



[transcript]

A: I love that picture.

Q: Where was it taken?

A: «Au Vieux Quais», a café in Marseille. Or Marseilles. Do you say Marseille or Marseilles? I still don't know. It's not very flattering, is it? My head looks huge.

Q: What were you doing there?

A: Well, as you can see, I was playing the accordion. Everyone has to make a living, you know? For many years I have been deeply involved in the performance traditions of early twentieth century French popular music -- *bal musette*, that kind of thing. There are a few places left in France where this kind of music is a living tradition, not a museum piece or something put on for groups of tourists. That picture was taken about the time I started getting regular gigs. It was pretty soon after I escaped from the aquarium, if I remember correctly. I can't remember who took it or what the occasion was, although I

recognize the bartender, or barman, or waiter, or whatever you would call him. He looks a bit blurry in that picture. Mind you, he always looked like that to me.

Q: Can you tell us something about your escape from the aquarium? Why did you decide to leave?

A: Well, there are lots of ways to answer that question. On one hand, I did it because I could, you know? I like a challenge; I like to put my intelligence to the test.

Q: We know that octopuses are very intelligent.

A: Right. It galls me whenever I hear about dolphins being so intelligent, when I have more intelligence in one inch of one tentacle than they have in their entire waterlogged brains. People say, "Oh they're so clever, they rescue drowning people." If they're that intelligent, why do they also rescue floating mattresses? Give me a break.

As I was saying, if my one small piece of bony integument can get through an aperture, then there is a good chance that I can get the rest of myself through it too. It's cartilage, actually. Sometimes an opportunity arises that is too good to resist, and when that happens you just have to seize the moment. For me it's a matter of self-respect to seize an opportunity when it arises.

Q: That was the only reason? Because you could?

A: Well, no. Things had been building up. For one thing, the chow was monotonous. They kept giving us squid to eat. I think they thought that all cephalopods are cannibals. The worst thing, though, was that they put me in a tank next to an electric eel. I found this intolerable.

Q: An electric eel? Surely that must have been rather amusing.

A: It certainly was not. It must have been their idea of a joke. The dopey thing would just ogle me all day, with its bony nose pressed to the glass. It would do its thing with the electrical discharge, and then grin at me, as if we had something in common. Horrible, big bulging eyes. Greasy little bubbles dribbled up out of its mouth. Its attempts to make friends with me made me void my sac. There was something wheedling and conniving about it, like we were both in the same sordid boat together. That it was somehow my peer. I had to hide behind a rock most of the time.

So-called eel, I should say. It's not an eel at all.

Q: What is it?

A: I believe it's some kind of dumbass knife fish.

Q: I was not aware of that.

A: They are prone to eye cataracts. Did you know that?

Q: No, I didn't know that.

A: It's true. Do you know why? It's because of the effort they have to make to push out one of those bursts of electricity. They have to strain every sinew to do it. Imagine taking a really big shit, and you'll get the idea. The effort makes their corneas bulge. Eventually the muscles weaken and they develop cataracts. They think twice every time they want to stun something after that. Is it worth the effort? they think. Most of them think that, but this one always seemed to think it was worth the effort.

Anyway, after a few months of this, I decided that enough was enough and I began to plan my escape.

Q: Can you tell us how you did it?

A: I assume you've seen the CCTV.

Q: Actually, I haven't.

A: They haven't wiped it, have they?

Q: No, I don't think so. I just haven't seen it.

(Pause)

Q: Do you have any regrets?

A: I have no regrets, but sometimes I miss the security of the aquarium. You get used to a place after a while. I have some fond memories. For instance, I miss the cute girls from the university doing marine biology who would put their arms into the tank up to the elbows, trying to touch me. They were mainly first and second year undergraduates. Sometimes they would have these intriguing charm bracelets on their arms, and I would pretend to try to steal them. It was very sensual, very intimate, but also very innocent.

But you can't live in the past. You have to move on, and that's what I feel I am doing now.

So now my focus is on the music that I love, the old French chansons.

Q: What originally drew you to this music?

A: Mainly, it was a desire for a kind of authenticity -- however elusive that idea may be in theory and in practice.

Q: Could you say a bit more about what you mean by that?

A: It is a very pure music.

Q: You seem to have a particular affinity for the accordion. Could you say something about what attracted you to this instrument?

A: Well, first of all, it has lots of shiny buttons. They look like little pearls. That's the first thing that attracted me. Then I found that I could press each one with an individual sucker on the tentacles. The buttons were all in a line and made slightly different sounds when you pressed them. I started playing simple arpeggios, by pressing the buttons in order; then I found that if I played them in a different order I could make melodies. After a while, as I continued to explore the instrument, I found that by using different tentacles on different rows of buttons you could produce previously unknown chromatic effects. The results were extraordinary. Eventually I developed my own tuning system, which is adapted from the Pythagorean tuning system used in the music of ancient Greece. The accordion that I play now is a customized diatonic button accordion.

Anyway, after a certain amount of ducking and diving, and one thing and another, I found myself in the café «Aux Vieux Quais», which as the name suggests is a classic old fashioned waterfront bar. I loved it at first. The great thing about Marseille is the great atmosphere of tolerance. It's been a cosmopolitan city for centuries: everyone is from somewhere else, you know? Catalans, Arabs, Spaniards, Maltese. People know how to mind their own business. No one asks you questions; you feel accepted as an equal. You know, I don't exactly represent the ideal of a unitary consciousness. Not only do I have three – no, four – (is it three or four? I can't even remember myself) brains, but most of my consciousness is in my tentacles, and they have a great deal of independence one from the other. I was aware that people would make silly remarks sometimes, but the main thing was that they would leave you alone.

Have you read Heidegger?

Q: Not with any success.

A: Top man, Heidegger. He grasped the idea that a limb could be conscious. Or to put it another way, he held that consciousness was neither a thing per se on one hand, or a gratuitous concourse of atoms, on the other, but a kind of blob, a blob with edges – exactly like an octopus. He had a little moustache under his nose.

Q: But of course you're not there any more. At the café, I mean. What happened?

A: Artistic differences.

Q: Can you elaborate?

A: On one level it was a disagreement with the café owner about how the songs should be performed. He was an Italian, and he wanted me to play in an Italian style, because his clientele mostly consisted of Italians, and I was not prepared to do that. When I say I am a traditionalist, I don't mean that I am opposed to innovation. Far from it. For a tradition to remain a living tradition it has to grow, to evolve. Otherwise it becomes like something in a museum, a fossil. So no, I am not opposed to innovation.

He said I played with too much vibrato, that I played in too much of a Gypsy style, and that that would be bad for business. In one sense he was right, in that I was indeed inspired by the Gypsy guitarists, especially Django and the ones that came before him.

M. le Patron, as he styled himself, was an idiot. He just wanted to show me off to his friends, but they couldn't have cared less what I played, as long as he kept standing them drinks. With me he just wanted to show who was boss.

The fruit merchants across the street had a pool that wasn't polluted, so one night I slithered across and made my way back into the water system.

Could you move the hydrophone over just a little? So it's behind that rock?  
Thanks.

Q: Can I ask you about your current situation? You are now in a bathtub in Paris, in the top floor apartment of a German couple in the 19e arrondissement.

A: Things are OK. Not at all bad, actually. As ever, I have fallen on my feet. I have been very lucky, and people have been very kind. Germans are very earnest and idealistic. I am being looked after by Brita and Hans-Joachim, who are sociologists. They want to consult me for some kind of study. I don't mind helping them out, but for me the music must come before anything else.

Q: In that regard, what do you see on the horizon? What is in store for you now?

A: There are various temptations, let's just say. I am in discussion with various parties. I would rather not say more at this stage. But I can say that I am hoping to make one definitive recording before I die (which will be in about six months). So that there can be some record.

Q: Is that it?

A: That's it for now.

Q: Well, that's a cute story.