

THE DREAMERS

More than 20 years after Serge Gainsbourg's death, Jane Birkin is still singing his songs. Here, she tells us why.

WORDS ANNE FULLERTON

Jane Birkin is perhaps best known as the naked girl from '60s classic *Blow-Up*, the semi-naked girl from Serge Gainsbourg's cover art and the girl who romped around with Brigitte Bardot in *Don Juan* – naked. In fact, for a woman who defined the style of the '60s and '70s, she's at least as famous for taking her clothes off as putting them on. Her decade-long love affair with French songwriter Serge Gainsbourg, the namesake Hermès bag, the bangs and the heavy-breathing that got Gainsbourg's 'Je t'aime... moi non plus' banned from BBC radio have all gone down in history. What's lesser known is that Birkin has an OBE, has released 14 studio albums and is a passionate human rights activist who is friends with Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. Though she and Gainsbourg separated in 1980 and Birkin went on to marry and have her third child with director Jacques Doillon – she had daughter Kate with British composer John Barry and Charlotte with Gainsbourg – the pair remained close friends and collaborators until Gainsbourg's death in 1991. We spoke to her ahead of her appearance at the Adelaide Festival, where she'll be performing the songs of her late friend and mentor.

What has prompted the performances? Well, we were playing concerts in America for 20 years after Serge Gainsbourg's death and 40 years after *Melody Nelson*, which is a rather famous [Gainsbourg] record that came out with me. I was supposed to do some concerts when the Japanese had their terrible nuclear disaster. I've been visiting Japan for the last 40 years, so I couldn't believe it when I saw the news. I got onto a friend in Tokyo and said, "I'm going to buy a ticket to Tokyo and can you fix up a concert on Sunday night?" I may as well be of some use and if I sing a few songs it might be a way of being *solidaire* for the Japanese people. And *voilà!* I've never been so pleased about doing something spur of the moment. Afterward I went around with a cap in my hands to raise money for orphans in the prefecture where I was visiting. My agent said, "You haven't forgotten that you're supposed to be singing in America at the Hollywood Bowl?" I said, "Put it off, I don't want to sing at the Hollywood Bowl and I wouldn't know what to sing. I don't know how to do Serge in a different way. I've done his songs so many times over the years people will be bored to death". Then I said, "Hang on, supposing I could get hold of Nobu, who I did the concert with, then I could do a few concerts six months after their episode, when people would have forgotten [about the disaster]. This would be a way of reminding them". Nobu orchestrated all of Serge's songs that he thought fitted his own style the most, and this is what I'm singing.

Your relationship with Serge is almost mythological now, what was it like day to day? Well, it was very weird for other people. For us, it was normal. We used to give the children their dinner about sort of 7 o'clock in the evening, kiss them goodnight and tuck them up into bed, and then start dressing up for the evening and going out to restaurants and nightclubs until 6 o'clock in the morning. We'd come back, the children would be waking up, we'd kiss them good morning, see they had their breakfast, trot them off to school and we went straight to bed! It was just romantic and fun. He adopted Kate and brought her up as well. Of the 13 years we were together, 10 of them were blissful.

What's something people might find surprising about Serge? That he was very funny. Because he was such a great poet, everyone knows that his house was black so that it would be like Salvador Dalí's house, but I don't think people know that he was a sort of amuser. He used to jump on people's shoes at hotels at night – people who had put their shoes out be cleaned – and then pull his trousers down at the back. Not that there was anything to be seen, but just to make the children giggle. He used to make rabbits out of their socks. We used to cry with laughter, and I think people can't imagine what a clown he was.

Was that your first impression of him? Certainly not! He had a very arrogant expression and he looked extremely disagreeable and like he didn't give a hoot about me, which he didn't. He said he'd never have the nerve to do a film in a language he didn't know, as I didn't speak French. He was sarcastic and snide and very pleased with himself. So my delight was asking the director if we could have a rendezvous, Serge and I, because he was being so disagreeable. Maybe we could have a dinner together with the director so that he would understand why I was there to do the film. Anyway, the director left discreetly and there was a dance floor, so I said to Serge, "Do you want to dance?" He said no, so I pulled him onto the dance floor. It was a slow dance and he walked on my feet. I thought how absolutely charming that he doesn't know how to dance, this man who was sophistication itself. He was shy, timid, candid, that he was in fact bashful. If he had a drink or two he started to be very funny. If you can imagine, after that first dance he took me back to Rasputin's, where he had five violinists lined up on the pavement to play. He stuffed a one hundred franc note in each of the violinists' pockets and said, "They're prostitutes like me!" Then we bounced back into the taxi and he took me to a transvestite club in Le Pigalle where his father had been a pianist just before the war. They

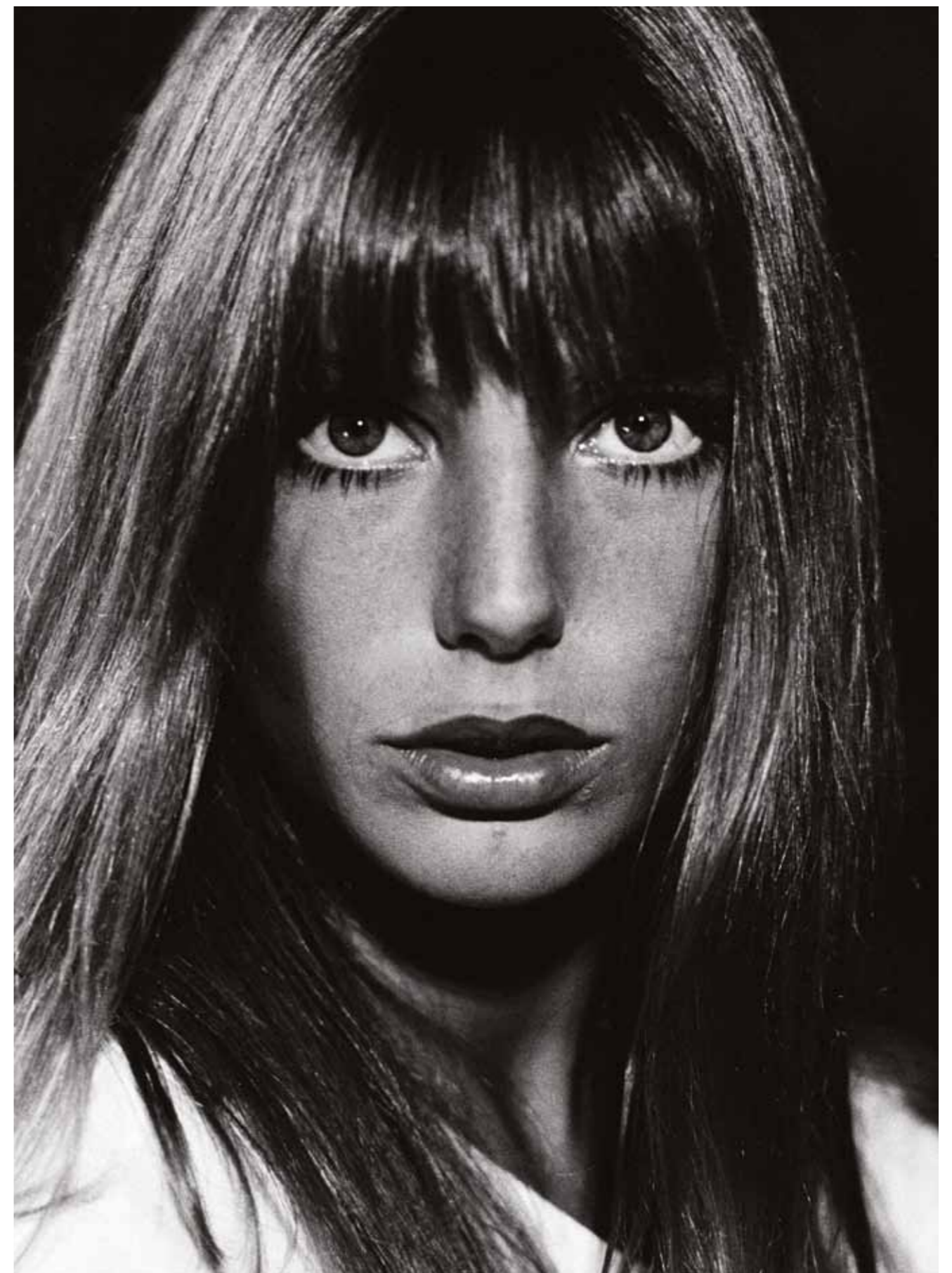


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"WHAT CAN YOU SAY ABOUT A MAN WHO BUYS YOU A DIAMOND FOUR DAYS BEFORE DYING? I DON'T KNOW MANY PEOPLE WHO HAVE HAD A RELATIONSHIP LIKE THAT"

were all kissing him. Everyone knows him – who is this person? We finished up where all the vegetable and the fruit [markets] started at six in the morning and he was pouring out glasses of champagne to all the people who were lugging great hunks of meat about. He said, "Do you want me to take you back to your hotel?" I said, "No" and I thought, gosh, I'm being so brave. He took me straight to a hotel where the man behind the desk said, "The same room as usual, Mr Gainsbourg?" I thought, oh God, this is a set up, so when we got up to his room I asked to go to the loo and when I came out of the bathroom he was asleep, absolutely drunk as a lord on his back. Which meant I could rush off to the drug store and buy a little record we'd been dancing to called 'Yummy Yummy Yummy, I've got Love in My Tummy' and stick it between his toes then rush back to my hotel. So that was what a night with Serge Gainsbourg was like. It was my first night with him. After that I just was crazy about him.

You did lots of things that were quite provocative at the time, what was your motivation? Oh, revenge! To be handcuffed naked to a radiator by Serge and have your picture taken for a magazine was really a way of getting back at all the girls at boarding school who used to look over the shower door and say, "You're a half-caste, half a boy and half a girl!". I was so fed up with everyone saying you're so underdeveloped and being taken to doctors and told that you're not going to be able to have a baby, buying false bras and things like that. All that was suddenly brushed under the carpet because here was this man who thought that you looked divine. So of course, I rushed towards the radiator with the handcuffs. I thought it was a great idea! My mother didn't think it was great, but I didn't realise that it was going to be published in England. I thought that was the fun of being in France, that nothing showed out of the country. My mother [Judy Campbell] was one of the greatest actresses in England and Noel Coward's muse, a fabulously beautiful woman, and my father [David Birkin] was a war hero who'd worked with the French Resistance. So I didn't have banal parents, but my father came

from a very bourgeois and aristocratic mother and none of this I would have been able to do in England without feeling that I was letting down the family. Even my mother refused a play with Peter O'Toole because she had to say "fuck". It brought me out that I was on the other side of the water.

Not many people do a tribute concert to their ex-partner – what was your relationship like after you split up? It was more incredible than when we were together, really. Even after I had a baby with Jacques Doillon, he said he wanted to be the baby's godfather. Then after that he said, "I owe you a record, come down and choose the songs that you think are the prettiest". That made me *Baby Alone in Babylone*, which was a golden record. Not only did he write it for me, but he also drew my portrait on the cover. What can you say about a man who buys you a diamond four days before dying? He said, "Oh you'll think it's vulgar and it's a bit too big, but I bought it for you because you might need it in your old age". I said, "Oh shut up Serge, stop drinking". I was in London with my father and two days later, Serge was dead. I don't know many people who have had a relationship like that.

You've raised some impressive daughters, what were they like growing up? Serge was very strict, he was like a Victorian father. He would never let them have their elbows on the table. They had to sit up straight, say "please" and "thank you" and be very polite. Charlotte [Gainsbourg] was such a great actress from the start, it was obvious that was what she was going to do. When Charlotte was celebrated and got her first César, I thought, now she'll be respected by the people of her own profession, which is something I never was really. So I was proud. She has a happy family and just had a baby at 40 and everything she wanted. And now with Lou [Doillon], who at 29 is bringing out a record. She's written the words, the music and she sings the songs. They're witty and sad and wonderful and she has an extraordinary voice. Kate [Barry] kicked it off earlier, for 10 years of her life she looked after other people, drug addicts and alcoholics, probably because she wanted to get Serge off alcohol and never could. She made a [rehabilitation] centre that no one had to pay to get into. It's still going and it works. It's a great, great success. After that, she's become one of France's great portraitists and photographers. Those three girls, they're my pride, my joy.

Thanks for your time, we're looking forward to having you. I'm looking forward to it. I shall whiz straight up to the Sydney zoo and hug one of those wonderful animals that don't exist anywhere else called a wombat. It's my favourite animal in the world. I would like to find a man who looks just like that, so if you know one, tell me. And if he could be funny, all the better. 🍀

Jane Birkin is performing at the Adelaide Festival in March.