

Serge Gainsbourg

Serge Gainsbourg (born **Lucien Ginsburg**; 2 April 1928 – 2 March 1991) was a French singer, songwriter, pianist, film composer, poet, painter, screenwriter, writer, actor, and director. Regarded as one of the most important figures in French popular music, he was renowned for his often provocative and scandalous releases, as well as his diverse artistic output, which embodied genres ranging from jazz, mambo, world, chanson, pop and yé-yé, to rock and roll, progressive rock, reggae, electronic, disco, new wave, and funk. Gainsbourg's varied musical style and individuality make him difficult to categorize although his legacy has been firmly established and he is often regarded as one of the world's most influential popular musicians.

His lyrical works incorporated a vast amount of clever word play to hoodwink the listener, often for humorous, provocative, satirical or subversive reasons. Common types of word play in his songs include mondegreen, onomatopoeia, rhyme, spoonerism, dysphemism, parapsydokian and pun. Through the course of his career, Gainsbourg wrote over 550 songs,^{[10][11]} which have been covered more than 1,000 times by a wide range of artists. Since his death, Gainsbourg's music has reached legendary stature in France, and he is regarded as one of France's most revered musicians. He has also gained a cult following in the English-speaking world, with numerous artists influenced by his arrangements.

Biography

Born in Paris, France, Gainsbourg was the son of Jewish Ukrainian migrants, Joseph Ginsburg (28 December 1898, in Kharkov, now Ukraine then Russian Empire – 22 April 1971) and Olga (née Bessman; 1894 – 16 March 1985), who fled to Paris after the 1917 Russian Revolution. Joseph Ginsburg was a classically trained musician whose profession was playing the piano in cabarets and casinos; he taught his children - Gainsbourg and his twin sister Liliane - to play the piano.

Gainsbourg's childhood was profoundly affected by the occupation of France by Germany in World War II. The identifying *yellow star* Jews were required to wear. Gainsbourg, something he in later years was able to transmute into creative inspiration. During the occupation, the Jewish Ginsburg family was able to make their way from Paris to Limoges, traveling under false papers. Limoges was in the Zone libre under the administration of the collaborationist Vichy government and still a perilous refuge for Jews. After the war, Gainsbourg obtained work teaching music and drawing in a school outside of Paris, in Mesnil-Le-Roi. The school was set up under the auspices of local rabbis, for the orphaned children of murdered deportees. Here Gainsbourg heard the accounts of Nazi persecution and genocide, stories that resonated for Gainsbourg far into the future. Before he was 30 years old, Gainsbourg was a disillusioned painter but earned his living as a piano player in bars.

Gainsbourg changed his first name to Serge, feeling that this was representative of his Russian background and because, as Jane Birkin relates: "Lucien reminded him of a hairdresser's assistant." He chose Gainsbourg as his last name, in homage to the English painter Thomas Gainsborough, whom he admired.

He married Elisabeth "Lize" Levitsky on 3 November 1951 and divorced in 1957. He married a second time on 7 January 1964, to Françoise-Antoinette "Béatrice" Pancrazzi (b. 28 July

1931), with whom he had two children: a daughter named Natacha (b. 8 August 1964) and a son, Paul (born in spring 1968). He divorced Béatrice in February 1966.

In late 1967 he had a short but ardent love affair with Brigitte Bardot, to whom he dedicated the song and album *Initials BB*.

In mid-1968 Gainsbourg fell in love with the younger English singer and actress Jane Birkin, whom he met during the shooting of the film *Slogan*. Their relationship lasted over a decade. In 1971 they had a daughter, the actress and singer Charlotte Gainsbourg. Although many sources state that they were married, according to their daughter Charlotte this was not the case. Birkin left Gainsbourg in 1980.

Birkin remembers the beginning of her affair with Gainsbourg: he first took her to a nightclub, then to a transvestite club and afterwards to the Hilton hotel where he passed out in a drunken stupor. Birkin left Gainsbourg when pregnant with her third daughter Lou by the film director Jacques Doillon.

His last partner was Bambou (Caroline Paulus, grandniece of German field marshal Friedrich Paulus of Stalingrad fame). In 1986, they had a son, Lucien (known as Lulu).

In 2010, Lise Lévitzy published a book called "Lise et Lulu" which raises the possibility of Gainsbourg being bisexual.

Early work

His early songs were influenced by Boris Vian and were largely in the vein of old-fashioned *chanson*.

Around 1957 he backed the Parisian "Cabaret Milord l'Arsouille" star, singer Michèle Arnaud.

She discovered a shy songwriter, who considered his compositions too modern and provocative for mainstream *chanson*. Arnaud offered to sing and even record such songs, and propelled his early career.

Later Gainsbourg began to move beyond this and experiment with a succession of musical styles: modern jazz early on, yé-yé and brit-pop in the 1960s, funk, rock and reggae in the 1970s and electronica in the 1980s.

Many of his songs contained themes with a bizarre, morbid or sexual twist in them. An early success, "Le Poinçonneur des Lilas", describes the day in the life of a Paris Métro ticket man, whose job is to stamp holes in passengers' tickets. Gainsbourg describes this chore as so monotonous, that the man eventually thinks of putting a hole into his own head and being buried in another.

By the time the yéyé's arrived in France, Gainsbourg was 32 years old and was not feeling very comfortable: he spent much time with Jacques Brel or Juliette Gréco but the public and critics rejected him, mocking his prominent ears and nose. During this period, Gainsbourg began working with Gréco, a collaboration that lasted throughout the 'Left Bank' period culminating in the song *La Javanaise* in the fall of 1962.

He performed a few duets in 1964 with the artist Philippe Clay, with whom he shared some resemblance. Around this time, Gainsbourg met Elek Bacsik. He pleased Gainsbourg, despite knowing that such a sound would not allow him access to success. The album sold only 1,500 copies. The decision was taken right upon leaving the studio: "I'll get into hack work and buy myself a Rolls". Still, his next album, *Gainsbourg Percussions*, inspired by the rhythms and melodies of Miriam Makeba and Babatunde Olatunji, was a world away from the yéyé wave, on the scene which was to become a key to the Gainsbourg fortune.

More success began to arrive when, in 1965, his song *Poupée de cire, poupée de son* was the Luxembourg entry in the Eurovision Song Contest. Performed by French teen and charming singer France Gall, it won first prize. The song was recorded in English as "A Lonely Singing Doll" by British teen idol Twinkle.

His next song for Gall, *Les Sucettes* (Lollipops), caused a scandal in France: Gainsbourg had written the song with double-meanings and strong sexual innuendo of which the singer was apparently unaware when she recorded it. Whereas Gall thought that the song was about a girl enjoying lollipops, it was actually about oral sex. The controversy arising from the song, although a big hit for Gall, threw her career off-track in France for several years.

Gainsbourg arranged other Gall songs and LPs that were characteristic of the late 1960s psychedelic styles, among them Gall's 1968 album. Another one of Serge's songs *Boum Bada Boum*, was entered by Monaco in the 1967 contest, sung by Minouche Barelli; it came fifth. He also wrote hit songs for other artists, such as *Comment Te Dire Adieu* for Françoise Hardy, Anna Karina (*Sous le soleil exactement, Ne dis rien*) and his lifelong friend and *muse-égérie*, Michèle Arnaud (*Les Papillons Noirs*).

In 1967 Serge Gainsbourg appeared as a dancer along with Jean Yanne and Sacha Distel in the Sacha Show with Marie Laforet singing 'Ivan, Boris & Moi'.

His relationship with Brigitte Bardot led to a series of prominent pop duets, such as *Ford Mustang* and *Bonnie and Clyde*.

In 1969, he released *Je t'aime... moi non plus*, which featured explicit lyrics and simulated sounds of female orgasm. The song appeared that year on an LP, *Jane Birkin/Serge Gainsbourg*. Originally recorded with Brigitte Bardot, it was released with his future girlfriend Birkin when Bardot backed out. While Gainsbourg declared it the "ultimate love song", it was considered too "hot"; the song was censored or banned from public broadcast in numerous countries and in France even the toned-down version was suppressed. The Vatican made a public statement citing the song as offensive. Despite (or perhaps because of) the controversy, it sold well and charted within the top ten in many European countries.

The 1970s

Histoire de Melody Nelson was released in 1971. This concept album, produced and arranged by Jean-Claude Vannier, tells the story of a Lolita-esque affair, with Gainsbourg as the narrator. It features prominent string arrangements and even a massed choir at its tragic climax. The album has proven influential with artists such as Air, David Holmes, Jarvis Cocker, Beck and Dan the Automator.

In 1975, he released the album *Rock Around the Bunker*, an album written entirely on the subject of National Socialism. Gainsbourg used black comedy, as he and his family had

suffered during World War II, being forced to wear the yellow star as the mark of a Jew. *Rock Around the Bunker* belonged to the mid-1970s "retro" trend.

The next year saw the release of another major work, *L'Homme à tête de chou* (Cabbage-Head Man), featuring the new character Marilou and sumptuous orchestral themes. Cabbage-Head Man is one of his nicknames, as it refers to his ears. Musically, *L'homme à tête de chou* turned out to be Gainsbourg's last LP in the English rock style he had favoured since the late 1960s. He would go on to produce two reggae albums recorded in Jamaica (1979 and 1981) and two electronic funk albums recorded in New York (1984 and 1987).

In Jamaica in 1979, he recorded "Aux Armes et cætera", a reggae version of the French national anthem "La Marseillaise", with Robbie Shakespeare, Sly Dunbar and Rita Marley. Following harsh and anti-semitic criticism in right-wing newspaper *Le Figaro* by Charles de Gaulle biographer Michel Droit, his song earned him death threats from right-wing veteran soldiers of the Algerian War of Independence, who were opposed to their national anthem being arranged in reggae style. In 1979, a show had to be cancelled, because an angry mob of French Army parachutists came to demonstrate in the audience. Alone onstage, Gainsbourg raised his fist and answered "The true meaning of our national anthem is revolutionary" and sang it with the audience. The soldiers joined them, a scene enjoyed by millions as French TV news broadcast it, creating more publicity. Shortly afterward, Gainsbourg bought the original manuscript of "La Marseillaise". He replied to his critics that his version was closer to the original as the manuscript shows the words "Aux armes et cætera..." for the chorus. This album, described by legendary drummer Sly Dunbar as "Perhaps the best record he ever played on" was his biggest commercial success, including major hits *Lola Rastaquouère*, *Aux Armes Et Cætera* and a French version of Sam Theard's jazz classic *You Rascal You* entitled *Vieille Canaille*. Rita Marley and the I-Three would record another controversial reggae album with him in 1981, *Mauvaises nouvelles des étoiles*. Bob Marley was furious, when he discovered that Gainsbourg made his wife Rita sing erotic lyrics. Posthumous new mixes, including dub versions by Soljie Hamilton and versions of both albums by Jamaican artists were released as double "Dub Style" albums in 2003, to critical praise in France as well as abroad and to international commercial success. Although belatedly, *Aux Armes Et Cætera – Dub Style* and *Mauvaises Nouvelles Des Étoiles – Dub Style* further posthumously established Gainsbourg as an influential icon in European pop music.

Final years

In 1982, Gainsbourg wrote an album for French rocker Alain Bashung, *Play blessures*. The album, although now considered a masterpiece by French critics, was a commercial failure.

After a turbulent 13-year relationship, Jane Birkin left Gainsbourg. In the 1980s, near the end of his life, Gainsbourg became a regular figure on French TV. His appearances seemed devoted to his controversial sense of humour and provocation. In March 1984, he burned three-quarters of a 500 French franc bill on television to protest against taxes rising up to 75% of income.

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He would show up drunk and unshaven on stage: in April 1986, on Michel Drucker's live Saturday evening television show *Champs-Élysées*, with the American singer Whitney Houston, he objected to Drucker's translating his comments to Whitney Houston and in

English stated: "I said, I want to fuck her" - Drucker insisted this meant "He says you are great..." The same year, in another talk show interview, he appeared alongside Catherine Ringer, a well known singer who had appeared in pornographic films. Gainsbourg spat out at her, "You're nothing but a filthy whore, a filthy, fucking whore".

His songs became increasingly eccentric during this period, ranging from the anti-drug *Aux Enfants de la Chance*, to the highly controversial duet with his daughter Charlotte named *Lemon Incest*. This translates as "*Inceste de citron*", a wordplay on "*un zeste de citron*" (a lemon zest). The title demonstrates Gainsbourg's love for puns – another example of which is *Beau oui comme Bowie*, a song he gave to Isabelle Adjani.

By December 1988, while a judge at a film festival in Val d'Isère, he was extremely intoxicated at a local theatre where he was to do a presentation. While on stage he began to tell an obscene story about Brigitte Bardot and a champagne bottle, only to stagger offstage and collapse in a nearby seat. Subsequent years saw his health deteriorate. He had to undergo liver surgery but denied any connection to cancer or cirrhosis. His appearances and releases became sparser as he had to rest and recover in Vezelay. During these final years, he released *Love on the Beat*, a controversial electronic album with mostly sexual themes in the lyrics and his last studio album, *You're Under Arrest*, presented more synth-driven songs.

Film work

Acting

Gainsbourg appeared in nearly 50 film and television roles. In 1960, he co-starred with Rhonda Fleming in the Italian film *La rivolta degli schiavi* (*The Revolt of the Slaves*) as Corvino, the Roman Emperor Massimiano's evil henchman. In 1968 he wrote music for and appeared as himself in *Le Pacha* directed by Georges Lautner. In 1969, he appeared in William Klein's pop art satire *Mr. Freedom*, and in the same year he starred with Jane Birkin in *The Pleasure Pit*. They acted together again in *Cannabis* the following year, and again in *Seven Deaths in the Cat's Eye* in 1973, and he also made a brief appearance with Birkin in Herbert Vesely's 1980 film, *Egon Schiele – Exzess und Bestrafung*. He co-starred alongside Birkin in the French film *Slogan* for which he wrote the title song "La Chanson de Slogan". Also with Birkin, he acted in the French-Yugoslav film *Devetnaest djevojaka i jedan mornar* (fr) (*19 girls and one sailor*) where he played a role of a partisan.

Directing

Gainsbourg directed five movies: *Je t'aime moi non plus*, *Le Physique et le Figuré*, *Équateur*, *Charlotte for Ever*, and *Stan the Flasher*.

Composing

Throughout his career, Gainsbourg wrote the soundtracks for nearly 60 films and television programs. In 1996, he received a posthumous César Award for Best Music Written for a Film for *Élisa*, along with Zbigniew Preisner and Michel Colombier.

Writing

Gainsbourg wrote a novel entitled *Evguénie Sokolov*.

Death and legacy

Gainsbourg died on 2 March 1991 of a heart attack, a month shy of his 63rd birthday. He was buried in the Jewish section of the Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris. French President François Mitterrand said of him, "He was our Baudelaire, our Apollinaire ... He elevated the song to the level of art."

Since his death, Gainsbourg's music has reached legendary stature in France. He has also gained a following in the English-speaking world, with numerous artists influenced by his arrangements. One of the most frequent interpreters of Gainsbourg's songs was British singer Petula Clark whose success in France was propelled by her recordings of his tunes. In 2003, she wrote and recorded *La Chanson de Gainsbourg* as a tribute to the composer of some of her biggest hits. The majority of Gainsbourg's lyrics are collected in the volume *Dernières nouvelles des étoiles*.

The Parisian house in which Gainsbourg lived from 1969 until 1991, at 5 bis Rue de Verneuil, remains a celebrated shrine, with his ashtrays and collections of various items, such as police badges and bullets, intact. The outside of the house is covered in graffiti dedicated to Gainsbourg, as well as with photographs of significant figures in his life, including Bardot and Birkin. .