**On Serge Gainsbourg (*New York Press*, 1997)**

The Frog Prince

It's an accident of language that Serge Gainsbourg isn't better known to English-speaking audiences. He was arguably France's most important pop-cultural figure from 1965 until his death in March of 1991 – a musician, provocateur and icon who rivaled Dylan or the Beatles or the Stones in influence there, and an innovator in his own right. But you'll drive yourself batty looking through encyclopedias of rock or Billboard chart histories for him. He's not there.

Gainsbourg’s great sin was that he wrote and sang in French – a language most Americans find impossible to speak except in trendy little snippets like “Garcon! There is a mouche in my bouillon!” That’s how the latest trendies who'd like to make Gainsbourg the flavor of the month hear his music – in cutesy snippets, and in the ripples that his songs have created from long ago.

For these folks, he’s the Esquivel of 1997. But he’s a lot more interesting than that. Born in 1928 as Lucien Ginzburg to Russian-Jewish immigrants in Paris, Gainsbourg didn't take up music seriously until the age of 30, preferring to paint and teach instead. His first LP, 1958’s *Du Chant a la Une!*, was a heady mix of homogenized jazz and native pop straight out of the chanson tradition that most Americans conjure up when they think of French music – accordions, swirling wordplay, pretty little girls and all that.

But Gainsbourg became restless. His next few LPs dumped any Brel hangover for a mix of Brubeck and Afro-Caribbean revisionism, shot through with a ready intellect, wit and decadent posturing. He started writing pop songs for other artists, and struck it rich in 1965 when he penned France Gall’s Eurovision prize winner “Poupee de cire, poupee de son” – a charging, if slightly Byzantine, pop rocker.

That’s where the Gainsbourg story picks up steam – and infamy. He took up with a string of beauties (most notably Brigitte Bardot), wrote songs for them, fucked them and (most cunningly of all) sang with them. Gainsbourg turned the Svengali role into a star turn for himself. Just about any record shop with French music carries a nifty 1989 Polygram collection of Gall’s hit singles (titled, simply, *France Gall*) that includes eight classic Gainsbourg songs. An equally impressive selection of Gainsbourg-penned numbers can be found on a 1996 Brigitte Bardot hits collection entitled *Best of BB* – ranging from early jukebox rockers like “L'appareil a sous” to pure 60s pop like “Contact” and “Harley Davidson.”

Sparked by Gainsbourg’s sudden hipness, Mercury is now releasing three French collections of Gainsbourg’s music from the 1960s, grouped roughly (very roughly, at that) by genre, here in the United States. *Du Jazz dans le Ravin* is a look at Gainsbourg’s sleek commercial jazz of the early 1960s. *Couleur Cafe* is a wide-ranging collection of Latin-influenced (or merely tinged) works from the same period. *Comic Strip* collects Gainsbourg’s late 60s pop and rock-the music that he’s best known for in this country and in England.

*Comic Strip*’s title track is the kind of Gainsbourg song that steers listeners from the main road to the ditch. A throwaway track from the 1968 LP, *Initials BB*, it’s a cute little ditty where Gainsbourg croons about taking his baby for a trip inside the comics while Bardot sings “POW!” “BLOP!” “WIZZ!” and “SHEBAM!” behind him. It’s an aural Lichtenstein, a “Doctor Demento” fave – and a joke.

*Initials BB* had a number of other stone classics, however: the title track, “Ford Mustang,” “Bonnie and Clyde” (all included on *Comic Strip*). These songs are serious, poetic, and they rock. Focusing on “Comic Strip” is like taking “Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite” as your starting point for assessing *Sergeant Pepper*. In fact, a number of the songs on *Comic Strip* extend pop’s territory circa 1967, or even redefine it. The opening track, “Requiem pour un c...,” isn't rap, it’s surely as close as anyone got in 1968.

Gainsbourg touched on a number of genres with currency in the pop world – rock, reggae, dance, Latin, cocktail jazz – but he brought his own unique take on songwriting to each table. Until fairly late in the game, Gainsbourg’s music was fiercely economical, and blessed with a devious sense of melody. Sweet gems like “La fille au rasoir” and “Requiem pour un twisteur” (on *Du Jazz*) or “Sous le soleil exactement” (on *Comic Strip*) are quintessential Gainsbourg – short, sweet, simple and catchy.

Underpinning all this, however, was a bleak sensibility that celebrated suicides (the funky “Chatterton” is on *Comic Strip*, while “Quand mon 6.35 me fait les yeux doux” is on *Du ]azz*), crime (“Bloody Jack” and the oft-sampled “Bonnie and Clyde,” also on *Comic Strip*), and the darker side of sex. Gainsbourg n’est pas Esquivel, though the new collections do lend themselves in some ways to that Esquivel sales pitch. Despite some dazzling highlights like the slinky bass and conga driven “L'eau a la bouche” and the airy, Parisian pop of “Baudelaire, *Couleur Cafe* has the very dated, loungy feel to it that the kids just snap up these days. *Comic Strip* mixes in the kitschy Gainsbourg (that title song, the over-the-top show tune “Un poison violent, c'est ca l’amour,” teeny-boppers like “Shu ba du ba loo ba”) with the classics. *Du Jazz Dans le Ravin* is more rounded and appealing – the songs are just plain better – with a very cool vibe that’s as much Sade the singer as Sade the marquis.

But the most disconcerting thing about the selling of the new-model Gainsbourg is the ducking of the more dubious sides of his character. I don't mean Gainsbourg’s cultivation of his seedy public image (one obituary, from London ‘s *Independent*, mentions Gainsbourg’s competitions with French pop singer Jacques Dutronc to pick up the ugliest girl in a nightclub). Or his inspired and wacky public gestures that included burning a 500-franc note on television to protest his taxes, and telling Whitney Houston on a talk show that he wanted, among other things, to fuck her. Gainsbourg was pretty much the Antichrist of political correctness. He defended his diet of cigarettes and alcohol by coining his most hilarious aphorism: “Alcohol preserves fruit and smoking preserves meat.”

But the persona’s ironic, amusing aspects had a less appealing side as well. Some of his songs of the 1970s –”Nazi Rock” and “Rock Around the Bunker,” for example – were blatant cries for attention. His various portrayals of black culture – from early in his career to late – weren't always lyrically enlightened.

The other aspect of Gainsbourg that offends many is his blatant eroticism. *Comic Strip* contains three of Gainsbourg’s erotic classics: “Les Sucettes,” “69 Aimee Erotique” and the internationally banned “Je t’aime... moi non plus,” early signs of where Gainsbourg would eventually go. “Les Sucettes” was a Gainsbourg song originally recorded by France Gall in 1966 with a perky arrangement and Gall’s little girl voice singing about lollipops and sugar and being in paradise. Gainsbourg’s version (1969) is a swinger’s delight, with a wah-wah and his low, dirty-raincoat growl. Played back to back, it’s hard to tell which is dirtier. It’s not, however, hard to tell which is more subversive. The Gall version is the ultimate Lolita stroke. (He also had her, by 1967, singing groovy songs of hipster rebellion like “Teenie Weenie Boppie,” which blatantly celebrates LSD long before one could do so on a hit record in America.)

This is probably Gainsbourg’s most important (and hidden, until recently) legacy to English speaking pop. Before “Je t’aime...moi non plus” was an international hit (fanned by its banning and denouncement), pop music sublimated its lyrical sexuality, deriving energy from the friction between the sensuality of the music and what was left unsaid, or purely metaphoric. “Je t’aime...moi non plus,” with Jane Birkin’s orgasmic groaning, its lingering, insistent organ riff and languid guitar scrape, laid bare what pop music was really about.

In fact, the subsequent influence that single had (you can hear it badly xeroxed in Rod Stewart’s 'Tonight’s the Night” and Sylvia’s “Pillow Talk,” and reproduced for the dance floor in Donna Summer’s early singles) may well have been perniciously radioactive. It wasn't until Prince moved orgasmic groans from the disco back to rock that the blatantly erotic was successfully essayed again.

By the 1980s, however, Gainsbourg was petering out. His songs (still catchy) were spinning out longer and longer. He made a pitch to English-speaking listeners in 1984 and 1986, when *Love on the Beat* and *You're Under Arrest* were released, with dancefloor synths and rhythms, English choruses and Gainsbourg’s trademark grumbling.

Lyrically, he was getting even stranger and more outrageous. performing a reggae version of "Les Marseillaise,” recording an ode to incest (“Lemon Incest”) with his daughter (and now movie star) Charlotte Gainsbourg, and obsessing on gay sex, drugs and violence. (Check out “Kiss Me Hardy” from *Love on the Beat*, and “Aux Enfants de la Chance” and the title track of *You're Under Arrest*.)

By *You're Under Arrest*, Gainsbourg was clearly running out of musical steam to propel the outrage. (The chorus to one song on that LP is “Suck baby suck/ to the CD of Chuck Berry Chuck.”) The high-pitched choruses in English turn into mere hooks on which Gainsbourg hangs some damn near unintelligible French muttering.(Even the controversial hit from *Love on the Beat* – “Lemon Incest”– takes its music from Chopin.)

Gainsbourg could, however, still pull off stunners like *Love on the Beat’s* “Harley David Son of a Bitch,” or the intricate wordplay of “Aux Enfants de la Chance.” But the long and gradual road downhill, while studded with some appealing roadside attractions, was a road down all the same. (Copies of *Love on the Beat* and *You’re Under Arrest* may still linger in your used-record shop.)

I've been pondering why Gainsbourg’s music has suddenly found an audience now. In particular, why has his '60s music suddenly caught on? The convergence of lounge and kitsch-pop explains it to a point, but I believe there’s more to it. Gainsbourg’s best work is wonderful pop with a true flair for melody. It also reeks of its periods – the smoky jazz-club piano and horn, and the Swinging London organ, sitars and guitars. But best of all, it has not been turned – like the Motown, acid rock and cool jazz already familiar as retro fodder – into commodity and cliché. It’s familiar, yet strange. It’s exotic, yet accessible. And better yet, there’s an amusing narrative of sex, celebrity and decadence behind it. At many crucial points, Gainsbourg is in fact a man of the '90s. That probably explains it best.