



Serge Gainsbourg: A Fistful Of Gitanes

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In this, the first English biography to capture Gainsbourg in all his contradiction and gleeful outrageousness, Simmons tells the fascinating story of the Gallic star. Drawing on hours of new interviews with his intimates—among them Jane Birkin, Sly & Robbie, Marianne Faithfull, and celebrated producer Philippe Lerichomme—Simmons describes in crackling prose the scope of Gainsbourg's achievement while doing full justice to his complicated emotional life. Simmons's work will stand as the definitive take on a dizzying genius.

Serge Gainsbourg: A Fistful Of Gitanes Details

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Maharsh says

Only giving it 4 stars because the enigma that Gainsbourg was made it an exciting read. For such a celebrated personality, it is quite amusing that such a brief biography in the English language exists. I think one needs a lot many more pages to encapsulate his life in detail. I wish the book was more visceral and went further in detail with the man's soul. Falling in love with his music is an added bonus. Otherwise purely on the merit of the writing I'd give it a 2 star rating.

Alice Catriona says

A worthwhile read for any Gainsbourg fan

A fascinating insight into the life of French pop's ultimate icon. Despite growing up on ye-ye pop followed by a teenage obsession with the music of Serge Gainsbourg, then a hell of a lot of time and money spent collecting Gainsbourg related records... I knew relatively little about the man himself. As a confessed Francophile I was only really aware of the fairly negative image of Gainsbourg portrayed by the UK press. It has been fascinating to get a wider picture complete with interviews with Jane Birkin, Sly and Robbie and the always fabulously no holds barred words of Marianne Faithfull. Not the most in depth biography, but a comfortably quick read; I couldn't put it down and finished it in an afternoon. Pour yourself a black coffee, grab a pack of Gitanes, and get ready for a rather interesting read.

Tosh says

At the moment the best biography in English on the great songwriter and pop artist Serge Gainsbourg. Sylvie Simmons did a really nice job in telling his essence and story.

In 2009 my press TamTam Books is going to be putting out a 600 page bio on this fascinating figure. Written by Gilles Verlant, "Gainsbourg" is really going to be something.

Jeremy says

It was nice to read the backstory of ol' Serge. I've ben listening to his records for years but he'd sort of become this mythical poet/barfly/gentleman and so I needed to really find out the basic story. It's not a bad read if you love the records.

Deborah says

Quintessentially and adorably Serge. Rereleased on kindle.

The man, his demons and his darlings and many stops between.

So you say that you like Lenny Cohen but have never heard of Serge...you ARE lacking.

If you have no intention of checking him out...tant pis...my disregard for you grows.

As a plug....friend and sometime Bad Seed Mick Harvey is about to release the third in a series of serge songs in English. The first two being Intoxicated Man and Pink Elephants and there is the film Gainsbourg....really you have no excuse unless knuckles dragging along the ground makes life difficult

Rob says

The best music biography I've read in a decade and best book I've read in many months. It helps that the subject matter is intensely interesting.

I picked up this book when I was doing a project of putting together all the original tracks of the songs covered in 4AD's "This Mortal Coil" releases. How I missed Gainsbourg given his lifetime output, esp. the 1970s and 80s up until his death in 1991 I have no idea. He's a fascinating character: think Leonard Cohen doing gypsy music meets jazz, funk, reggae and rap meets The Sex Pistols... and that just touches on it. I won't go into more detail; just read the book.

Skip the intro/forward - the author tries too hard to be that combo of hip/smart/connected/educated and falls flat. It turned me off from getting into the book for a year. There's a few hiccups where the French translation is wrong or repeated or minor things like that, but it's written by an obvious fan and moves along at a good clip, well-researched and never getting bogged down in too much detail. This might be the only other fault in that it's a bit brief in places, but it's highly entertaining from start to finish. Whether or not you know Gainsbourg, I recommend it.

Kim Bonfils says

Some great artists are not merely superior craftsmen, but so unique, they stand aside from all their contemporaries. Serge Gainsbourg was one such artist.

I noticed this book got some bad reviews - mainly from French and international Gainsbourg aficionados - to whom most of the content will be common knowledge.

But as a relative newcomer, I was pleasantly surprised by this short and easily-read biography. It was unfortunately written after Gainsbourg's death - the author never met him - and it is clearly intended as a short and entertaining summary of his life and work. It is certainly not the definitive biography - Simmons herself recommends Gilles Verlant's "Gainsbourg" for that. Biographies in Paperback: Gainsbourg

The author quotes generously from her interviews with people who knew Serge - Jane Birkin, not least - and paints a clear picture of the kind of man Gainsbourg was: Restlessly creative, painfully shy, yet devil-may-care - and maybe most surprisingly, a devout family man. In fact, I can't remember reading any other

musician's biography (and a heavy-drinking French musician at that) that doesn't imply any sort of infidelity.

The only disappointment in the book is the treatment of Serge's work itself. Being no Paul Morley, Simmons doesn't indulge in wordy descriptions of Serge's music - and maybe just as well. Of course music needs to be listened to, rather than read about - but if you don't know the music in advance, this book hardly does much to encourage you.

And of course, there are the lyrics. Serge's punny French wordplays (think triple entendre rather than double) are notoriously un-translatable. Though Simmons should get credit for giving it her best shot when needed.

Still, this book offers the perfect companion to a set of Gainsbourg cds - either a good compilation or the massive complete works box set. The music is like nothing you ever heard - and the book offers some fine insights into the enigmatic man behind the work.

Joe Loftus says

When I was thirteen years old, or at least I think I was (fourteen seems too old but twelve far too young) I went to my aunties house after school. Always did. She's riddled with dementia now. We used to sit there and talk about everything. Whatever everything was when I was closer to twelve than I was fourteen. I used to work my way through a full packet of digestives and maybe half a dozen cans of diet coke. Amazingly I looked great back then and now, though I no longer demolish digestives and coca cola, I look like a sack of shit. Well maybe not that bad but hey.

Anyway. Point of the story is that at some point during our usual 3:30pm on a Tuesday going to Jose's after school, I walked through to the kitchen to get another can of coke when I spotted a pack of Cuban cigars on top of the keyboard. I can't remember exactly what I did but I imagine I deliberated over all the possible conclusions that could take place if I were to steal one of the cigars. I was almost certainly nervous but when I left Jose's that night I had a cigar in my pocket and when I got home I lit it in my room while playing L'anamour by Serge Gainsbourg.

That was my first ever experience of smoking. Another time, perhaps it was before or after that, I bought a cigarette off Budgie Brown before ripping it up when I got home as I was too scared to smoke it. If only I stayed that way.

I knew I had to listen to Serge while losing my tobacco virginity. Even then I had known his name forever. My father used to play Serge to me in the womb. I adored him. But only now have I got to understand him thoroughly.

A must read for any Gainsbourg fan.

Eric says

Kinda shoddy, really. Made me want to smoke, though.

Tyler says

This is a great portrait of the brilliant Serge Gainsbourg, who elevated filth to the level of cosmopolitan art with his music. The book could have been twice as long and I wouldn't have been bored; I guess I'm just fascinated by lecherous Europeans. My favorite passage describes how a young Serge, who was dating Salvador Dali's assistant at the time, broke into Dali's place and fucked her in his all-black living room: he "left the apartment with...a future wife on his arm...a small black-and-white picture stolen from Dali's porn collection of two young girls eating each other out, and a reinforced belief that Surrealism was the finest artistic movement there ever was." Unbelievable.

Gruia says

Reading about his personal history helps understanding the man's work. But shining a light on his human imperfections makes Serge less of a god. The biography demystifies him a bit and I now feel guilty for looking behind the curtain. Fortunately it is a quick read.

Annoyed note to Simmons: "reins" in *Je t'aime... moi non plus* does not mean kidneys, but - in this context - hips

Andrew Bishop says

The greatest French composer of the twentieth-century not named Olivier Messiaen! Warning: anyone immune to the charms of French culture should probably leave right now. This is a short biography, but one fully packed with information about Serge and his music. Letting you know everything of worth about the man, Simmons does a great job with extraordinary material and leaves no stone unturned. I daresay that anyone who hasn't heard a note of the man's music could still walk away having been entertained by its many stories. Simmons craft as a storyteller and talent as an interviewer make this book very compelling reading. The many strange entries in his musical oeuvre can be a challenge, but Simmons details the reasons and circumstances for them so rest assured that you won't be baffled for long. A new respect for Jane Birkin is imparted by the book's end so consider that another reward for reading the book. All in all, a good resource for anyone intrigued by one of the more eccentric geniuses of modern musical culture. Imperfect man, impeccable composer.

Andrew Tattersall says

A very readable and well-written book on such an important person in the life of a country I lived in for eight years yet never really knew. I felt this book brought him to life for me, explained why he was important, why I should get to know his music, and more importantly his words, better and I will try to do so over the coming year. I have already started to listen to him. This book has made my life better, at the end of the day the only judgement of whether a book is worthwhile or not. So far it is Sylvie 2 on that score.

David says

Is this the best I'm going to get for an English-language bio of S.G.? I really hope not...This one is fine -- hits all the major moments of his life and career, and seems to have at least the tacit approval of Jane Birkin -- but its like a 30-minute History Channel doc...no context, no depth, and no lyrics translated. Solid but I want more.

Jonfaith says

Stumbled upon this in a filing cabinet just now. I inhaled this bookt back in 2008, took its wayward magic into my lungs and held it. Historically I haven't read much about performers. Perhaps I stoned form the novelty of it all. Serge's televised encounter w/ the late Whitney Houston was astonishing as was his less than cereberal time in Yugoslavia. Beyond such, Gainsbourg was an unflinching artist, one compensating for his own insecurites and baggage. He stormed across borders and perforated genres. His mark on music is unmistakable. This biography illuminates such and is a remarkable survey of his life as well.
