

# Jean-Pierre Melville is Dead

by Soren Eversoll

Jean-Pierre Melville dies on August second, 1973, at 15:34 PM, in the main dining room of the Hôtel PLM Saint-Jacques, just off the Rue de la Santé and Cabanis, as the black fist of the Tour Montparnasse nearly completes its ascent into the sky. He dies just as he downs his fourth glass of '67 Latour, as he complains of a pain in his throat when he swallows—he tries to stand to call the waiter to the table but crashes instead onto the carpeted floor, his legs going out from under him slack and useless, his mouth, wet and slightly ajar, something he can no longer find the strength to close. He's wearing a felt Stetson hat that's now spinning a few feet away from his egg-white head, facedown in velvet plush—when the brim rolls to a stop everyone in the restaurant has an uncanny feeling they will not be able to later describe that he is dead.

His old friend Phillippe Labro is kneeling beside his head and yelling for someone to call a doctor, even though he knows there isn't a use—he remembers the rows of NLA corpses lining the streets of Les Tagarins back when he served as a corporal in the Algerian War and remembers even more what they look like, what they smell like, the way their backs stiffen as if every bone in their body has been tightened two notches by winch—Melville is all of this as he lies there, warm and swollen and already not quite real. The ambulance arrives twenty minutes later, in twenty-five *l'ambulanciers* pronounce him officially, unequivocally dead, and in thirty-three he is wheeled onto a stretcher and into the back of an ambulance headed east for the city morgue. There he will lie, cold in the dark, on a cement slab no bigger than a guitar case, for eight days before his body is buried in le Cimetière de Pantin. The funeral will be quiet and quick.

Of course his name is not really Melville; he is the little Jewish boy Jean-Pierre Grumbach, the butcher's son from Alsace, though the young Grumbach soon realized that his name was clunky and ugly and would never sell movie tickets so he changed it to that of his hero, Mr. Moby Dick. Minutes before he dies he's been talking to Labro about the next film he's going to make, *Contre-enquête*, a spy picture starring Yves Montand and Catherine Deneuve concerning a stolen bit of microfilm and cross-country chase topped with a spectacularly bloody gunfight on the Pont des Arts—it will be grand and expensive and Labro knows that it is best to trust his friend with his vision and work out the financials later, as has always been done. At that moment neither men know that Montand will never have his chase or kiss Deneuve in glorious Technicolor, or that in three seconds Melville will fall to the floor, clutch his chest, and die.

I know all this because I'm there, in that last moment of pure clarity between Jean-Pierre Grumbach and his self concept, when he can still see the little creases in the corners of Labro's eyes and that speck of salad on the edge of his lip, as he's exhaling life like a bellows, his pupils dilating into two empty black Os, trying to get one more word in just when he feels himself slipping away for good. I'm not pulling him, I'm not urging him, I'm just standing there, and for the first time now he can see me too. I say hello, he says nothing to me. This is normal. It takes

time. He drifts past me, a couple of diners, and out the door.

In the first few months I'll occasionally see Melville in passing, bumping into walls along Vitry-sur-Seine or trying to smell the coffee grounds behind the counter at Café Tournon. The world of the dead is just as deep and labyrinthian as that of the living, maybe even more so—you find yourself walking for days without tiring, wandering randomly through the city streets, apartment hallways, letting your gauzy body slip between lampposts and slide through cracked doors. The living walk right through you, unaware, even though you can feel them so incredibly clearly—their warmth, the way their bodies swell when they breathe, the little sounds they make when they walk. You cross paths with others like you but barely pay them any notice; the dead are solitary, quiet, never quite seeming to have the time to chat yet really the only ones with all the time in the world to do so. Occasionally you may see someone you once knew—a coworker, a friend, an old classmate—you stop for a moment and ask how they've been, where they've been hanging around recently, until both of you soon realize that neither quite wants to talk to the other about anything at all. It is difficult to be reminded that you were once alive. Some take it badly; they will spend months trying to squeeze themselves back into the people they used to be, to reclaim the shadow their bodies used to make, the weight they used to have. Melville, already solitary in life, seems to be transitioning well. When I see him in those first months I'll stop and try to catch his attention, though his eyes are always glassy and a little confused, and after a while spent standing there I feel something that creeps towards embarrassment and I rush away.

The first time he speaks to me it is as I am greeting someone just hit by a Citroën outside the Tournon; he is sitting at a table in the sun and waves me over once I am finished with the necessary formalities and have sent the young woman on her way. Somehow he is wearing a new Stetson, nearly identical to the one that toppled to the floor of the PLM Saint-Jacques. He claims he wears it because he loves cowboys, I know it is because he cannot stand the sight of his baldness. He asks me how I am doing. I say that I am well. I ask how he is getting along. He says he is adjusting.

"I know I was murdered," he tells me.

I ask him why he thinks such a thing.

"I tasted something in the wine," he says. "I think it was poison."

I say nothing.

"I want to know who did it," he demands.

This is not uncommon. Much of one's time spent dead is occupied in thinking about how you got yourself into such a predicament. You obsess over the exact moment of your demise, return to the spot where it happened—if you know who it is that killed you you can spend years with them, lurking in the corner of their bedroom at night, floating over their family at the dinner table, lying in their body as they sleep, praying that they trip down the stairs or choke on an ice-cube so you can finally feel the satisfaction, *now it's happened, now you're in the same boat as me*. Melville is no different from the others, yet his decades spent making crime films has led an already pulpy imagination into believing it can play the part of a detective.

It soon becomes a little tradition of mine to pass by Melville when I'm in the area of the

Café Tournon; he'll wave me over and I'll spend a few minutes sitting there with him. This is part of my duty too, maybe my favorite part—the transition to death is traumatic and uncomfortable and it is one of my responsibilities to help the new arrivals cope. I soon realize that Melville is lonelier than I'd initially thought; he is eager to talk to someone, anyone, finding the weakest excuse to turn the conversation to the life that he used to live. He tells me bits of his story—non-chronological, vague, ice chunks knocking together in murky water—his career in the movies, his childhood, his time spent in the war. Our conversation can only last for about ten minutes before I sense the work piling up beyond what I can manage and tell him I need to go.

In my free time I take to looking around the city for Melville. I soon start to learn his spots—the hotels, the tiny alleyways, the pockets of air in the drywall between the laundrette and the grocery store on Rue Périer. I'll see him in the room he always kept in the Hôtel Passy, floating in the corner while the maid strips the bed below, or in a vacant spot at the Raphael or the Suffren and Orly Hiltons, in which he lounges about for a while before someone unlocks the door and he feels his privacy has been ruined and wanders away. In life he liked to give the receptionist false names at the front desk, now he just walks past it a little forlornly before poking around the halls for an unoccupied room.

Most often he visits his old apartment built in a disused factory at 25 bis rue Jenner, in the slightly vaporous, industrial thirteenth arrondissement of south-east Paris—the street is bleak and looks like a still out of one of his movies. In the bottom floor he built a studio after the release of his first picture, *Le Silence de la mer*, in 1949—two sound stages, one wardrobe room, two cutting rooms, a screening room. A floor above was his office, now stuffed to the brim with the detritus of his past life—books, a samurai sword, a .32 caliber Rugby (from his days in the Resistance), a bronze statue of an Andalusian rearing his front legs, three cases of Remington *Longue* cartridges, two velvet armchairs, boxes under a gramophone of what he thought were his clandestine subscriptions to *Pour l'Homme* and *Playboy*, stacks and stacks on his immense desk of papers, magazines, photographs, newspaper clippings, and telephones (three). On the floor above is the flat he shared with Florence for nineteen years.

He met her while on leave from the First Regiment of the Colonial Artillery in 1945, worn and tired and alone in the great tangle of Paris at the tail end of a war. He had been introduced to her once briefly in 1939—then she had not made any kind of impression on him but at midnight in 1945 in the crowded back room of a party she sparkles. Her hair is so blonde it is nearly white, she has blue eyes that remind him of a photograph of Jacques Cousteau he remembers from *Life* magazine, of the man floating in a shallow reef, his hand outstretched towards deep sea; her voice is cold and detached but in the same way that he thinks his is, in a way that draws him closer. He asked her on a date, then a second, then a third. She loved the novels of Raymond Chandler, like him. She smoked Gauloises, like him. She had never been to New York either. They promised each other they would go someday. They married in 1952 and she worked on his films for the rest of his life, as an adviser, as a production manager, as this, as that, as a studio administrator, as the supervisor of his finances. Her name only appeared three

times in the credits of his thirteen movies. This is something she never mentioned to him, nor he to her. Now she lives alone in the apartment upstairs—a black and white honeycomb floor, little matchbooks she keeps littered around the house, an overflowing ashtray, the two Siamese cats with their matching porcelain bowls. She has not deviated much from the routine she once occupied with him—waking early to read, taking little walks around the neighborhood, sometimes going out to see a movie. At first it seems that he can only sit in the room with her for the shortest moments before emotion overcomes him and he flies out the nearest window. He most frequently visits during the nights while she's reading; he sits in the corner and stares at her for hours, like he can will her to see him if he tries hard enough, if he gets a painting to fall off its hook or a book off its shelf, *I'm still here, I didn't go away, don't forget about me*. He notices that there are no longer any pictures of him around the house, save for one she keeps facedown on her dresser. She has not remarried.

Sitting at the Tournon one day Melville tells me that he remembers one particular summer with her in '57, when they eventually made it to New York for the week—they climbed up the fire escape of their hotel one evening and sat cross-legged on the roof, watching the lights of the apartments and skyscrapers flicker on one after the other. She said the buildings looked smaller than she'd expected. They shared a cigarette and when he kissed her her lips burned.

The ground floor studio burned down in 1967, halfway through the filming of his Alain Delon assassin picture *Le Samourai*. Florence was away the night it happened—Melville tells me he remembers waking to the smell of smoke and rushing downstairs to find his studio in flames—he stumbled onto the street, dazed, suddenly realizing barefoot on the cold cobblestones that he had left his cat Amok in the bedroom. He ran back through the sound stage, now an inferno, climbed up the weakening stairs to his room, shoved Amok under one arm and a signed picture of Charles de Gaulle under the other, and somehow managed to push his way outside. It took nine fire brigades two hours to put the blaze out. The next morning Melville walked through the white ashes of his spent moviemaking kingdom and wondered if he would ever touch a camera again. He told a crew of television reporters that the fire started in the sound-proofed, double-walled ceiling of the studio, where there were no electrical wires, making a short-circuit impossible; he still suspects that one of his competitors may have started the fire on purpose. Maybe, he reasons to me, this is the same person who eventually killed him.

The fire nearly ruined him—the past year Florence had forgotten to renew the insurance policy. Melville went back to filming without a budget on the streets of Paris. Plans to rebuild the studio came to nothing. He was almost a failure. He tells me he still blames Florence for this. I tell him that death is not a good time for resentment.

Melville takes almost a year before he broaches the topic of his murder again; this time he comes with suspects. I soon realize that this is nearly everyone who has ever worked with him—the writer Vercours who called him “authoritarian”—a thought shared by Cocteau and José Giovanni, Charles Vanel, Jean-Paul Belmondo, and Lino Ventura, with whom things got so tense

on the set of *L'Armée des ombres* that the actor swore he would never work with him again. Even Alain Delon, who always put up with Melville's tantrums and ultimatums, was no longer speaking with him on the evening of August 2nd, 1973, after a particularly bad argument following the premiere of *Un Flic*. He publicly ridiculed Truffaut, dismissed Godard, feuded with the Hakim brothers, and challenged Claude Lelouch on television, him with those thick black sunglasses and that pouting upper lip. Melville also reasons that his killer could be any of the producers, editors, gaffers, best boys, cameramen, makeup artists, hair stylists, set builders, painters, and props supervisors who he would call into the studio at midnight, fuming, demanding to know why they weren't still working, why the width of a character's hat brim was three inches longer than he had requested, why the walls of his set were painted alabaster instead of eggshell. Despite all this—as if he cannot help but contradict himself—he reminds me that most said that working with him gave them the feeling that they were with a master, *il padrino*. As Yves Montand says at Melville's funeral, which he watches in rapt attention behind the furthest pew—*Ce n'était pas un homme facile, mais il fallait le respecter*.

Nonetheless even he can admit that by the end of the sixties his visionary luck ran out; among the press he had become a cliché, a posterboy, a pariah, the worst thing you can possibly be at the end of the sixties—*commercial*. It does not help matters that his Resistance epic *L'Armée des ombres* was dismissed as “Gaullist” by the French cinephile's bible *Cahiers du cinéma*, undoubtedly prickled by drunk comments Melville gave their reporter one night that he identified most as an areligious, right-wing anarchist. Melville marks November fourteenth, 1969, in plaster relief along the path of his life, the day the article in *Cahiers* came out and Jean Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni labeled him a hack in paper and ink—something far worse than simply calling him one on television, he tells me—proclaiming him an ideological filmmaker with nothing left to really say, his particular altar that of the cheap, bastardized American gangster film. Of course this is all somewhat close to the truth, and perhaps that's what hurts Melville so much, why he still brings it up to me seven years later sitting in the Tournon.

“In the fifties they called me a genius,” he tells me, “twenty years later I was *passé*. But these are the same films.”

He confides in me that he kept a cutout of that *Cahiers* article taped to the bottom of his drawer, where he could see it every morning, just after he woke. He takes great satisfaction in reading his obituaries when he first dies—a *stylish, highly original director, noted for his subtly elegant framings, the perfectionism of his mise-en-scène, the constant though restrained nostalgia of his images*. *Cahiers* does not run so much as a retrospective.

Melville reasons that any of the people he has listed could have poisoned his Latour that afternoon. He is most suspicious of a props manager who he once shared a horrible screaming match with on the set of *Le Samourai*; he tells me that he's been following said crew member around for a few weeks—lying in his attic, sitting at his table as he makes coffee, waiting for him to slip up and murmur something to his friends along the lines of a confession. During the nights he's taken to visiting Godard and Truffaut, wondering in something silent and deeply colored with envy if they were the ones who did this to him. He starts wandering around the

streets of Paris like one of the characters from his film *Bob le flambeur*, through the seedier corners of town, hanging around doorways, skulking in the cigar smoke of underground jazz clubs, listening at the keyholes of doors he knows he has no business listening at. He asks me what I think of his list. I tell him that making a list will do him no good. This time it seems to bother him more than my usual rebuffs; he tells me that he doesn't need my help and storms off. Later that night I spot him loitering under a streetlight in the meatpacking district, pacing up and down the sidewalk, nowhere left to go.

What Melville doesn't know, what he will never know, is that he never drank any poison that day in the Saint Jacques. There was nothing in the Latour, no person from his past lurking at the hotel, no figure from the countless he had crossed and feuded with in life who eventually caused his death. On August second his heart simply gave out. It happens all the time. He is no different from any of the others. Of course I can never tell him this. It is not my place.

I want to confide with him that I think his insistence on murder is slightly amusing but I do not think he will agree. Now on the days I pass the Tournon I no longer see him sitting at the table outside.

\*\*\*

The job continues, the years go by. The seventies push into the eighties. The pants get tighter, the colors darker, the hair shorter. I lose touch with Jean-Pierre Melville in the swell of a city in a new decade. This is normal. I come to know a new cast of characters. This is also normal. They have their own problems and regrets and half-baked dreams that I dutifully listen to—one is looking for his dead child, the other thinks she should have really tried to give painting a second shot, another can't stop lying next to his lover on his old bed. The situations are different but the problem is always the same; they wish they had had just a little more time, that I had given them a notice in advance. Some beg that I bring them back—only for a day, an hour, a minute and a half. Others want me to pass someone a message—*I love you, I'm waiting for you, I want you back*—every time they ask me this I shake my head and say that such a thing is not within my power and some beg me all the more.

I come for Truffaut, then Lino Ventura, then Vanel, then Montand. They go in their own separate but unique ways. Lung cancer, ball cancer, a heart attack, a brain tumor. They find their own spots to wander along, some in the same shadows Melville frequents. They have their own problems I'll listen to. Sometime around 1989 I hear that the director is trying to make another picture—I remember him telling me that this has always been a dream of his, to correct his filmography—he thinks his last work, *Un Flic*, was a failure; the critics hated it, audiences did not come in the droves they had before, it only drew two-point-eight million viewers compared to his previous movie's four. Now he tells me he desperately wishes he could have made just one more, to end on a high note, to garner a little more respect; I hear he is trying to gather a crew of his old friends he finds wandering the streets together again, though in their current state nothing quite seems to come to fruition and after a few hours spent blinking on set everyone manages to just drift away. Then someone tells me he has moved on to making lists, hundreds of them—*The*

*Sixty-Three Best Pre-war American Filmmakers, European Directors of Westerns in the Past Fifty Years, Seventy-four of the Best American Heavies.*

In the early nineties I hear that he has taken to visiting the same movie theater every day, the Ciné-Club du Lycée Montaigne, watching movies day and night, watching couples hold each other's hands and kiss behind raised seats. I pay the Ciné-Club a visit one afternoon and see him sitting in the back, wearing those same sunglasses, the Stetson pushed low over his brow, that same stubborn lip jutting out over his chin. I take a seat next to him as the credits start to roll. He nods at me silently. As we watch the names stream by he mutters that it's been a long time. I agree. I ask him how the investigation is going, he snarls that it is currently at a standstill. We sit there for a while in silence before he says something I almost can't catch under his breath.

"Why wasn't she in them more?"

Later that night I make a point to go by bis rue Jenner. Melville is sitting in the doorway of an apartment across the street—when Florence walks out he abruptly stands. She is wearing a headscarf tied under her chin and a gray overcoat; her face has deeper lines than I remember and those Cousteau eyes are now slightly diluted but she is still just as beautiful. She pulls up the collar of her coat as the wind stings through the street and starts to walk; Jean-Pierre trails her at a distance, slowly. I follow them for a while as they turn down Rue Bruant and then Denois, passing the Square Héloïse et Abélard, then Notre-Dame-de-La-Gare. When she walks inside the grocery store he creeps in just behind her—through the window I see him floating under the fluorescent lights behind the lemons, watching her pick up an orange, weigh a peach. For a moment he steps towards her and then seems to think the better of it—he disappears down an aisle of canned vegetables and out the service entrance. I follow him as he heads onto the street and down the road to the Pont de Bercy, stretching silently over the gray-green Seine. Teenagers like to hang around here and smoke cigarettes and occasionally fuck under the shadow of the bridge—on two separate instances I've had to come for those who got a little too drunk too close to the edge of the river. Now there is a group of ten milling about under the yolky glow of a street lamp, laughing, the thin voice of MC Solaar running from a radio at their feet. Melville pauses for a second to watch them, wary of their foreign appearance, awkward even in anonymity. Then suddenly he starts to rise, drifting above the leather jackets and the ratty tights, the pimple cream and spikes of hair gel, like a cowboy Christ, floating to just where the smoke from their cigarettes meets and curls into a single milky strand towards the sky—he seems to breathe in the vapor and even though I know he can't smell anything, the faintest hint of a smile traces his lips. It is like he is trying to suck them in, all of them, him frozen at fifty-five, the careless, stupid way that they love and dance and talk and take up space in the world. One of the teenagers throws a pack of cigarettes on the ground and I think they might be Gauloises.

\*\*\*

I do not see Jean-Pierre Melville for another decade. The PC comes along, so does Britney Spears; genocide sweeps Rwanda, the United States invades Iraq. Every day I feel like I am doing more for less. I am beginning to think I am depressed.

One day I have a bit of time on my hands so I decide to go to the cinema; it is a cloudy

day and I can feel the rain starting to set in. Something pulls me to the Ciné-Club. They are showing *Anchorman*. I sit in the back. Jean-Pierre is sitting there too.

"Hello," I say.

"Hello," he says.

I ask him what he has been up to after all these years. He says he has been taking long walks in the forests of Saint-Germain-en-Laye and spending his nights at 25 bis rue Jenner. He still likes to be there most when she is reading. I say that that is good. He asks me what I have been doing. I tell him this and that, here and there. Not all that much. He tells me that that is good. I ask him how the investigation is proceeding. He tells me he doesn't care anymore. He is just waiting for Florence. We watch the movie through to the credits.