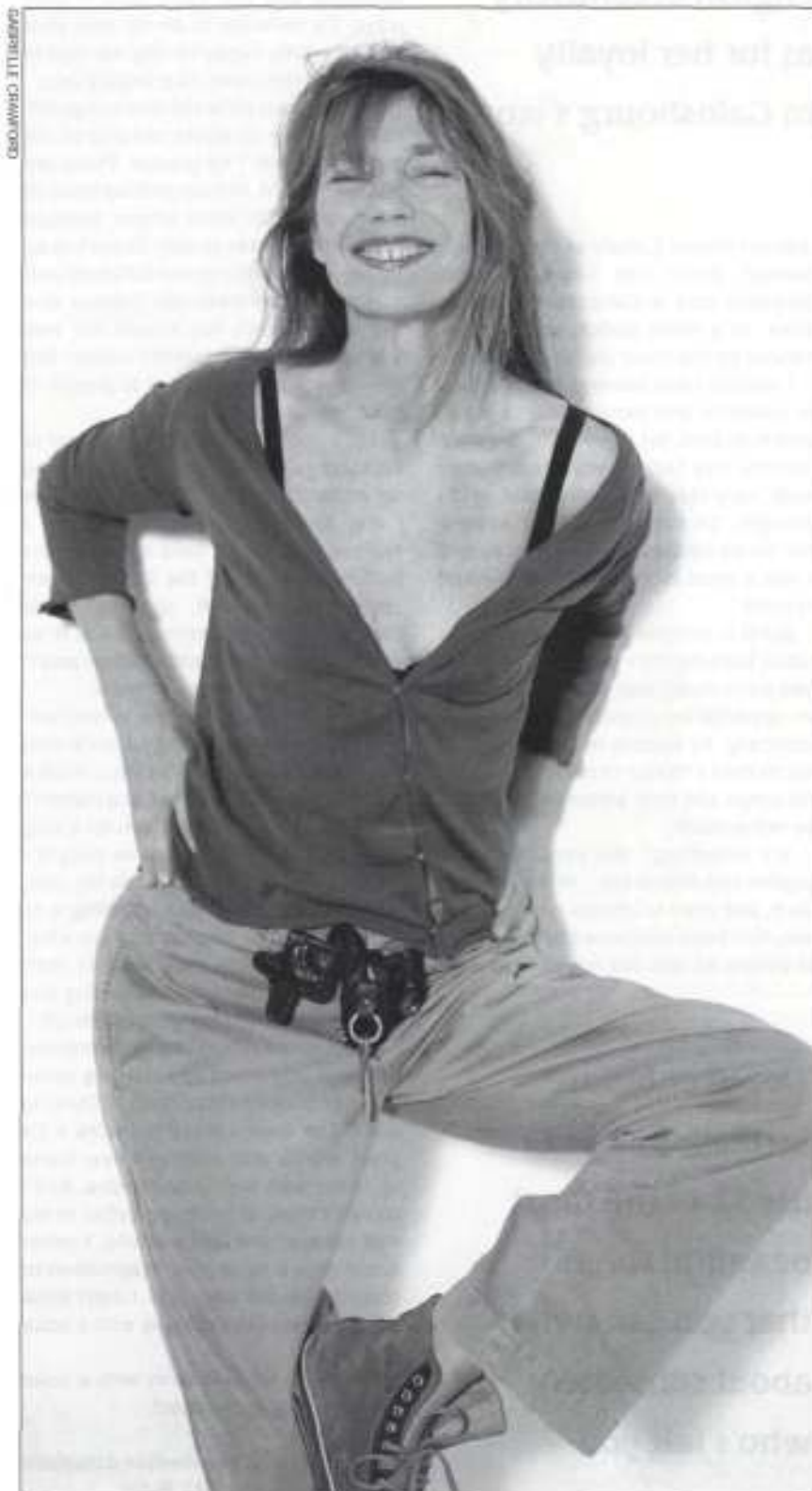


Your song

Piers Ford encounters the legendary muse and singer Jane Birkin



Fragile is the word which springs to mind when Jane Birkin sings. It isn't just the delicate vocal quality or the hesitant hit-or-miss pitching. There's also a vulnerability in the interpretation itself, as if the song is a piece of gossamer which might be crushed by too much focus. Better to let it well up and spill gently out, unforced. The impact is disconcerting: soul and drama conjured unexpectedly from apparent frailty.

This might come as a surprise to British audiences more used to thinking of Birkin as a perennially gamine film star or the source of the soft core moans on that infamous duet with Serge Gainsbourg, 'Je t'Aime Moi Non Plus'. But her musical pedigree is impeccable.

Her actress mother Judy Campbell introduced 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square'. Her second West End appearance was in John Barry's musical *Passion Flower Hotel* in 1965. Aged 19, she fell in love with the James Bond composer and married him. It was a brief union, but it gave her a first daughter (Kate) and an abiding love of Mahler.

Then in 1968, on the strength of appearances in iconic 1960s films like *The Knack* and *Blow Up*, she was invited to France to star with chansonnier Gainsbourg in *Slogan*. Their relationship, initially as a couple and the parents of actress Charlotte, later as close friends, would endure until Gainsbourg's death in 1991. Throughout, he regarded her as a muse. Her adopted country shared his enthusiasm – she has lived there ever since – and she has become one of France's most admired performing artists, loved as much for her English eccentricity as for her loyalty to Gainsbourg's work.

Now that commitment is affirmed in the form of an album, *Arabesque*, on which Birkin has collaborated with a host of world musicians, led by Algerian violinist Djamel Benyelles, to reinterpret some of her favourite Gainsbourg songs in Arab- and Orient-influenced settings. It's mesmerising stuff. And a series of sell-out concerts around the UK have provided a potent reminder that in Birkin, we have an unconventional singing star of some stature.

'I didn't know who Serge was when we met, and he was rather vexed that I had no idea,' she recalls. After that affront, he gave me a book of his poems, *Chansons Cruelles*, and wrote in the preface, 'For Jane, who one day I will write "Mélody Nelson" for'. So he must have been keener than I thought; and more vexed, because then he played me the original 'Je t'Aime Moi Non Plus'.

with him and Bardot, which I thought was a bit flash.

'Serge was always in awe of great music, which to him was Brahms, Mozart, Rachmaninov, and what's more, he knew it to his fingertips,' she says. 'He was into everything. I'd met the Rolling Stones in a nightclub, and I knew the Beatles because my brother had been doing a film with them. I found my little Collins diary the other day. I'd written: "Went out with John Lennon, V nice". Is that all I could come up with? It's like meeting Mozart and saying: "V kind". Serge used to blow me up for loving Mahler because he thought it was too sentimental, romantic and obvious. But I still put on Mahler's 10th and cry like a Madeleine because what I like is to be very sad. Serge thought that was a bit of an easy trick. He was very honest and he knew his place at the top of French chanson. But he used to like pretending that writing pop music was *à mineur* – for young people.'

Gainsbourg's legacy to Birkin was an opus of poetic, deceptively simple songs, often based on classical melodies. He wrote many of them for her after she left him in 1982 and they continued to work together on albums. *Arabesque* revisits numbers like 'Baby Alone in Babylon', 'Valse de Mélody', the hypnotic 'La Javanaise' and 'Amours des Feintes' (her personal favourite) as well as the instantly recognisable 'Comment te Dire Adieu', on which she wrings almost unbearable poignancy from a light-weight pop song.

'Serge left me about 25 of the best songs ever written for a girl or boy,' she says. 'The year before he died, he wrote me 12 of the most beautiful songs that you can write about somebody who's left you [the album was called *Amours Défuntes*]. The fact of my leaving him seemed to provoke a female side in him of suffering, great beauty and elegance.'

'When I did a concert at the Casino de Paris two months after he died, I realised with gloom that I hadn't understood the record in time. He'd known he was in a hurry in some way, and I'd blown him up, asking why I had to make the album then when I was busy in a play. He'd wanted to write a song about how one love can hide another and I just yelped with distress. I said: "Please, I understand that you're making me sing all the things that are making you suffer but I don't think I can take one more." But that's what those songs are about and that's why they are so beautiful.'

The concept for *Arabesque* was born in 1999, when Birkin was invited to put together a concert for the television

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channel France Culture at the Avignon Festival. Birkin had heard Djamel Benyelles play a Gainsbourg number, 'Elisa', at a radio station and was entranced by the sheer joy he generated.

'I realised I was listening to something so powerful and extraordinarily indulgent in its pain, yet danceable,' she says. 'Terribly like Serge: very Jewish, very Arab, very Slav and a bit *gitane*. And I thought: "Of course, this is what we'll do!" So we added some more songs and it was a great success at Avignon – and beyond.'

Birkin is delighted that *Arabesque* has taken Gainsbourg's work so far afield, and particularly that it has found such an appreciative Anglophone audience. Ironically, its success has also allowed her to shed a feeling of responsibility for his songs. Her next album will probably be self-penned.

'It's refreshing,' she says. 'Now the English and Americans – in the name of Beck, and even Madonna – have found him, he's been discovered by the one lot of people he was sad not to have been

found by. In a way, he's not my responsibility any more and one day young girls will start singing what was inspired by me, because of our relationship which went on until the day he died. They're just great songs for people who are feeling any pain.'

'Of course I know the references. And when I heard Ute Lemper sing 'Amour Défuntes', it was a shock. I thought, "That's mine!" But Serge belongs to everyone and you can't have it both ways. It's freed me to do my own stuff and be totally happy to sing his stuff in such a different way, like singing jazz.'

The contrast between Birkin's girlish voice and the darkness of some of the material couldn't be greater. These are not the lived-in, brandy-pickled tones of your traditional torch singer. Perhaps that's why it works so well. Birkin has an innate sense of the powerful emotional relationship between the listener and the music, which has served her well throughout her peripatetic career. She often takes music as a gift to people in troubled areas of the world.

'I can't do bandages, but it's a sort of bandage to think about something else for an hour and a half,' she says. 'When I was in a tank going to Sarajevo, I noticed that we all held hands as the bullets bounced off the sides and we sang a very quiet, shaking "Frère Jacques". It was something that all of us from different nationalities knew and it seemed to calm people's nerves.'

'If I hear Roy Orbison I'm immediately taken back to a Brighton festival with my brother Andrew. If it's Elvis, I'm back dancing in boarding school. But I haven't bought anything Anglo-Saxon for a long time. I've always found other people's cultures more interesting than my own. A better statement than anything is to get people out singing and dancing, showing the pride they have in their folklore and their roots, and getting you on your feet, clapping your hands off.'

At 56, Birkin's roots betray themselves with one unrealised and startling ambition: she'd love to play Anna in *The King and I*. 'I've always loved it. I think it's a great shame that nobody's ever come up to me with such a bright idea. And I couldn't think of anything better in my ripe old age,' she says wistfully. 'I rather doubt they'd have that imagination or that I'd pass the voice test. I don't think you're allowed to get away with a voice like mine.'

In fact, Birkin gets away with a voice like hers very well indeed.

Jane Birkin's album *Arabesque* is available on the Liberty label (542 7642)

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