

The Rascal as Cultural Provocateur

Focus

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VIEW FROM THE EXTERIOR: SERGE GAINSBOURG

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“Provoke, never stop provoking your entire life...but always remain humane.”

—Serge Gainsbourg

Christmas 1979: love of Gainsbourg’s life, actress Jane Birkin, is backstage, trembling, mumbling over and over, “He’s fantastic, incredible,” as Gainsbourg’s acapella version of “*La Marseillaise*” reverberates across a stunned silence at the now (in)famous Strasbourg “concert.” It wasn’t much of a concert because as Gainsbourg finished *his* “*Marseillaise*,” threats of violence charged the air anew. Some 100 supporters gathered around to protect Gainsbourg from the over 400 incensed paratroopers. What were they so incensed about?

Gainsbourg’d just released *Aux Armes Et Caetera*, the title song of which, Gainsbourg noted, was “suggested by the *Larousse*,” which published the “*La Marseillaise*” lyrics; after the first refrain, subsequent refrains were noted simply as “*Aux armes*, etc.” Put to the ganja-inflected reggae beat of rhythm masters, Sly & Robbie, it created an off-handed reconstruction of the “sacred” anthem which seemed to ooze casual indifference. Gainsbourg considered “*La Marseillaise*” the bloodiest song of all time. The fact that people so easily found themselves singing such glorious odes to violence fascinated Gainsbourg. And through mere anthropological change in tempo and delivery, Gainsbourg had managed to

reconfigure “*La Marseillaise*” in the way Hendrix had transfigured the “Star Spangled Banner” as protest song.

Gainsbourg’s early fusion of copulatin’ blues and easy listening opened minds, flies, orifices.

French patriots wasted no time rallying around their collective indignation. They smelled attitude, sacrilege. Generals, priests, journalists, and politicians denounced Gainsbourg in the media. Aspects of his career—even his Jewishness—were reexamined. Reactionaries ultimately concluded that he’d defaced “*La Marseillaise*” expressly *because* he was Jewish!

In September, the crusty Paratroopers announced their intent to disrupt any Gainsbourg performance with violence. In Marseilles they threatened Gainsbourg’s band, forcing him to cancel remaining concert dates. He launched a counteroffensive, adamantly confronting critics: “Paratroopers don’t have exclusive rights to the national anthem.” By then most French *citoyens* were involved; *les Françaises* everywhere chose sides.

After the cancellations he ventured onto a smaller stage with rock band, Bijou. Gainsbourg was surprised to learn how popular he was, *especially* with the young—many born *after* the last time he’d mounted a stage. He organized eight sold-out concerts between Christmas and New Years. Early performances in Lyon and Brussels proceeded smoothly. But then came Strasbourg—no way were the paratroopers going to let him perform. Gainsbourg remained defiant: “I’m going to sing the way I need to.” Tensions mounted.

One hour before the concert, a bomb threat at his reggae band's hotel spooked them so much that they refused to play, insisting that this was Gainsbourg's own affair. Gainsbourg understood.

Defying threats and taunts, Gainsbourg went on as scheduled—alone. Pale and shaking, he faced the crowd: “right wing goons have tried to force a cancellation.” He thanked fans for their support, then tried appeasing the paratroopers with a conciliatory gesture of embrace. “My band had to flee a bomb threat but I'm still going to sing ‘*La Marseillaise*.’” He sang it like it had never been sung before. Emotions soared, many paratroopers were moved to tears...but then the song ended.

The paratroopers regained their lack of composure and called for Gainsbourg's head. Serge turned to his uniformed taunters and...flipped them the bird! Some hell broke loose, chairs flew, skirmishes between pro- and anti-Gainsbourg factions were reported near the exits. And by the time people looked back up, Serge had disappeared into a halo of blinding stagelight.

In a matter of months the album sold over 500,000 copies, earning him his first gold album. He went on to win “best male performer” and “best album” awards at that year's music awards in Cannes. By year's end, Gainsbourg, now 52, was someone to most French and everything to many; worshipped like few Americans could ever hope to be, managing that jittery tightrope between outcast and pop star—marginal yet marketable; every indie rocker's dream, or scheme.

Gainsbourg remains a complex cultural homunculus to this day. As king of kink, he wore his crown one day, pissed on it the next. In Anglo terms, he was part rat pack, part beatnik, dash of Dylan, shot of Brel, pungent growl of Leonard Cohen, Chet Baker's lilting fragility, Tom Waits's irrepressible inventiveness, Johnny Rotten's spectacular naughtiness, and a pinch of Johnny Hartman's silky smoothness. Actor, pianist, singer, poet, *cinéaste*, photographer, painter, and novelist the

sentimental rascally voice of repressed desires avenging the dispossessed inside all of us. When Sinatra died, Americans may have paused, put the needle down on some scratchy wax, but America didn't come to a standstill as did France when Gainsbourg died of a heart attack on March 2, 1991.

This remains difficult to comprehend because in America you're either out or in, artist or hack, with it or without; every French gustatory delight is honored and every Frenchman despised. Outside “Francophonía,” Gainsbourg remained an unknown entity until some six years ago, 35 years after his first single. In part, this occurred because of shifting tectonic plates of aesthetics—a culture catching up—and, spurred on by independent radio djs and Mick Harvey (Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds), whose “combination of personal curiosity...and a growing bewilderment that his work is virtually unknown outside French speaking countries” led him to produce two albums of English versions of Gainsbourg songs. This new awareness raises essential questions: how did this oxymoronic accepted marginality thrive? And why did “Anglophonía” take so long to appreciate Gainsbourg?

With Alan Clayson's *View From The Exterior* I hoped to add reasons to Gainsbourg's rhyme. But Clayson fails to draw you *inside*. Instead, one feels oddly more *exterior*. Clayson never manages to untangle himself from his own vast lengths of herniated alimentary canal which must serve as his sentences. We're consistently misled by hackneyed “Dutch uncle's finger” prose, detained by constipated metaphors (he compares the “outcry about Serge's naughtiness” to “the explosions in cordite-riddled Ypres in the Great War”), and distracted by factual errors and pretensions to insight that merely “flog the dead horse” attitudes of an over-the-top-of-the-hill “legendary...cult celebrity,” to quote his own bio. Whenever Clayson cannot support his own preprogrammed squash-the-frog agenda, he just barges into Gainsbourg's “calculating” cerebral cortex: “What he

couldn't confess even to himself [To whom then? Clayson?] was that he had developed a taste for being in the limelight." Or he ventriloquistically attributes his consternation to dead men: "Perhaps Simenon's ghostly annoyance at this mangling of his work put a jinx on *Equateur*" (Gainsbourg's 2nd film as director). If Clayson'd done his homework, we wouldn't be guessing.

Clayson's most interesting contribution to "Gainsbourgia" is a chronology which traces Serge's woes and wanderings. This is enriched by a lattice of cross-referenced, overlapping synchronicities which offers a context—colorful Parisian contemporaries cross Serge's many wayward paths. But just as your curiosity piques, these meetings dissolve, become footnotes, parenthetical asides, *sans issue*. Clayson never becomes our fly on the proverbial wall. To appreciate these encounters at all, readers must literally circle interesting passages and cut them away from Clayson's fumbling "sleight of verbal judo" (in his own words).

For instance, Clayson informs us that Gainsbourg wrote the title song for the film *Striptease* for Nico, but her "Germanic contralto...proved too guttural, so it was passed on to Juliette Greco..." We learn that Jane Birkin and Edith Piaf lived in the same building—but what of it? Clayson contextualizes Piaf as "this bossy little madam who was a French cross between Vera Lynn and Judy Garland [!]" You wonder aloud, "Who's Clayson's target audience?!"

Birkin's ex-husband is John Barry, famous for *James Bond* and other film music—exactly the kind Gainsbourg hoped to write. But Clayson provides no intrigue, no dialogue. Clayson tells us that "Mick Jagger's...paramour" Marianne Faithfull's B-side "Tomorrow's Calling" was an interpretation of Gainsbourg's "*Hier Ou Demain*" and that Gainsbourg considered her voice for "*Je T'Aime...Moi Non Plus*." But...curiosity interrupted again. Clayson carves out puzzle pieces but (because of deadlines?) never puts them together.

Clayson is further hampered by his axes-

to-grind: Gainsbourg's ugliness, age, Frenchness, and MONEY. In fact, *View* often reads like an *Economist* profile. Clayson consistently hot-links "chart gladiator" Gainsbourg's every impulse to "warm up sales." He egregiously compares Gainsbourg's provocations to "the gangland slayings in *The Godfather*, it was connected to business," which "boosted attendance figures" and "gave Gainsbourg's bank balance a welcome shot in the arm." When Gainsbourg reprises his own songs, it's just PR, "yuk(s)-for-a-buck" intended to rescue his career from "market decline." *Forbes* anyone?

Clayson's alternative reality paints Gainsbourg as some old fart who NEVER appealed to French youth: "he was apparently one of the few older artists held in borderline regard by post-Beatles record-buyers. More typically, he was totally ignored." But this conclusion is undermined by quotes from Birkin that he quickly *ignores*: "The French know all his songs by heart....There were children of 12 and men of 70 waiting to follow him to the graveyard."

Just peruse Samuel Tastet's *Le Mur de Gainsbourg* (EST, Paris, 1992) and see Gainsbourg's youth appeal. This photo book shows the grafittied walls around Gainsbourg's Paris home, the young fans' last respects (post-modernity's bouquets) transforming this corner into a sacred precinct reminiscent of Jim Morrison's grave in Père Lachaise.

My 1986 Parisian memories include a backdrop of young, old, hip and un-knowing Gainsbourg's work. Before learning French, Mirielle and friends, who owned nearly everything he'd ever recorded, would patiently explain Gainsbourg's *jeux de mots* and double entendres to me. These mid-20-somethings knew his twisty nuanced *chansons* best. Gainsbourg made his lyrics spin, created sparks beyond their realm for them. It's incumbent upon anyone writing about Gainsbourg to analyze his lyrics, or at least to keep them on hand, since much of his life seeped into his lyrics; one can even say his

life was kept in orbit by them.

Unfortunately, Clayson, drowning in his “oceans of press” and persecuted by “a deadline I’d never meet,” shrinks quickly from explaining how someone so “personal and universal; subversive but encroaching upon public consciousness,” with such “an agreeable uncommerciality,” could enchant so many people? Clayson offers his mea culpa in the prologue(!): “I have...been inclined not to quote Serge Gainsbourg’s lyrics directly, but to paraphrase their substance.” This is like a partygoer who relates the substance of a joke, telling us exactly where the laughter would have occurred had he actually told the joke.

In the 50s, complex emotions were acceptable in poetry but not pop. In 1958, Vian’s review won Gainsbourg a recording contract. “*Poinçoinneur de Lilas*” was his Goya-like portrait of a train conductor punching tickets all day, singing of his “soul-destroying” monotony, while sneaking little snatches of reading from *Reader’s Digest* “to kill the boredom,” but his “daydreams [are] always failing.” When the conductor contemplates suicide (he doesn’t follow through, as Clayson mistakenly claims) while on the job, you realize you’re listening to something deep—a Gallic Blues if you will—the voice of the unspeakable horror of meaninglessness. Gaily rendered by Les Frères Jacques with its bubbly surfaces (the way Peter, Paul, & Mary rendered Dylan) further underlines the sinister existentialism.

Clayson is plainly uninterested. Central to appreciating Gainsbourg is the counterpoint of the lyrics’ sinister beauty (even Clayson compares them to Cole Porter), with the oft too-sweet music (Clayson prefers “treacly slickness,” “disappointingly tedious”) which flexes the bow with an arrow aimed right at...trouble. Clayson seldom pursues this dynamic tension: barbed *poésie* ushered along by lush productions (listen to contemporary examples like Portishead, Massive Attack, et al.) By page 70 he has totally abdicated: “my own musical palate has been too coarsened by the decades of pop....I can’t write anything constructive about *Confidentiel*

[Gainsbourg’s 6th LP]. Adjectives like ‘soporific,’ ‘dull’ and ‘mind-stultifying’ spring to mind.”

Author Joseph Lanza (*Elevator Music*, St. Martin’s, 1994), who has championed the reappraisal of low grade muzak as high culture, knows differently. Because John Barry and exotica composer Martin Denny, among others, are now considered “serious” composers, Lanza suggests it’s now Gainsbourg’s turn as a composer of exquisite film music (*Gainsbourg, Musiques de Films*, Phillips 9101246), with its “strange moods verging on a sonic bi-polar disorder, that range lushly sentimental to metallicly sinister.”

But there’s little in *View* about Gainsbourg’s films or soundtracks. In 1975, Gainsbourg directed his first film, *Je T’Aime...Moi Non Plus*, and composed the soundtrack, which included a pipe organ reprise of “*Je T’Aime*.” It starred Warhol actor Joe Dallesandro, Birkin, and a young, unknown Gerard Depardieu. Clayson *does* provide Paris attendance figures—200,000—some snide swipes, but little else.

By 1960 Gainsbourg was already infusing his *chansons* with rock-n-roll’s sound; “*Requiem Pour un Twisteur*” is his tribute to its silly liberational possibilities. 1963: he introduced the electric guitar sound to France. Via Stan Getz, he drenched his *chansons* with dense saxophone. Via Astrud Gilberto, sultry sambas dramatized the feverish emotions that sizzle just beneath cool vocals. And like Dylan’s early fusions of blues, poetry, and the scene’s Zeitgeist, Gainsbourg absorbed the day’s chaotic currents, recasting them into a unique “voice.” Gainsbourg even reinvented Dylan’s “Hollis Brown” as “*Les Aventures de Vidocq*.”

1964’s *Gainsbourg Percussions* may have been “too ‘clever’ to be a pop hit,” but even Clayson admits it was “among the first audacious creaks of a door,” opening up the west to a whole world of sounds—Afro-Cuban (“*Couleur Café*”) in this case. Later coined “world music,” it came to define both

exploitation and extrapolation of west by east and vice versa, and led to some incredible (some execrable) fusions of ethnicity and electronica, the conjunction of overlapping ambiences, new dance musics which were exploited by nearly everyone, including Paul Simon, the Clash, King Sunny Adé, Cheb Khaled, on through to trip hopsters and ambient navigators. Gainsbourg also introduced his biggest vocal development, Anglo-slang—deliriously evident on “Ford Mustang”—providing new scat-punning ammo to undermine cultural expectations.

In 1967’s “Comic Strip,” Gainsbourg invites Bardot to “come into my comic strip.” She supplies comic book “Pow-bang” exclamations, innovatively manipulating pop’s virtual surfaces like a Liechtenstein painting come alive. Meanwhile “NY-USA” rattles off a list of “oh-so-tall” NY sights to an infectious percussive beat. This sound became massively successful for producer Malcolm McLaren with the percussive Adam and the Ants and Bow Wow Wow. Since analysis doesn’t appear on Clayson’s resume, we’re consistently deprived of such speculations.

Readers will have to look elsewhere to learn that Gainsbourg was attacked by homophobic thugs in 1981, because they disapproved of his politics—a recent song, “*La Nostalgie Camarade*,” had attacked the far right—and his Bowie-esque flirtations with sexual ambiguity. He’s beat up bad but appears on television the following day, proudly displaying his black eyes. “I write songs of aggression,” he mumbled; “When I discover aggression in the streets it’s to be expected.”

In 1966 Gainsbourg wrote “*Les Sucettes*” for “ye-ye” singer, France Gall, as—Clayson insists—a career resuscitator. But Gainsbourg clearly loved soft subversions like penning lubricious lyrics for a naive teen. Here are “the candies of anis” (sounds like “anus”) she’ll buy for a few pennies (which, in French, sounds like “pen-is.”) Gainsbourg once asked Gall on a talk show whether she’d understood the lyrics. She answered naïvely, yes, a girl buys her favorite candies. Serge laughed

heartily. Gall was so—well—galled that she disappeared for weeks.

Then, in January 1969, a song exploded into the frontal lobes of an unsuspecting pop universe—“*Je T’Aime...Moi Non Plus*.” Perpetrator: Gainsbourg. Accomplice: Birkin. Effect: mayhem and scandal. Magnitude: somewhere between Elvis’s censored pelvis, Altamont and the Sex Pistols’ Queen’s Jubilee concert on the Thames. Journalists and world politicians condemned it as immoral, called for stricter censorship of lyrics. It was banned in Sweden, Spain, Brazil, and Britain, and, as Clayson puts it, “incited furor in hot-blooded Roman Catholic Latin America.” The Vatican’s official newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*, implored Italy to banish it. Philips halted production. Black market firms took up the slack. Every shrill denunciation equals increased sales; exceeding two million by winter’s end, making Gainsbourg one of Europe’s top pop acts. Blasé Serge just grins mischievously. Meanwhile, America “shrugged its shoulders,” the single reaching no higher than #69.

Serge stumbled upon “*Je T’Aime*’s” melody, Clayson explains, while working on “*Les Coeur Verts*, a documentary...about urban youth.” Its surreal nonsequiter I-love-you-me-neither hook “derived from a...carefully polished one-liner from Dali: ‘Picasso is Spanish, *moi aussi*; Picasso is a genius, *moi aussi*; Picasso is a communist, *moi non plus*.’” The song’s produced with then paramour, Bardot, whom Clayson refers to as “French cinema’s ‘answer’ to Hollywood’s Marilyn Monroe and Ealing’s Diana Dors...” SHEESH! But when their relationship soured, it was locked away, ultimately emerging on disc in 1986.

The second (famous) version was with Birkin, whose humid love-drenched sighs still incite amorous explorations on dance floors to this day. But in a rare instant of Clayson venturing into interpretation, he flubs the key line “*L’Amour physique est sans issue*” as “There’s nothing to beat physical love.” My

reading—Harvey’s too—is “Physical love is a dead end.” Delivered all-knowingly by Gainsbourg, who’s, nevertheless, unable to resist the pleasurable emptiness of physical love, rendering the song obsessively tragic, rather than Clayson’s one-dimensionally triumphant.

Gainsbourg’s early fusion of copulatin’ blues and easy listening opened minds, flies, orifices, while creating a pop benchmark of simulated sex as ambience. Hundreds followed suit applying the slippery soundbytes of sexual simulation, pulsating from electrical cord through to central nervous system, along the phone lines to... phone sex.

It provided opening bars to many careers of ambient lechery: think Barry White’s orgasmic oozings, Prince’s sexual politics, McLaren’s conniving frontal lobes applying it to, as Greil Marcus puts it, “elevator music” versions of Sex Pistols’ hits “done in the manner of Michel Legrand” to subvert the original subversions. The pranksters eventually met, Clayson reports, but, alas, like a similar summit with Jerry Lee Lewis, who “compared notes” with Gainsbourg, we’re left *outside* of insight.

In later years, after Birkin divorced him, Gainsbourg could be found aimlessly hitchhiking, soliciting cops for rides to his favorite dives. Gainsbourg becomes Gainsbarre, a persona obsessed with remolding his hideousness. Instead, he loses sight of himself. In 1982 he appeared on a talk show with a huge balloon emerging from his open fly. On another, he stumbled into Deneuve’s lap where they whisper off mike.

Gainsbourg’s image is unimaginable without a Gitane dangling from his lip. Plus, he overcame chronic shyness with drink: “If I don’t get drunk life becomes impossible.” These habits allowed his booze-livered, “stylish” nihilistic dissipation to acquire provocative attributes; like those scurrilous 19th-century slacker absinthe drinkers, they subverted the work ethic. Scandal was etched into his DNA—Born To Raise Hell; Gainsbourg once said “provocation is my

oxygen.” Meanwhile, axe-wielding Clayson insists Gainsbourg’s provocations were calculated stunts of “unvarnished opportunism.”

Clayson remains totally vexed by how the vulnerable ugliness of this “comical monstrosity of a clown” with his “still-fashionable aura of fascinating depravity” could ever become handsome. “What did [Bardot] see in Serge Gainsbourg?” he asks.

Understanding Gainsbourg’s statement that “ugliness is superior to beauty because it endures” in the context of postmodernism’s propensity to dredge up ugly as beautiful might’ve put Clayson on some *rue* to understanding Gainsbourg.

Instead, Clayson remains tormented by “windows displaying magazines like *Marie-Claire*; their front covers promising articles about Gainsbourg inside with ‘Why Beautiful Girls Fall For This Ugly Man.’” But Clayson never ventures *inside*, never opens the magazines to find out why Gainsbourg was once named “Don Juan of the Year.” Instead, he whines about Gainsbourg’s “old-young looks, trendy ‘designer’ stubble.”

Appearing on a 1986 talk show with Whitney Houston, Gainsbourg whispered to host Michel Drucker, “She’s fantastic... You must introduce me.” Drucker does. Gainsbourg faces Houston and exclaims, “I’d love to fuck you.” Gainsbarre speaks the unspeakable. Houston is incensed: What’d he say? Drucker lies: “He’d love to offer you flowers.” But Gainsbourg interjects: “Not at all. I said I wanna fuck you.” Later he’d tell Catherine Ringer, lead singer of Les Rita Mitsoukos (Blondie-esque), that she has “a perfect mouth for blow jobs.” Result: Gainsbourg’s banned from live TV. “Without controversy it’d all be very boring,” Gainsbourg quips.

Meanwhile, someone tried kidnapping daughter Charlotte. Plus a young fan’s caught camping in his home. Without considering this, Clayson places Gainsbourg’s reaction in the moral code of “coolness,” writing that he showed “not the least inclination to listen to

what [the perp] had to say.... Gainsbourg, venerated symbol of cool, summoned the gendarmes without further ado.”

To inhabit any star’s life one must first negotiate through its myriad of re-creations. Biography is by trade territorial, impressionistic. Clayson, however, with 1001 axes-to-grind, whittles Gainsbourg down to a stick figure. There’s plenty to criticize about Gainsbourg, but the more Clayson opines, the less we learn, the more Gainsbourg is laid to waste. By book’s end, Clayson admits: “Serge Gainsbourg had lost me...his music had become too pat...too American—but that’s the feeling of a regressive who prefers the Troggs, Gary Glitter, the Spice Girls—anyone to...Phil Collins and other purveyors of cultured ‘contemporary’ pop that forty-somethings like me are supposed to enjoy...but to ask my opinion...is like asking me about railway lines or donkeys’ false teeth—because I can’t say anything objective about them either.” Reader, be wary of self-proclaimed credentials like that.

Gainsbourg once said: “I don’t want to pass into posterity after my death. Fuck Posterity.” Especially if Clayson’s doing the ushering.

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