

Exceptionally talented guitarist, smiling aesthete, brilliant composer, adored entertainer, discreet humanist, licensed charmer, Sacha Distel surfed all his life on the waves of a turbulent century. Popular crooner, always generous, he kept intact his love of life until the end, which had given him so much then, with a frightening, relentless regularity, came the reminder that nothing, no one can be taken for granted...

Not even « La belle vie (The Good Life) ».

Red Army, Yellow star, « Puce lumineuse » (*lighting shop*) and dazzling illumination

Léonine, 17 years old, Sacha's future father, walked across East Europe. His destination: the Parisian apartment of his elder brother Georges, already settled and prosperous in France. Odessa-Paris: certainly a few miles on the clock, but at the end, liberty and survival compared to life in the budding Soviet regime.

Fairly quickly acclimatized, his interest in chemical formulas led him to study at Rouen. Where, to be honest he came close to being extremely bored. Because Léonine loved to dance... and to play the charmer too... What a surprise...

It was at a dance that he met Andrée Ventura, the youngest daughter of a middle-class Jewish Parisian family, sister of the great Ray. As was the custom at the time, Léonine asked her mother permission to dance with her daughter. The answer was no. No to everything until Sacha's birth reconciled the Ventura family with the rebellious lovers. That was 29th January 1933.

His childhood was a cosy one and "illuminating". His father, having finished with cars, was selling lighting at the Porte de Clignancourt at the shop « La puce Lumineuse ». Several years later, Sacha described his enchantment one morning when at the flick of a switch, Léonine lit up a sky of electric stars. The artist would relive the same emotions on stage years later at the moment the red curtain went up.

Sacha was six when the Second World War broke out.

Nine when Andrée Ventura, Distel's wife received her « yellow star of David », before being interned at Drancy.

Ten when he was sent to a Catholic school in Mayenne.

Twelve the first time he saw his parents again in 1945.

1945, return to Paris. In spite of everyone being impressed, life had to go on. He wanted to move on and develop his own style. The sporty Sacha began to realise to what point he turned female heads.

The musical process was underway: Maman Andrée made him take long and tedious piano lessons but the light came from elsewhere

In the winter of 1948 Uncle Ray–Ventura–, accompanied by Paul Misraki, one of his Collégiens and Bruno Coquatrix, a friend who hadn't yet had a real job and no one knew if he'd ever have one, drove the young Sacha to the Alhambra.

That evening Sacha's life would be played out. Opposite Dizzie Gillespie.

Jazz literally entered his soul. In fact, « enter » was exactly it. Without physically breaking and entering, music flooded his brain, irradiated each nerve, lit up each cell, woke up each chromosome.

Sacha would be a jazz musician.

Definitely.

A taboo subject, gutter press, Gibson and Scoubidou.

So began a remarkable period which, looking back, laid the foundations for Sacha's life for quite sometime: hard work by day but as soon as night fell, heading off for Saint Germain where the Paris regulars would meet up to swing to the rhythm of be bop.

Initiated by a young imaginative Henri Salvador, Sacha, in addition to his double baccalaureate (an essential condition without which there would have been no peace with his in laws), wore out his fingers playing his guitar.

At 17, Sacha Distel was one of the most promising of French jazz guitarists.

At 19, he was recognised as the best.

1953, Sacha wasn't yet 20. He was taken on by, « Uncle » Ray who had become music editor. He offered him the chance to learn the job and English at the same time, in New York, then London.

Sacha returned from the first city his heart full of black music, from the second...frozen. But he was influenced by both and would stay that way. This sort of initiation, at this stage in his life, would remain with him all through his life. A musician's life. Free to play his Gibson all night long in a smoky nightclub. Close, very close to those who he thought of as being the best and happiest of musicians: jazzmen. He was one of them.

Return to France, we're in the middle of the 1950's.

Sacha sang (a bit), played (a lot) and fell in love (passionately).

During the day, Sacha was musical editor and as part of his job he met the global superstar: Brigitte Bardot. Between them, it wasn't love at first sight but Brigitte who made the move. Then, after Greco, Moreau, and others Sacha would pin up Bardot on his list of conquests.

Then followed a mixed period along with the flavours of St Tropez « Dolce vita ». Month of happiness with a bittersweet taste that sounded the beginning of trouble. Detested by half the men on the planet, he was harassed by the gutter press of the time and molested by the Diva's entourage. Not really the time for starting a singing career without the critics seeing an opportunist maniac...

At the time, the French satirical newspaper "Le Canard Enchaîné" wrote about him « *The little young guitarist who is trying to make himself a name by the sweat of his brow engaging in a certain activity that one doesn't like to mention* » End of quote.

"La belle" finished by giving up and like all the others left him. Betrayed in public and classed as a high-class porter.

It wasn't the end of the world. He continued his route. Exhausted, shaken but alive still standing and singing. His career was setting off and his repertoire filling out. All that was missing was a hit.

But this is what America was going to give him.

We're in 1958. 10th December, Sacha was giving one of his first concerts in Algiers, already in an explosive atmosphere. There was just one problem; the repertoire was a bit short. On a visit to New York, Sacha, heard Nancy Holloway interpret a Peggy Lee song with a jazzy backing about a girl selling apples, peaches and cherries. This was to be the Turning point.

Exit the two last fruit, the French version does mention apples, pears and especially what became the cult object of France in the sixties: scoubidou!

The legend had started. At 23, Sacha made the first of a long series of hits.

Francine and Sacha Show... « The Good Life » and Queen of England.

With a year in between Sacha combined (in a very different way) two elements, which were going to totally change his life. The most important, although the least obvious, would be his meeting the ski champion Francine Bréaud in Megève. Two boys: Laurent and Julien were born from this relationship. But more than anything else, a family. This was to be the vital factor in the balance and functioning of Sacha. For over 40 years, Francine

would oversee everything, live everything, know everything. Although in the background she was in love with him, always there, discreet.

Until his last breath.

1963 was the year of the point of impact.

Beginning of the 1960's...

If we go back to the context of the time where television wasn't yet the all-powerful daily brainwashing that it is today. But a handful of daring, somewhat crazy people had already imagined the up and coming phenomena. Sacha was part of it.

1962, after testing the programme on the radio waves of the French station RTL, the well known Maritie and Gilbert Carpentier offer a programme to Distel.

After a moment's hesitation he accepted.

The first version would be called « Guitare et copains ». Very quickly the name was replaced (idea of a genius) by the unpronounceable (for the French) – and therefore easily memorable « Sacha Show ». The programme, ancestor of the famous « Top à... » would last ten years.

Ten years of duos, live shows, sketches and other daring moments. All live ladies and gentlemen!

Backstage, but also on screen, around Sacha, was a group of several young artists who were soon to make themselves known: Pétula Clark, the English girlfriend, Jean Yanne, the brilliant rebel, Jean Pierre Cassel, the elegant longstanding friend, Aldo Maccione, alias « Brutus », the comic and the author of the lyrics and composition, a certain Serge Gainsbourg.

1964. Sacha was 31 when he lost his mother who died of a stroke. She'd never recovered from the 18 months she spent in a Nazi prison. This same year, perfect illustration of the roller coaster ride that was his life, Sacha composed « Marina », a song written for the film: « Les 7 péchés capitaux ». The score crossed the Atlantic, falling into the hands of Tony Bennet. Then Sinatra. The English title, the first to have lyrics would be « The good life ». In French it would become the classic: « La belle vie ».

The 60's went by, varied, rhythmic, dynamic.

Television was an amazing high velocity accelerator. Sacha became one of the most popular French personalities.

It was also an enormous magnifying glass enlarging and freezing the image it created. And there increasingly the gap widened between what Sacha had always wanted to be and what he had become: « *I realised the discrepancy between the hits that had made me successful and my musical tastes... I wanted to do Sinatra...* » Sacha would say.

Against all expectations, it was abroad where he would receive public recognition so dear to his heart. Germany first. Sacha started a career of being a ballad singer in German!

It worked. But tired of only singing sad songs it was Sacha who broke it off.

In the 70's against all the odds, it would be the « perfidious Albion » that made Sacha – finally - the « French Sinatra ». Carried by the success of « Toute la pluie tombe sur moi », Sacha went on to become for a long time the favourite Frenchman in England. (Dethroned only recently by quite a different type of countryman: Thierry Henry!).

This acclaim meant that he went on to star in the highly successful musical Chicago on stage at the Adelphi Theatre. At the dawn of the third millennium.

« *French Sunny voice* (his nickname)

The Queen personally invited him to sing in front of her three times at the Royal Variety Performance at the celebrated London Palladium.

The 80's and 90's were calmer allowing him to return regularly to his first love: jazz. With them would arrive hard times, but some great artistic moments. Without much else to prove and still quite a bit of life left Sacha would produce « *En vers et contre vous* », a double French-English jewel album thanks to the duo with his long standing girl friend, Dionne Warwick. Sacha, although fragile eventually managed to reconcile his eternal separation of popular singer / jazzman.

4th December 2003, he received the SACEM Grand Prix for the French 'chanson' (singer – songwriter) as a reward for the whole of his career. May 2004, at the Victoires du Jazz, secretly frail but happy he played in duo with a young talented musician: Sanseverino. 60 days later...

A twist of fate.

Handsome. Talent. Success. It looked as if all the fairies were bending over the cradle of baby Sacha. Perhaps not all of them...

As in a bad dream, one of them must have been forgotten when the invitations were sent out. This one must have caused him to go off the road, a first time, in 1965: plane crash. Sacha, Francine and the pilot would miraculously escape unharmed.

Then there was the Porsche on that night April 1985.

Chantal. The coma, a life destroyed, many dreams as well.

In his memoirs, Sacha would write on the subject, I quote: « *The sadness doesn't go away. I know that certain scars are deeper than others. But as one says in the trade, the show must go on* ».

The show must go on.

Yes.

But the down side.

Sacha spent twenty years of his life fighting against four successive cancers.

There would be moments of remission. Tough times, suffering, giving up and fear.

Happiness as well...

It's true.

But no complaints. The smile and this amazing lesson from someone who has never really been what one thought he was. Who has always done more in the background than under the sweltering lights of the projectors. The type of guy to ask how you were when he's just given himself a morphine injection for the third time that day.

A polite guy, funny, intelligent. A wonderful father.

Enthusiastic, incredibly talented and you know what?

Such a handsome guy.

**Eric Jean-Jean for *Prosadis* (Translation Cara Jones)
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