

Rob interviewing Sam Lewis on Breton poet, Anjela Duval

Sam: Anjela Duval was a Breton poet. She was a farmer, and known as a poet. She was born at the beginning of the last century, in 1905, and had a very, very simple life. That's what I find so interesting about her story.

Rob: Whereabouts was this in Brittany?

Sam: In Trégor. In the village of Vieux Marché. A small farm, and she was the only child

Rob: She had to play the role of the son; presumably

Sam: Exactly, but she really liked it, you know, that was the thing. I think she was a bit of a tomboy, and her mother got – was always telling her off for tearing her clothes and climbing trees and things. So she was basically always happy when she was out in the fields with her father. Although her father apparently was a bit strict. Many times she would come back up the hill you know, howling, in tears, because her father had said, 'you're not doing that right!'

Rob: So she took on the farm after her parents? That was a choice for her, was it?

Sam: Yeah. She was devoted to her parents. I think it was like an obvious choice. She was an only child, and as her father grew older she just did more. She did more and more in the farm. And then her father, he died, it was 1941, and then she obviously had to look after her mother, which was very demanding. Her mother was going blind, and she was quite frail. She had to look after her mother, she had to do the farm, and she didn't have time to think about anything else. It was just duty, you know, this was what had to be done.

Rob: So she looked after her mother, and after her mother died presumably she was on her own on the farm.

Sam: Exactly. Her mother died ten years after, so it was in 1951. So she spent ten years just having her mother and the farm

Rob: And then her life changed quite radically, I think

Sam: Yeah, it's like described in one of her poems, you know, the first Christmas, I think, she was like all by herself. Obviously she still had her animals. She had her dogs, she had her horses, so she wasn't all alone, but the house was just empty. And it was at that moment that she thought, I like writing, I'll occupy my spare time with writing poetry. And she already had a few contacts, I think she was subscribing to one or two Breton language magazines. She just liked the idea of writing in Breton and writing it correctly, and playing with the words. But actually her poems were very good, so gradually started being published in the Breton language magazines.

Rob: She became known, perhaps through this poetry initially, but also there was a turning point, was there not?

Sam: Exactly. She was basically well known in a small Breton language circle. And it was via one of these friends, Roger Laouenan, who lived in Lannion, and he knew a man; Andre Voisin, he was making a series of documentaries about the story tellers, *Les conteurs*. So when Andre asked, do you know anyone that's interesting for my programme, for the television, Roger Laouenan said, Yes! You've got to go and see Anjela, because she is the most authentic person, she's the spring of knowledge. And so that's how that adventure started. They went down with a film crew and they did an interview with Anjela

Rob: And that was broadcast nationwide throughout France, wasn't it?

Sam: Yeah, that was broadcast in 1971

Rob: So she'd been 20 years on her own, and then suddenly, exposure to the world.

Sam: Exactly

Rob: How did that affect her?

Sam: It killed her, probably, in the end, with fatigue. Yeah, it was crazy, you know, because she had a small group of friends, and then all of a sudden; she was getting hundreds of letters a day. In the series, she was the one that touched people the most. She was talking about how she was against the mechanisation of agriculture, how she wanted the preservation of the banks, respecting the land.

Rob: An early environmentalist, in fact

Sam: A very very early environmentalist, and when people watched it, you know, there were peasants all across France who were having the same experience – they were being bullied, they were losing their land, they were seeing their lifestyle disappear, the communities were disappearing. But then at the same time there was also a generation in the towns that were looking for a new solution in 1971, and thinking there's got to be a better way of living. And there were all these young, urban French people that wanted to rediscover their roots and who they were. They came on a pilgrimage to the farm

Rob: So she actually received many, many visitors

Sam: From the time of the documentary, some days she reckoned she had hundreds of people, hundreds of people on the farm, passing through. And she said if she had known, if she had known how it was going to completely destroy her life, being on television, she would never have accepted. So funny she complains about you know, some of these – she hated tourists. Basically, people that wanted to learn about Breton culture, she'd

always make time for them. But you've got these tourists coming to see Anjela, and one time she found they brought peanuts. 'What do you think I am, a monkey or something? You bring peanuts to feed the monkey while you watch him play in the zoo!'

Rob: Let's talk about what kind of poems she wrote. And presumably it was all this time between 1951 – until her death?

Sam: Yep. She wrote right until the end. She was always writing

Rob: And what were her subject matters then?

Sam: Well, it's quite varied, really. Some of them are just very intimate encounters with nature. You can have a whole poem about silver birch catkins, which is just amazing because it's something that one sees, and one doesn't notice. For Anjela, she grew up with that, and it's just so detailed and minute; the different colours and the different seasons. Her understanding of nature is just unbelievable. When you read the poems you see this is a creature of nature, this is somebody that's grown up in nature and understands everything – the tiniest little animal, the tiniest plant, or the wind. Because when she was working in the fields she would always have a bit of paper in her pocket, and when something happened, she saw something, she had an idea, she'd take out her bit of paper and scribble it down. And then later on in the evening she'd look at her notes and see what poem she was going to write.

But then, some of her poems are very strong and critical, you know. She wasn't at all afraid; she would just really rip into her neighbours, you know, the farmers that were mechanising, going into debt, just to work harder, just to be richer than their neighbour, and to work harder, and going into debt.

Rob: This was actually a movement that was going on throughout Brittany, wasn't it?

Sam: Exactly

Rob: Mechanisation, making the fields larger

Sam: Remembrement

Rob: And she was dead against that. And she used to write poems about that?

Sam: Yeah. One of them is a graphic description of the bulldozer, the teeth of the bulldozer ripping up a bank, you know

Rob: The talus

Sam: The *talus*, and *Ar c'hleuz* in Breton, and destroying it. You know she wrote some very very passionate poems about the destruction of nature, and then others about the houses falling into ruin, the communities that had disappeared because everyone had gone to the town in search of wealth, when the wealth was on the land.

Rob: One of the most famous ones she wrote was about her decision to give up married life with someone that she loved.

Sam: Yes, *Karantez-Vro*. Apparently, it's semi-fictitious and semi-true. I don't know if she had a specific lover that she decided not to marry, but it was definitely, it was a choice in her life. The poem describes how this man, he was interested in towns, he was interested in travelling, going places, seeing things, in money. While what she loved was the land, primarily. She loved the man; but she loved her land more. And if there was a choice, it was going to be the land. And later in life when she was writing, it was, I've had to make lots of hard decisions in my life, but I've got this feeling that I've always been in my place, I've always been where I should be

Rob: Sam Lewis, thanks ever so much for telling us about this inspiring figure, and we're going to play out with a little bit of music, which is her poems set to music by another local person, Annie Ebrel, well known around here for singing in Breton. This time her new album is poems of Anjela Duval set to music. So we'll play out with that. Thanks ever so much.

Sam: Let's listen to it.