*Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong*

**Living life my way, with no regrets**

A lot of musicians can sing in different languages. Sometimes it is not necessary that they actually speak the language per se, but simply that they can pronounce the words correctly.

With the music in the background, it sounds like they are actually singing the song in the mother tongue. I once watched a Chinese TV program, celebrating the new year with all kinds of festive songs and they featured different singers from all around the world.

Jose Placido Domingo, the famous Spanish tenor, was one of them. After singing a couple of Spanish love songs, he teamed up with a famous female singer, and together, they sang a beautiful Chinese traditional song, glorifying the beauty of Mu Le Hwa (the jasmine flower).

Not only did Domingo pronounce each word perfectly but he also captured the essence of the song; and on top of that, he was harmonizing with the female singer. I was mesmerized, totally stunned.

I never knew Domingo could speak Mandarin! Then it dawned on me, no, he doesn’t speak it, he is just being a true, blessed professional singer!

Somehow, I am fortunate enough to possess a language skill that can mimic the sound of different languages. I can duplicate the sound, the diction and even with emotion; though I have no idea what I am saying or singing about.

In a sense, I can listen to a song, no matter what language it is; and after humming a few times, I can sing along. So, Spanish love songs, Italian love songs, French love songs … all a piece of cake!

A friend of mine gave me a CD a few years ago. It was by Edith Piaf, a French songstress who had the voice of a sparrow. By chance, I saw a movie later featuring her sad but famous life and I was most touched.

Abandoned by her own mother at birth, she was raised by her grandma who worked in a brothel. She was singing on the streets to make a living and was discovered by Louis Leplee, a cabaret owner.

He dubbed her “la mome piaf,” which means little sparrow, and she adopted the name and became Edith Piaf. Fame and fortune never brought her happiness and it reflected in all her songs.

Though I don’t speak French — except good morning, how are you and pardon me — I can sense the loneliness and sadness in her voice. One song that I like most is called “Non Je Ne Regrette Rien” (no regrets). If I have to put this song with Sinatra’s “My Way,” they will both come out the same.

I wanted to learn the song so badly that I actually got the chords and listened to the CD over and over till I got the tune down. Then, my luck came.

There was a lady in this health club I went to in Milwaukee whom I befriended. She met her husband in France during WWII and followed him back to the States. She had been teaching French lessons until the time she developed dementia.

So, every weekend when her husband played tennis, she just sat alone in the waiting area watching the world go by. I started a conversation with her with my limited French. When I asked her if she could teach me how to pronounce the words of “Non Je Ne Regrette Rien,” her eyes lit up.

“Edith is my favorite singer,” she exclaimed. “I would love to teach you.” She already knew the words, so it was easy for me to follow the lyrics and just make sure that I got the diction correctly.

The final test came when I asked her if I could sing the whole song to her (in French, of course). On top of that, I would do so in front of her husband and his tennis partners.

“Oui, bien sur” (yes, of course).

So, I gathered enough courage, brought my guitar to the club and sang my heart out in front of her and other strangers. The song has a wonderful tune, but the lyrics are what hit me, as I’ve also lived a life with “No Regrets,” and did it “My Way.”

When I sang the last words of the song, she grabbed my hand and whispered, “Merci.” (Thank you.) I saw her eyes glistening with tears. I touched someone’s heart with a different language that I don’t speak. My, all the tea in China couldn’t replace that precious moment.

We all live our life by following the path, and doing the best we possibly can. Most important, we have to learn to love, to give, to share and to care for one another. After all, isn’t that what living is about?

Edith had a sad life, yet she has left us a lot of hope and faith, which we can interpret as happiness.

Life is not just about making a lot of money, no!?