



Serge Gainsbourg's Histoire de Melody Nelson (33 1/3)

Darran Anderson

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Outside his native France, the view of Serge Gainsbourg was once of a one-hit wonder lothario. This has been slowly replaced by an awareness of how talented and innovative a songwriter he was. Gainsbourg was an eclectic, protean figure; a Dadaist, poète maudit, Pop-Artist, libertine and anti-hero. An icon and iconoclast.

His masterpiece is arguably *Histoire de Melody Nelson*, an album suite combining many of his signature themes; sex, taboo, provocation, humour, exoticism and ultimately tragedy. Composed and arranged with the great Jean-Claude Vannier, its score of lush cinematic strings and proto-hip hop beats, combined with Serge's spoken-word poetry, has become remarkably influential across a vast musical spectrum; inspiring soundtracks, indie groups and electronic artists. In recent years, the album's reputation has grown from cult status to that of a modern classic with the likes of Beck, Portishead, Mike Patton, Air and Pulp paying tribute.

How did the son of Jewish Russian immigrants, hounded during the Nazi Occupation, rise to such notoriety and acclaim, being celebrated by President François Mitterand as "our Baudelaire, our Apollinaire"? How did the early chanson singer evolve into a musical visionary incorporating samples, breakbeats and dub into his music, decades ahead of the curve? And what are the roots and legacy of a concept album about a Rolls Royce, a red-haired Lolita muse, otherworldly mansions, plane crashes and Cargo Cults?

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