

Review

Serge Gainsbourg. An International Perspective. Edited by Olivier Julien and Olivier Bourderionnet. New York: Bloomsbury, 2024. 259 pp. ISBN 978-1-5103-6566-9

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This much-awaited collection on France's pop *provocateur* Serge Gainsbourg (1928–1991) came out just as his name appeared in the French news for two different and typically contrasting reasons. In September 2023, the Maison Gainsbourg opened its doors in the singer's former Parisian home, showcasing his life and art collection. The museum has been a resounding success so far, with tickets only available 6 months in advance at the time of writing (July 2024).¹ Yet in November of the same year, a petition was launched gathering over 17,000 signatures with the aim of blocking the proposed naming, in Gainsbourg's honour, of a new Paris *métro* station. The petitioners argued that Gainsbourg was a 'violent misogynist and apologist for incest', owing largely to the 1984 duet 'Lemon Incest', which he composed and sang with his daughter Charlotte, aged 13 at the time (both have strenuously denied this accusation; see Chaplin 2023).² Serge Gainsbourg is no stranger to ambivalence and controversy, then, and it is a core strength of this volume – the first English-language book to focus solely on this singer-songwriter – to lucidly confront both the work and the man, shining a sometimes unflattering light on these complexities.

Coming out of a conference on Gainsbourg held in 2018 at the Sorbonne University, this collection brings together musicologists and cultural historians from France, Germany, the UK, the US, Australia, New Zealand and Québec. Across 26 compact chapters, it examines three main topic areas: Gainsbourg's controversial public persona in France and beyond; his cultish pop songs (both music and lyrics); and his lesser-known forays into the domains of literature, cinema and advertising. Few stones are left unturned as Gainsbourg's influences, collaborations, creative process, stardom and legacy all benefit from one or more chapters, some of which are written by seasoned Gainsbourg scholars such as Peter Hawkins, Chris Tinker, France Grenaudier-Klijn, Catherine Rudent, Darran Anderson and the two co-editors Olivier Bourderionnet and Olivier Julien, who here revisit or expand previous arguments.

Readers of French might already be familiar with some of the facts and musical examples mentioned here, which often rely on the fairly exhaustive biography of Gainsbourg written by Gilles Verlant, originally published in 1985 and re-edited posthumously in 1992 (Verlant 1992), and on the subtle deconstruction of the artist's stardom by French music critic Bertrand Dicale (2009). However, if these sources are well known in France, their citation here benefits the wider

¹ See: <https://www.maisongainsbourg.fr/>

² See: <https://www.change.org/p/pour-que-la-ratp-renomme-la-future-station-de-la-ligne-11-serge-gainsbourg>

Anglophone readership and comes into fruitful dialogue with foreign contexts and international concerns – including Gainsbourg's 'authentic' understanding of Cuban *clave* feel, thanks to early collaborations with Cuban exiles in Paris (Sue Miller); his admiration for British studio engineers and sound producers (Kirk Anderson, Thomas MacFarlane); the military march he composed for the Israeli army in the Spring of 1967, just before the Six Days War erupted (Grenaudier-Klijn); and his cultish status in 1990s Australia (Caroline Kennedy).

Paradoxically, this international dimension brings into sharp relief the profound 'Frenchness' of Serge Gainsbourg, whose dualities and contradictions turn out to be less individual than might at first appear, and profoundly embedded, as Peter Hawkins argues in his review of Jane Birkin's success in France (p. 132), in the contradictions inherent within French culture. Gainsbourg's musical versatility and his cynicism, two themes cutting across several chapters, illustrate this point.

When Gainsbourg became a music professional in the 1950s (after a failed attempt at art, which is belied by the beautiful self-portrait reproduced on this book's front cover), French music culture was being transformed by two parallel trends, unproductively pitted against each other by the critics of the time: on the one hand the emergence of solo singer-songwriters, who re-invigorated the poeticity of the French language in *chanson*, and on the other the growing presence of non-domestic genres, from 'Latin' music to Anglo-American rock'n'roll. Unlike his contemporaries Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel, who found popular success and critical recognition in *chanson* alone, Gainsbourg loved to experiment with both trends, and he blended them in ways that often baffled audiences and only occasionally piqued the interest of critics. Mostly misunderstood during his lifetime, Gainsbourg greatly dynamised French popular music of the 1960s and 1970s by weaving together practices and genres that included the poetic craft of *chanson* (see the contributions of Claire Fraysse and Marianne Di Benedetto), well-known classical tunes (Olivier Julien; Nathalie Hérold), modern jazz (Olivier Bourderionnet), Cuban influences (Miller), African drumming (Danick Trotter) and, latterly, reggae music (Marc Kaiser).

This magpie attitude sets Gainsbourg apart and justifies, posthumously at least, his popularity in France as a precursor of quality French pop (Lebrun 2014, p. 168). Nonetheless, as Darran Anderson aptly summarises here (p. 143), it also embroiled him 'in accusations of appropriation and theft from other cultures, especially formerly colonized ones'. Indeed, one of the most notorious examples circulating on the Internet today, and which was unacknowledged during Gainsbourg's lifetime, is his direct lifting of large segments of the music of Miriam Makeba and Babatunde Olatunji for his 1964 album, *Gainsbourg Percussions*. As Olivier Bourderionnet shows (pp. 71–77), Gainsbourg had turned to African music for inspiration following very disappointing sales of his previous and completely drumless album, *Confidentiel* (1963). Thus in 1964, while composing Anglo-inspired pop for female *yéyé* singers (Andreas Bonnermeier), Gainsbourg put African percussions at the centre of his solo work, hoping for a change in his fortunes. If audiences remained lukewarm, influential high-brow critics responded positively by praising Gainsbourg's 'groundbreaking' ability to wed French popular music with 'exogenous traits' (Trotter p. 89). Yet what critics of the time glossed over, and which scholars in this collection are quite right to insist upon, is that Gainsbourg and the wider French cultural establishment blindly ignored the rightful composers and owners of those rhythms, confirming their white privilege and racist indifference towards

African musicians (Trottier p. 92; Aurélien and Elina Djebbari, p. 104). Absorbing the music of foreign, non-white musicians for domestic enjoyment is part and parcel of the dynamic, problematic evolution of French popular music in the 20th century, and if this pattern is not unique to Gainsbourg, it is blatantly exposed in his career.

Another aspect of Gainsbourg's characteristic Frenchness is his cynicism, specifically perceptible in his contempt for the music industry (on which he relied for sales and recognition), and his self-loathing for having, as he saw it, 'sold out'. Gainsbourg is variously described in this volume as 'acerbic' (Darran Anderson, p. 141), 'ironic' (Grenaudier-Klijn, p. 39; Fraysse, p. 114), 'sardonic' (Rudent, p. 168) and 'caustic' (Mickaël Savchenko, p. 193), an attitude which he explored in some of his most well-known and self-referential songs like 'Docteur Jekyll et Monsieur Hyde' (1968) and 'L'Homme à tête de chou' (1976). In the last 10 years of his life, at the height of his mediatisation, he particularly enjoyed performing his cynicism on French television, turning himself into an object of derision (contributions by Jeremy Allen and Christophe Levaux, among others). Yet as Philippe Cathé (pp. 215–223) summarises in his strong concluding chapter, Gainsbourg overall comes across as a cultural conformist, a man and an artist who reproduced, and contributed to solidifying, the dominant French values of the times in all their clashing resonance – consumerism, snobbery, sexual liberation, sexism, cosmopolitanism and racism. In fact, Gainsbourg embodied that most widespread and gendered of French paradoxes – the popularity of anti-Establishment, 'transgressive' figures, especially when they are male (contribution by Isabelle Marc, pp. 17–26).

This collection, then, does a great service to popular music scholarship by multiplying the critical lenses through which to understand the success and meanings of Serge Gainsbourg, in France and further afield, and by bringing up to date Anglophone debates about the place and legacy of controversial artists. If Gainsbourg's main claim to fame remains, for the UK press at least, the 1969 duet with Birkin 'Je t'aime ... moi non plus' (Tinker, pp. 43–51), then this collection makes it clear that his musical skills, popularity and impact are vastly more complex than this.

One reservation about the book is that it spreads itself too thinly at times, producing a sense of duplication across its numerous and rather short chapters. Another is that, especially in the wake of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, more effort could have been made to denounce Gainsbourg's racism and misogyny. Having taught an undergraduate module on French pop music at the University of Manchester for many years, I no longer dwell on Gainsbourg like I used to. In my experience, students are genuinely shocked by his behaviour, yet they find him fascinating nonetheless. The core of this fascination lies arguably in his capacity to reveal pernicious aspects of French (music) culture, from racism and sexism to pedantry and a 'very French' form of anarcho-individualism. Designed for Gainsbourg newbies and old-hands alike, this collection is invaluable for those who want to delve into the musical creativity of the artist, and understand better the French culture, warts and all, in which he emerged.

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