

CULTURE

MONDAY, JANUARY 25, 2010

BY JODY ROSEN
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

It doesn't take long for *IRM*, the new album by the French singer and actress Charlotte Gainsbourg, to start sounding Gainsbourgian. The record opens with *Master's Hands*, a ballad full of tense guitar and banjo picking, clattering percussion and strings that dart and swoop.

In a voice pitched between a hiss and a whisper, Gainsbourg sings:

*Hold my head up
Right foot back
Take my hands down
Shake my back
Pull my strings
And cut my rope*

It is Gainsbourg's signature vocal maneuver. It is also her birthright. That dreamy whisper-singing — a style that gives every lyric the feeling of a slightly scandalous confession — was pioneered by her father, the Gallic pop great and provocateur Serge Gainsbourg, and perfected in his famous collaborations with Gainsbourg's mother, Jane Birkin, the English actress and vocalist.

It can be hard to get past the pedigree when considering Gainsbourg. She has had a long and successful career as a film actress, starring in dozens of movies, including Michel Gondry's *Science of Sleep* and Lars von Trier's controversial *Antichrist*, for which she won the best actress award at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival. (Gainsbourg's husband is the actor and director Yvan Attal.)

But as a singer, the legacy of her father looms large. Like Julian Lennon, like Ziggy Marley, like Jakob Dylan, she is blessed and burdened with a name that not only defines an illustrious musical era but seems to sum up a national sensibility. Her father's witty, smutty, sonically inventive recordings are the most celebrated French pop of the second half of the 20th century. Hits like the heavy-breathing Gainsbourg-Birkin duet *Je T'aime ... Moi Non Plus*, from 1969, capture France's sexiness and urbanity as surely as Bob Marley's

songs speak to the Jamaican soul and Bob Dylan's distill American roots music tradition.

From the beginning the musical career of Gainsbourg *filie* has been entwined with that of Gainsbourg père, who died in 1991. Gainsbourg made her recording debut in 1985 at 13, a duet with her father on one of his juiciest succès de scandales, *Lemon Incest*. On Gainsbourg's 2006 CD *5:55*, her first album after a 20-year musical hiatus, she sounded weighed down by her patrimony, singing in a voice delicate to the point of self-effacing amid orchestral pop arrangements that explicitly echoed her father's records.

"Just because my father was such a genius with his songwriting, his lyrics, his music — that doesn't mean I have any gift," Gainsbourg, 38, said in a telephone interview from her home in Paris. "I don't believe in that. I have my own path. But the comparisons are constant. And the comparisons are heavy to wear."

In an e-mail message Birkin asserted that her daughter has already found her own identity. "I think she has established, in two very big-selling records, that 'she is she,' not Serge, not me. But, sweetly she has our voices in her head."

Yet on *IRM*, which was produced and largely written by Beck, Gainsbourg's anxiety of influence seems to have dissipated. She still sings in that patented Gainsbourgian hiss on *Master's Hands* and several other tracks. But she branches out elsewhere, ambling through folk-rock ballads, venturing into dance-punk and blues, and letting Beck swamp her voice in layers of distortion. The result is an engrossingly eclectic pop record and a kind of coming-out party: the first time that Gainsbourg the chanteuse has displayed the charisma of Charlotte Gainsbourg the actress.

"Ideally music is more instinctive than acting," said Gainsbourg, who speaks softly and precisely with a slight British accent. "On this album I tried to let my instincts guide me and tried not to be so guarded — tried to let accidents happen."

It was a less happy kind of accident that spurred *IRM* in the first place. Vacationing in the US in the summer of 2007, Gainsbourg had



Below: French actress and singer Charlotte Gainsbourg in a scene from Danish director Lars von Trier's film *Antichrist*. Gainsbourg won the best actress award for her role in the film at the 62nd Cannes Film Festival on 24 May, 2009.

PHOTOS: EPA

a minor fall while water-skiing. Six months later she went to the doctor in Paris, complaining of chronic headaches. An MRI scan revealed that she had suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and was lucky to be alive.

Gainsbourg underwent successful emergency surgery but remained convinced that she was unwell, continuing to schedule MRI examinations for months after getting a clean bill of health. "I was so preoccupied with my condition, always thinking that I had something," she recalled.

When she turned her attention to a new record in early 2008, she had two goals in mind: to sing about her medical crisis and to work with Beck, whom she had met some years earlier. "I'd admired him so much," she said. That spring, she traveled to Beck's home studio in Los Angeles,

where the pair began working through a few songs. One of the first results was *Master's Hands*. Written entirely by Beck, it included lyrics that eerily evoked Gainsbourg's medical experiences: "Drill my brain/All full of holes/And patch it before it leaks." Yet Beck had said he was unaware of Gainsbourg's brain hemorrhage until after the song had been composed. (His sound engineer pointed out the coincidence.) For Gainsbourg it was a sign that this was a good musical match.

"Beck had a way of guessing what I was thinking and feeling without my telling him," she said. "We never discussed these things explicitly. He asked me what I wanted the album to sound like, but I didn't want to close myself in. So I didn't give him too much direction."

The partnership really clicked with the title track, *IRM*. ("IRM" is the French equivalent of "MRI," an acronym for magnetic resonance imaging.) Over the many months of her health crisis Gainsbourg grew oddly fond of MRI scanners and their grating, grinding sounds. (Think of an idling combine harvester.) She found audio clips online, which she brought to Beck as the building blocks for a song. Like many of the songs on the album, *IRM* juxtaposes severity and dreaminess, with a keyboard chiming above the blare of the MRI samples. Gainsbourg sings lyrics that move between the medical and the metaphysical:

*Ghost imagining my mind
Neural pattern like a spider ...
From the cortex to medulla
Analyze EKG
Can you see a memory?*

You can detect plenty of Beck in that song, from the surreal turns of phrase to the slacker's monotone in which Gainsbourg sings. At times the album sounds uncannily like a sequel to Beck's *Modern Guilt* (2008), with songs like the blues-rock *Trick Pony* staking out a similar sonic and spiritual middle-ground between the digital present and the psychedelic 1960s.

Gainsbourg, of course, is used to working collaboratively, in music as in film. Her formative record-making experience, the 1986 album *Charlotte for Ever*, was written and produced by her father. On *5:55* the main songwriting duties were handled by the English singer and songwriter Jarvis Cocker, the former frontman of Pulp, and a self-styled roue in the Serge Gainsbourg mold. She studied classical piano as a child, but is staunchly self-deprecating about her musical ability.

"I'm attracted to but very intimidated by music," she said. "I've never experienced any real creativity through music myself. I did *Charlotte for Ever* through my father. It was always through him." As for Beck: "He gives the impression that he's constantly thinking about music. He has a guitar that seems to be sewn to his arm. I was trying desperately to write a couple of lines, and in a few minutes he had a whole song. I suggested some of the song titles, wrote a line or two here and there. But really, Beck did everything."

Whatever heavy lifting Beck shouldered on *IRM* can be seen as a repayment of debts to the Gainsbourg family. From the beginning, Beck's own music has been audibly inspired by Serge Gainsbourg. (He made the influence explicit on *Paper Tiger*, from his 2002 album *Sea Change*, which sampled sections of Gainsbourg's 1971 song *Melody*.)

The questions are: What does Gainsbourg bring to her musical endeavors beyond her impeccable pedigree, her success as an actress and her status as a left-of-center fashion symbol? Is *IRM* merely the latest record in which her primary function is to play muse for a male Svengali? What are we to make of an heiress to pop royalty who bluntly declares herself musically uncreative while promoting her latest arty release?

Gainsbourg doesn't quite answer these. But listening to *IRM* it's clear there's some false modesty at work. No one who hears the jaunty Gainsbourg-Beck duet *Heaven Can Wait* can doubt that they are hearing a meeting of two formidable musical personalities — and evenly matched vocalists.



Beyond the Gainsbourg birthright

Charlotte Gainsbourg emerges from the shadows of her musical legacy with *IRM*, an album of whispery vocals produced and largely written by Beck

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

JAN. 15 TO JAN. 21



1 Alan Luo (羅志祥, also known as Show Luo) and *Rashomon* (羅生門) with **38.96** percent of sales

2 Jeremy Liu (劉子千) and *Mr Why* (愛與想) with **5.86%**

3 Rainie Yang (楊丞琳) and *Rainie & Love ...?* (雨愛) with **4.6%**

4 Alien Huang (黃鴻升) and *Love Hero* (愛&英雄) with **3.76%**

5 F.I.R. (飛兒樂團) and *Let's Smile* (讓我們一起微笑吧) with **3.28%**

ALBUM CHART COMPILED FROM G-MUSIC (WWW.G-MUSIC.COM.TW), BASED ON RETAIL SALES

PLANET POP

It was too good too last: reports have hit newsstands that Hollywood's most beautiful couple, Brangelina, is to split. While that's nothing new, the *Sunday Times*, a renowned conduit of celebrity gossip, the *Daily Mail*, and *News of the World*, all ran stories yesterday revealing details of the split.

Though not married, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt have inked legal papers setting the groundwork for formal financial separation and joint custody of their children, the reports said.

Still it could be worse, at least the Scientologists haven't offered to lend them a hand in their hour of need.

The high profile, expansionist figures who represent psychopath, conman, liar, fantasist, fraudster, bully, tax evader, megalomaniac L. Ron Hubbard's organization have turned their thoughts to Haiti.

Were an idiot like you to itemize the myriad things that this most wretched of disaster zones currently lacked, chances are you'd omit "militant Scientologists

who claim post-traumatic stress is a conspiracy created by the evil psychiatric profession, and who believe the correct response to extreme shock is to touch sufferers with one finger, before attempting to convert them to the ways of Hubbard."

Thank God for John Travolta. The *Wild Hogs* legend has unveiled his response to the

unfolding crisis, announcing: "I have arranged for a plane to take down some Volunteer Ministers and some supplies and some medics." For the medics and supplies Travolta must obviously be thanked, but for the Volunteer Ministers — arriving in Haiti via Air Travolta along with scores from other Scientology churches — the

same cannot be said.

According to an official press release, the corps will be on hand to dispense "spiritual first aid" to Haitians. Because really, nothing should feel more appropriate right now than gadding about Port-au-Prince offering survivors the chance to be hooked up to an e-meter. Hopefully if they find any gay people, they can begin curing them.

For the Volunteer Ministers, you see, a tragedy is not so much a tragedy as a tragitunity.

Hubbard personally decreed the strategy he called "Casualty Contact," in which he advised Scientologists to scan newspapers for reports of accidents or bereavements, searching for "people who have been victimized one way or another by life."

Stipulating that one way to do this was to trawl hospitals, Hubbard declared of the ambulance-chasing Scientologist that, "He should represent himself ... as a minister whose

The final curtain?

PHOTO: REUTERS

compassion was compelled by the newspaper story concerning the person ... However, in handling the press he should simply say that it is a mission of the church to assist those who are in need of assistance. He should avoid any lengthy discussions of Scientology and should talk about the work of ministers and how all too few ministers these days get around to places where they are needed. It's straight recruiting!"

The Volunteer Ministers program's yellow tents are increasingly visible at high-profile disaster sites, and often enlivened by special appearances by their celebrity adherents. Within these tents Scientologists administer the aforementioned Touch Assists, whose purpose is to "speed the Thetan's ability to heal or repair a condition with his body."

The Scientologists claim they provide a unique brand of "meaningful help" during catastrophes. They were there after the Indian Ocean tsunami, after Katrina — with added



Air Travolta flies to the rescue.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Travolta — and in Beslan, before being asked to leave after the local Russian health ministry judged their techniques unhelpful to already severely traumatized children.

And of course they were there after the 7 July terrorism attacks

in the UK, when an undercover BBC investigation taped the leader of the London branch of the Church's anti-psychiatry movement laughing that their role in the immediate aftermath of the bombings was "fighting the psychiatrists; keeping the psychs away [from survivors]."

What sort of numbers they'll do in Haiti remains to be seen, but hats off to Travolta and the church leaders for deploying in this way. As for Scientology's most famous face, do recall "the Mr Cruise response to 9/11" — setting up the First New York Hubbard Detox project where firemen who had breathed in the World Trade Center dust were encouraged to submit to the "Purification Rundown," discarding their medication and taking endless saunas along with high doses of niacin, much to the despair of their doctors. Whether even Cruise's nuclear self-confidence extends to mooting the First Port-au-Prince Hubbard Detox Project, only time will tell.

— STAFF WRITER, WITH THE GUARDIAN