



MUSIC

In the Midst of #metoo, Jane Birkin Revisits Her Relationship with Serge

Gainsbourg

As Birkin prepares to perform a tribute to Gainsbourg in New York, she discusses her muse-lover relationship with the notorious chauvinist.

By [BRITTANY RICHMOND](#) | Feb 1 2018, 1:06pm

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Photograph by Keystone for Getty Images.

No matter how famous or successful you are, resentment lingers when someone else gets to do something first. For the inimitable Jane Birkin, that feeling struck in 1969, when Serge Gainsbourg asked Birkin to re-record a song he had first sung with his ex-lover, the eruptive and voluptuous Brigitte Bardot. “That’s how I started singing, out of jealousy,” Jane admitted in a discussion at the French Institute Alliance Francaise Monday night, and “so I had to swallow my pride and realize that [Bardot’s version] would be better than mine.”

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Gainsbourg’s request for Birkin to sing an octave higher than Bardot proved genius, and the heavy-breathing, moan-filled poem of a song, “Je-taime... moi non plus,” became a huge hit—the sexiest song in history, banned by the Pope, and the first fully French single to top the charts in the UK. A love affair that lasted over a decade and several collaborative albums followed. This Thursday (tonight), almost 30 years after his death in 1991, Birkin will perform a collection of songs Gainsbourg had written for Birkin from her thirteenth album titled *Birkin/Gainsbourg: The Symphonic* at Carnegie Hall.

Birkin has no apologies about her relationship with Gainsbourg; instead she feels there was a tenderness to it.

Tonight’s tribute to the infamous Gainsbourg brings back memories of a number of

“firsts” for Birkin, she explained. There's the failure of her first marriage at age 17 to James Bond composer John Barry and the birth of her first child, which propelled her to audition for films and ultimately secure a part alongside Gainsbourg in *Slogan*. Her feeble efforts to speak French during her first meeting with Gainsbourg (she thought his name was Serge Bourginion, like the meat dish). And then there's the couple's first date, which had been clouded by her insecurity at the thought of haughty Gainsbourg's previous relationships. Plus, the Hilton Hotel Paris lobby attendant's exclamation at the suggestion of a sexual relationship between the two: “The same room Monsieur Gainsbourg?” By the way, Birkin remained “pure as snow” that night, leaving him alone and asleep with the Ohio Express “Yummy, Yummy, Yummy” record lodged between his toes.

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The awkwardness and discomfort of first times loom and linger in her past, yet Birkin seems determined to remember these moments as charming and unexpected. Unapologetically devoted to him and the fun they had together as actress and director, and singer and songwriter, Birkin fits into a lineage of muses (her mother, Judy Campbell, to Noel Coward, and her daughter, Charlotte Gainsbourg, to Lars von Trier).

Birkin feels it was an exceptional opportunity to play Gainsbourg's sidekick and foil, his feminist side; and she exhibits unwavering support for all his controversial moves—even his notorious record “Lemon Incest” with daughter Charlotte Gainsbourg. As to witnessing at close range some of Gainsbourg's most controversial moments, Birkin responds: “I didn't know anything else, it seemed normal.”

Gainsbourg wrote for Birkin from when she was 20 years old until his death, and that, according to Birkin was her “good fortune”. In looking back at her life, her career, and, in particular, her relationship with Gainsbourg, Birkin seems to have adopted an attitude of happenstance—often claiming she doesn't know how or why something came first and then the next thing happened. But in the context of the muse-artist relationship, a reliance on destiny to account for the events of one's life can be dangerous. Does being a victim of her fate mark her as submissive?

The age-old muse-artist relationship is currently under media scrutiny; more recently, Birkin’s outspoken contemporaries [Catherine Deneuve](#) and [Brigitte Bardot](#) have controversially opined that out of seduction can come creative genius—which is not exactly the mantra of the #metoo movement. Perhaps it’s Birkin’s British side (despite being a French icon, she was born and raised in England), and her affinity for understatement, that has left her out of this feminist debate.

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But in discussing her relationship with the controversial Gainsbourg, Birkin has no apologies; instead she speaks about it with tenderness. (She even uses mild, biblical phrasing, referring to “having known” various men.)

Regardless of its origins, its sexuality, and its missteps, there is no doubt the Birkin-Gainsbourg working relationship and love affair had a creative output of paramount importance. The photographs, the movies and the music, [which you can enjoy IRL tonight in New York City](#), establish Birkin as one of the first of her kind. Whether it’s her iconic “Birkin” bag, long locks, or effortless British-Parisian style, Birkin has waded through the unfair scrutiny that comes with being a leading lady and become a touchstone of both sexuality and attentive motherhood for millions of women. Birkin says it best: Whatever happened first, “the rest of life is rather refreshing.”

All quotes are from Jane Birkin, Conversation with Jane Birkin, French Institute Alliance Francaise, Monday, January 29, 2018, 7pm.

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