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Cantona: The Rebel Who Would be King

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Foreword

I'd originally thought of giving this book a different title: The Life and Death of a Footballer. This was not to satisfy a desire for gratuitous provocation. Éric Cantona, the footballer, really died on May the 11th, 1997, when he swapped his Manchester United jersey with an opponent for the last time.

Throughout the three years that this book took to research and write, the idea that this 'death' – a word Cantona himself used liberally when speaking of his retirement – was also a suicide became a conviction of mine. In January 1996, when he was at the height of his powers, he turned down the chance to rejoin the France team. He chose not to be part of an adventure that would lead to a World Cup title in 1998. Why and how you shall see for yourselves. At this stage, it should be enough to say that this apparently incomprehensible decision fitted in with the strange logic of his progress so far, an eccentric parabola the like of which French and English football had never seen before him, and are unlikely to see again.

There have been many accounts of Cantona's life, perceived failings, failures and achievements over the years, too many of them published in the immediate wake of his prodigious success with Manchester United to stand the test of time. Some have focused on his 'troubled personality', and sought clues to his 'instability' and tendency to explode into violence. Others were mere picture-books or collections of match reports which could only satisfy the hungriest and most easily sated of fans. Some (in France in particular) were attempts at making a martyr of him, a victim of the establishment or of xenophobia. Others deplored the self-destructive undercurrent in his character, which had prevented him from becoming one of the game's all-time greats.

One thing united all these attempts at making sense of the man who transformed English football to a greater extent than any other player of the modern age: as I soon discovered, even the most thoughtful and penetrating of them were riddled with factual errors, and tainted by a reluctance to question the mythical dimension of Cantona. To question – not to deny, as so many of his deeds instantly became, literally, the stuff of legend.

Éric himself helped build this legend. His sponsors exploited it with glee. It provided writers with tremendous copy. A strange balance was thus found: it was in nobody's interest to look beyond the accepted image of a prodigiously-gifted maverick, a gipsy philosopher, a footballing artist who could be exalted or ridiculed according to one's inclination or agenda. Cantona attracted clichés even more readily than red cards.

I'll not claim to have unearthed a truth that had proved elusive to others; my ambition was to his work as if its subject had been a sportsman (or a poet, or a politician) who'd left us a long time ago. Which, in Cantona's case, is and isn't true. It is true because he scored his last goal twelve years ago, and because the Éric who still exerts such fascination, the Éric one wants to write and read about, ceased to exist when he last walked off the Old Trafford pitch. What followed, his efforts to turn beach-soccer into an established sport, which were remarkably successful, and his attempts to be accepted as a bona fide actor, which were largely ignored outside of France, are part of another life, a life after death if you will, which I will only refer to when it has a relevance to what preceded it. It isn't true because his aura has not dimmed since he stopped kicking a football. Manchester United fans voted him their 'player of the century' several years after he'd retired, ahead of the fabled Best-Law-Charlton triumvirate. More recently, in 2008, a poll conducted in 185 countries by the Premiership's sponsor Barclays found him to be this competition's 'All-Time Favourite Player'. That same year, Sport magazine chose the infamous Crystal Palace 'kung-fu kick' as one of the 100 most important moments in the history of sport. Ken Loach has made him a central figure in his latest film, *Looking for Éric*. The ghost of Éric Cantona will haunt us for some time to come.

True, legends have a habit of growing as actual memories are eroded by time. But I didn't want to 'debunk' this legend: those looking for scandalous titbits and innuendo will be disappointed, I'm afraid. But I wished to interrogate the myth, and chart Éric's steps from promise to damnation, then redemption and idolatry with the exactness of a mapmaker. What I can promise is that there will be a few surprises along the way.

Chapter 1

I Am the King! I Am the King!

'As soon as I walked, I played football. My parents have told me: as soon as I saw a ball, I played with it. This is something I have in me . . . Maybe, on the day I caressed a ball for the first time, the sun was shining, people were happy, and it made me feel like playing football. All my life, I'll try to capture that moment again.' Éric Cantona

To find the house in which Éric Cantona was born, you board a gleaming, air-conditioned tram that takes you uphill from the heart of Marseilles' Old Town. Just before La Palette, ten minutes at the most from the quayside of the Vieux Port where fishmongers sell live sea-bream on a multitude of small slabs, you find yourself suddenly in Provence. The trees growing alongside the boulevard will bear olives in the autumn; the road's gradient becomes steeper; and the pine-covered hills of the Garlaban, the backdrop to Marcel Pagnol's Jean de Florette and Manon des Sources, draw nearer. A few modern housing estates are peppered between tile-roofed villas enclosed in small walled gardens.

Once in the village of Les Caillols, the names on the mail boxes tell their own story. Hardly any of them sounds 'French'. Italian, yes, Spanish, too. Every Marseillais has an ancestor who was once an exile, and the Cantonas were no exception. No French city is more truly cosmopolitan; the social division of the city does not prevent an easily carried elegance in the rapport between the communities. Only in London have I seen so many friends and lovers cutting across racial and ethnic distinctions. Marseillais we are first, French second – maybe. In a video he shot in 1995, shortly after the end of the eight-month ban which nearly precipitated his second and final retirement from the game, Éric Cantona chose to address the camera clad in a T-shirt on which can be read: 'Fier d'être Marseillais' – 'Proud to be a Marseillais'. Alone among the conurbations which have doubled or trebled their size in the last fifty years because of the influx of North and Western African immigrants, Marseilles exudes the sense of vitality and youthful exuberance one would associate with cities where new lives can be made.

As I walk along the dusty alleyways that arrow from the Grand-Rue, each of them leading to a modest house set in a clump of small trees, a lady – Madame Ferrero – calls from her doorstep. She's seen me jotting a few words in my notebook, and I realize that I must look out of place. In Les Caillols, no one wears a suit when summer lingers so warmly in October. There is curiosity in her voice, but no abruptness. Am I looking for something? she asks. When I tell her I have come to see the place where Éric Cantona grew up, she points out to a hill in the distance. 'You see that white house, there?' It's hard not to. It is already halfway up the mountain, pink and white against the green of the pines; gigantic compared to the modest dwellings in the village. 'That is where they lived.'

In fact the house is still theirs, even if they have now acquired another home in the Basses-Alpes, and Éric's brother Joël has moved towards Notre-Dame de la Garde. The postcode tells us we haven't quite left the great city; everything else, the plane trees, the monument to the dead of the Great War, the unpretentious church, the ground which has been cleared to play boules or pétanque, all this speaks and smells of Provence. Marseilles is a peculiar city: its dozens of villages have been swallowed by the metropolis over time, but, once there, the air you breathe still carries the fragrances of the countryside. The Marseilles Éric Cantona grew up in had little if anything in common with the concrete jungle that gave some shade to Zinedine Zidane and his friends when they hit a football in the Castellane quartier. It is a 'poisoned city', where unemployment tops 50 per cent and firemen hesitate to answer a call, as they fear being stoned by feral youths. But if La Castellane speaks of a fractured city within a fractured country, Les Caillols sings with a Provençal accent.

The breeze that freshens its few streets carries the scent of tomatoes gently simmering with garlic at lunchtime. The singularity with which Marseillais identify themselves can lead to a rebellious streak. But Cantona's rebelliousness flowed from a different source – certainly not from his own environment, which was loving and, in many ways, idyllic.

According to Éric's father, Albert, 'this land didn't cost much, because no one thought it would be possible to build a house on such rocky terrain'. After a long search, in 1954 or 1955 (depending on which member of the family you're speaking to) Albert's mother Lucienne had found this site located on the border between the 11th and 12th arrondissements of Marseilles, all stones and weeds. This, she decided, is where the future home of the Cantonas would be built. Come the weekend, picnicking families would unfold their tablecloths on the slope to enjoy the magnificent view, as yet uncluttered by tower blocks – from there, you could see the Garlaban mountains and the rugged outposts of Cassis, rising as if they were close enough to touch; on clear days, the first houses of Aubagne, St Marcel and La Vierge de la Garde could be glimpsed on the horizon. Later, when the young Éric walked onto the terrace, he could watch players kicking the ball some 500 yards away on the pitch of the Arsène-Minelli stadium, the home ground of his first club, Sports Olympiques ('SO') Caillolais.

But view and price aside, this piece of land had little to commend itself. Local tradition had it that the German army used this promontory as a look-out in the last months of the Second World War; but if they had, no trace of their presence is left. All that Lucienne's husband, Joseph (a stonemason by trade), could find as shelter when he embarked on the huge task of building a house on the face of the hill was a small cave, covering a bare 9 square metres, which the couple protected from the elements with a curtain in winter. Contrary to legend, Éric himself never lived the life of a troglodyte, but his teenage father most certainly did. Nicknamed 'la chambrette', it survived the erection of the family home, a memento of the hardship Joseph and Lucienne had to overcome.

It's true that hardship had long been a companion of the Cantonas. Joseph's roots were in Sardinia, whose odd language, with its ghostly remnants of Phoenician and Etruscan, was still spoken at home when he grew up on the Boulevard Oddo, the first port of call for transalpine immigrants. To his own parents, Marseilles had been what the New World represented for the Italians who could save enough to pay for their passage overseas. Money was hard to come by; when winter came, with no electricity, proper heating or running water, Lucienne had to cook pasta in melted snow; but her husband's energy and the fierceness of her determination overcame shortcomings like these and, slowly, a house rose from the dust. This was followed by a second one, built on top of the original to accommodate Albert's young family.

Albert was nicknamed 'Le Blond' ('the Fair One'), not because of the colour of his hair, but because of his eye for the ladies. He had fallen in love with Eléonore ('Léonor') Raurich, the handsome daughter of Catalan refugees named Pedro and Paquita. Poverty and exile looked over her side of the family too, with a measure of

tragedy. In 1938 Pedro, a republican partisan, had suffered a serious injury to his liver while fighting the Franquist forces in Catalunya. He sought medical help across the Pyrenees, only to be caught by the Vichy police two years later, and sent to a detention camp set up for the 'undesirables' of the collaborationist regime. Upon his release, after a forced stay in the town of St Priest in the Ardèche, the passionate anti-fascist finally settled in Marseilles – accompanied by the much younger Paquita. Pedro would never see his parents again. With such a background, which combined fidelity to one's own and almost constant displacement to an inextricable degree, is it surprising that Éric understood the attraction of nomadism better than most?

In 1966, with already her four-year-old son Jean-Marie to care for, Eléonore (a seamstress by trade), was about to have a second child. Their house was nowhere near ready to be lived in but, contrary to the legend that would have Albert taking the family to Paris (where he had found a job as a psychiatric nurse), it was in Marseilles that she gave birth to Éric Daniel Pierre Cantona on 24 May. A third son, Joël, would follow in October 1967, completing the family. Work had now sufficiently progressed for all of them to occupy the home that Joseph built, though it was by no means finished. The three boys would jump over heaps of concrete bricks and bags of cement until they became teenagers. Their house, as if carried on the shoulders of the grandparents' home, cut a striking silhouette on the hill. Like the family who lived in it, the house was different, which enhanced the status of the boys and their parents in the small community of Les Caillols.

A singular presence on the rocks, surrounded by dark trees, the seat of the clan spoke for the values it shared: hard work, stubbornness, pride, and reliance on each other. The Cantonas were by no means outcasts; their diverse origins held nothing exotic for the neighbours for whom, as we've seen, settling in Marseilles was still part of living memory. Nevertheless, it took time for 'outsiders' to gain their confidence and be invited to the huge table where three generations of Cantonas sat, always eating together, laughing at the ceaseless jokes cracked by Albert. As Éric's brother Joël recalled to one journalist, 'These Sardinian and Catalan roots, adapted to Marseilles, [had] created an unusual mix. Our parents had a strong personality, which everyone respected, as my father was a natural leader. So, yes, there was [a sense of] honour, but also the typical warmth of Mediterranean families.' Despite Albert's strong sense of discipline, there was also mayhem, more often than not involving Éric. The little boy 'loved playing, but loved to win above everything else', Jean-Marie told *L'Équipe-Magazine* in 2007, thinking of one incident when, having been beaten twice in a row at table-tennis (which the brothers somehow managed to play in the attic which doubled up as a painting studio for Albert), the younger Cantona, beside himself with fury, managed to jump on the table with such force that it broke in two. And 'ping-pong' mattered little to Éric compared to football, of course.

Éric's father, Albert, had been a decent goalkeeper himself, not quite good enough to cut it in one of the better clubs of the area, but sufficient to become the coach of his three sons. The situation of the house made playing with a proper ball quite a tricky exercise; the patio offered a bit of space, but a misdirected kick easily sent the ball rolling all the way down the hill, where it would be fetched and brought back by a grumbling neighbour. The brothers were so caught up in their game that they'd

crumple old newspapers into the semblance of a sphere to carry on playing, rather than run down the slope themselves. Other matches were played at night, in their bedrooms. The legs of a wardrobe became goalposts, and rolled-up socks were close enough in shape to the real thing to kick, and argue about.

‘We could hear them talk all the time’, Albert recalled. ‘Did the ball cross the line? No, it didn’t!’ We sometimes had to pick one of them up by the seat of his pants to make the others stop.’ Stop – but not for long.

The passion for football that ran through the three sons ran through the father as well. He could have punished the unruly children by preventing them from attending Olympique de Marseille (‘OM’) games at the Stade-Vélodrome; in fact, he took them there himself, to watch Josip Skoblar (‘the Yugoslavian goal-machine’) and the Swedish winger Roger Magnusson, who produced some of the most ravishing football seen in Europe in the early seventies. On one of these early visits to Marseilles’ stadium, on 20 October 1972, Éric, perched on Albert’s shoulders, was one of 48,000 spectators who saw Ajax, the European champions, beat Marseille by two goals to one. The beauty of this Dutch exhibition struck the six-year-old boy to such an extent that, to this day, no other team (not even the Brazilians, ‘who pass the ball as if it were a gift’) has taken the place of Johann Cruyff’s in Cantona’s pantheon. Cruyff, ‘a real artist, a visionary’, inspired such a devotion to the Oranje in the young boy that when, in the autumn of 1981, France met the Netherlands for a crucial World Cup qualifier, he prayed for the defeat of his countrymen. France won 2–0. Marseillais first, footballer second, Frenchman a distant third.

Around the time he conceived this violent passion for Ajax’s ‘total football’, at the age of six, Éric was old enough to sign his first registration form. Just as the elder Jean-Marie had done, and like Joël would do, he joined SO Caillolais, where he was asked to go in goal. This was a logical choice for Albert’s son, but did not hold much appeal for him, and was a waste of his prodigious gift. How prodigious that gift was soon became apparent. In any case, he’d had the good fortune to grow up almost next door to the very best football school Marseilles could provide.

Sports Olympiques Caillolais was already an institution by the time Éric joined in 1972. Founded in 1939, a few months before France declared war on Germany, it had established itself as a feeder club nonpareil to the best teams in the Provence-Côte d’Azur region, including the ‘giants’ Olympique de Marseille and OGC Nice. Its youth teams regularly made mincemeat of what opposition other quartiers dared to enter in local competitions: the mass of cups and medals that greet the visitor to the club today bears witness to this enduring success. Its most famous product, until Cantona became ‘Canto’, had been Roger Jouve, a midfielder who was capped by France seven times in the seventies and won the national title with RC Strasbourg, having been the heartbeat of OGC Nice for thirteen seasons. The great Jean Tigana joined the club the same year as Éric, though he was his elder by more than ten years; and to this day, no fewer than eleven Caillolais have progressed through the club’s ranks to become professionals, an astonishing number considering the not-for-profit association’s lack of resources, and its complete reliance on the generosity of unpaid coaching and administrative staff. Cantona could not have wished for a better footballing education.

One of his teammates at the time, who also sat with him at the desks of the local école communale, was Christophe Galtier, no mean player himself. Cantona was not long in making an impression. Galtier recalled how his friend, having played just one game between the posts, insisted on joining the forward line. As was their habit, the cocky Caillolais had scored some fifteen goals without reply, and their new 'keeper hadn't had as much as a touch of the ball. Football was not supposed to be that boring, something Éric articulated in loftier terms once he had retired from the game: 'Even as a footballer, I was always being creative. I could never have played a defensive role because I would have been forced to destroy the other players' creativity.'

A few weeks after the massacre to which he had been a frustrated witness, the reluctant goalie got his way and was deployed upfield at a prestigious under-12 tournament held in Cannes. Les Caillols won (naturally), Cantona earning the distinction of being voted the competition's best player. The young Éric still put the gloves on from time to time, however, when his team was practising penalties on the rugged pitch, or when the three brothers (joined by Galtier) hit the ball in one of the club's two car parks, a battered bus shelter having become the 'goal'. Like Maradona and Platini, Cantona learnt the game 'dribbling with tin cans in the street'; he would always feel that these impromptu kickabouts not only helped him refine his skill, and taught him how to exploit the most exiguous of spaces, but also represented a more noble, more authentic form of the game he loved. As he told a French journalist in 1993: 'My luck is that I have kept the spirit of street football. In the street, when I was a minot ['a lad', in the patois of Marseilles], if a player had a red shirt, and I had it too, we played together, in the same team. There was no strategy, no tactics. Only improvisation. And pleasure. What I have kept from this time is pleasure, the uncertainty of the result, and spontaneity. Whatever else is said, in today's football, despite everything, a player remains more spontaneous than artists who claim to be spontaneous themselves.' Not everyone shared these convictions, as he was to discover later.

Albert didn't mind Éric deserting the net. He knew enough of the game to realise what a special talent the second of his sons possessed. 'It wasn't necessary for my father to tell me I was good, I could see it in his eyes. It's better if it's not said but shown in other ways.' Of the 200-plus matches Éric played wearing the blue and yellow of SO Caillolais, only a handful were lost. Nobody knows quite how many goals he scored. But, without giving in to the Marseillais penchant for embellishment, it must have been hundreds, and this when the bob-haired youth often played against much older opponents ('at nine, he was already playing like a fifteen-year-old' is a comment that I have often come across). The quality of his first touch, his assurance in front of the goal and, above all, the confidence he had in his mastery of the ball set him aside from what, even by Les Caillols' high standards, was the best generation of footballers the club had ever seen. Yves Cicculo, a man whose life has been enmeshed with SOC for six decades, from playing in the youth team to assuming the presidency, has often commented on the 'pride', 'the natural class and charisma' of the little boy he first saw shortly after his sixth birthday: 'That attitude is not for show – that is the real Cantona. He was one of those rare players you knew would become a pro. He made us dream even when he was a small boy. He didn't need to be taught football; football was innate in him.'

His family did nothing to discourage Éric from feeling ‘special’; far from it. Albert provided extra coaching; words of advice too, as when he told his son after a rare defeat: ‘There is nothing more stupid than a footballer who pretends to be more indispensable to the game than the ball. Rather than run with the ball, make the ball do the work, give it and look quickly. Look before you receive the ball and then give it, and always remember that the ball goes quicker than you can carry it’ – words that Cantona claimed to remember verbatim when, in 1993, he dictated his somewhat eccentric autobiography, *Un Rêve modeste et fou* (‘A Humble and Crazy Dream’). But Albert was not the only Cantona to take position on the touchline when Sunday came; in fact, the whole family gathered behind the railings. Éric’s paternal grandmother Lucienne, never seen without an umbrella, or so the story goes, didn’t use it just to protect herself from the light of the sun, but also to accompany her diatribes against whoever had had the cheek to rough up her grandson.

Whether because of jealousy, or out of genuine concern for the child’s well-being, not everyone took kindly to the Cantonas’ behaviour. In 1995, immediately after Cantona’s infamous assault on a thuggish fan at Crystal Palace, the *Mail on Sunday* dispatched a reporter to Marseilles with a clear brief – find out whether there is a cloud of darkness over Cantona’s childhood, which might explain his life-long conflicts with authority and outbursts of violence. The journalist didn’t come home empty-handed. Jules Bartoli, who had been Éric’s coach in the under-11s team of Les Caillols, painted the picture of a child who was far too easily indulged by his parents, Albert in particular: ‘In French we say ‘chouchouter’ [‘pamper’] – he had special treatment and was obviously his father’s favourite. There were three sons, but the father seemed interested only in watching Éric. He was very systematic about it. Maybe Éric received too much attention from his parents.’ More interestingly, Bartoli is quoted as saying: ‘Éric did not know how to lose because his team simply never lost. In one season, he scored 42 goals and the team didn’t suffer a single defeat. If he had learned how to lose, maybe he wouldn’t do so many stupid things now.’ It is tempting to add – ‘and he may not have scored so many goals either’. Yves Ciccuto, usually so full of praise for his most famous player, concurred, up to a point: ‘If Éric had enjoyed a more normal adolescence, he might have had more serenity. But he started with our club at six and had left home by 15. Parents don’t think of the sacrifices their children must make. Some children crack straight away. Éric didn’t, but the experience may have destroyed his youth. It certainly changed his character.’ Perhaps there is an element of truth in these opinions, provided Ciccuto’s ‘may’ is understood not as a figure of speech, but as a mark of genuine uncertainty. Whenever Cantona himself has spoken of his childhood, which he has often done, it has always been in nostalgic terms, as if the higgledy-piggledy house on the hill had been built in some Arcadia. This idealized vision was not exclusively his; the few who were allowed to enter the inner circle of the clan, like Christophe Galtier, have spoken of its ‘love, warmth and lack of hypocrisy’ with fondness and a deep sense of gratitude for having been accepted within it.

Even if one concedes that Bartoli ‘may’ have had a point, Les Caillols was not the kind of nightmarish place inhabited by many other gifted athletes in their youth. Éric did not become a performing monkey dancing to his father’s tune. He did suffer from bullying, however, not at the hands of those closest to him, but when he was singled out by the son of his very first schoolteacher, ‘someone you knew was very

unhappy' – Eric's words– when he was only five years old. The teacher's son, a leather-clad biker, visited his mother from time to time in the classroom, and used Éric as a target for his own anger. The form this bullying took can only be guessed at; but the little boy never once complained, and only betrayed his disarray when he was asked by the bully's mother to stand up and read a poem or a story in class. Éric must have complied, but with such unease that one of the lasting effects of his trauma was a phobia of speaking or reading in public. He only confessed to this three decades later, when he had already embarked on an acting career. Trust him not to do things by halves, even when it comes to catharsis.

Exceptional as Éric's talent was, and keen as his parents were on pushing him to the fore, his childhood was not just a long game of football played in the bosom of a proud and protective family. Marseilles might have been the country's third largest city; but the boy's and the teenager's desires were more attuned to what the scrubby woodland of the nearby Garlaban had to offer – the walks, the daydreaming, the shooting parties in the company of his father. Rising at dawn, the two of them would look for 'larks, thrushes and woodcocks', Éric simultaneously pacified by the hush of the forest and inebriated by the scents of the undergrowth. From a very early age, silence and solitude held a strong appeal for him, an inclination which, coupled with his boisterousness and frequent explosions of temper, made him something of an enigma to his schoolmates. Christophe Galtier has described him 'as a bit of a poète' in the classroom. His friend's mind easily drifted into a world of his own creation, with little regard for the consequences this may have on his work or on his teachers' judgement of this unusual child. He could be charming one minute, appallingly rude the next; he wouldn't harm anyone out of sheer viciousness, but could cause serious hurt nevertheless. One of his first football coaches is said to have been so shocked by a public attack on his tactics and team selection that he resigned his position there and then.

Yet there was always the other Éric, the playful, mischievous, exuberant Éric, who was never more in evidence than when the family uprooted from Les Caillols for the Christmas and summer holidays. The Cantonas had two favourite destinations, the Provençal Alps and 'La Côte bleue', a stretch of coastline between l'Estaque and Martigues where Éric's paternal grandparents owned a cabanon – a wooden hut – right on the shore of the Mediterranean. The whole family, Joseph and Lucienne included, seven people in all, crammed in a Lancia which had seen better days. The drive was mercifully short; and, as soon as they had arrived, the three brothers set up camp on the beach. The first object out of the boot was, more often than not, a football. Jean-Marie remembered blissful days spent diving from rocks, swimming and fishing whatever Lucienne needed for the evening soup, then sitting round a bonfire, listening to the Gipsy guitarists who had been invited by his grandfather Joseph. Éric relished these regular escapades, which also gave him a chance to indulge his passion for scuba-diving, though not of the usual kind. Buying the requisite equipment was out of the question; but using one's imagination cost nothing and could be just as rewarding. So Éric collected empty water bottles, and tied them together with a piece of string. Once he had thrown this apparatus on his bare shoulders, it was easy enough for him to pretend the bottles were filled with oxygen, and that he had joined the crew of Jacques Cousteau's ship, the famous Calypso.

Then there was art or, more precisely, painting. Albert, again, would be a perfect guide for his son through the mastery of his craft, his culture and, above all, his sensitivity. 'He was passionate about many things,' Cantona told *L'Équipe-Magazine* in 2007. 'He explained something to you and then he would start to cry. He gave us this passion and love for life. That's very important: when your education is built around that, it is solid. And you can cry, even when you are a strong man. You can find something beautiful and cry simply because it is so beautiful. You can find emotion in the beauty of things and, to me, that's love.' Albert had obviously been a convincing teacher. Éric would sit by his side when he mixed his colours and painted brightly coloured landscapes in the style of the *école marseillaise*, with post-Impressionist Pierre Ambrogiani a favourite of both. Albert could see a bit of himself in Ambrogiani, a self-taught Provençal of working-class extraction who had worked as a postman for many years, before the patronage of Marcel Pagnol had launched a career spent exclusively in Marseilles. Albert, who also introduced Éric to Van Gogh's work, was by all accounts 'an accomplished amateur', someone who had mastered his craft to a far greater degree than most Sunday brush-pushers. Éric watched, and learnt.

Judging from an early photograph, taken in his first two years at the communale of Les Caillols, the cherubic little boy possessed a strong sense of colour, using vivid blues and yellows eerily evocative of Joan Miró, a painter he would idolize later on. Though he never lost his admiration for the Ambrogianis of this world (his father included), his taste soon moved away from the figurative. Éric's need for 'expression', and his somewhat naïve belief that 'expression' represented the be-all and end-all of the creative act, pushed him towards darker universes, such as the 'spontaneous' creations of the short-lived CoBrA school and the astonishing still-lives of Nicolas de Staël – an inclination that should be proof enough that there was nothing pseudish about his visceral response to art. Cantona never felt much affinity with painting as production of imagery (think of Magritte); he instinctively responded far more to colour, rhythm, abruptness of manner as well as harmony of composition – in short, what is most 'painterly' about painting. Yes, Éric Cantona was an unusual child. So what could be done with him?