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The Musician and the Producer

James Truman has tended a farm, built a circus and overseen a publishing empire. Sebastien Leon has held just about every job in the art world. Now the restless creatives have come together on an album.

By JODY ROSEN



WONDER TWINS, ACTIVATE | Sebastien Leon (left) and James Truman taken an Abbey Road stroll in New York City.

NEVER MIND THAT JAMES TRUMAN and Sebastien Leon are Europeans. They're also archetypal New Yorkers. Both have lived out versions of the city's bootstrapping myth: arriving as ambitious young men, plunging into the demimonde and ascending to become tastemakers and toasts of the town.

Truman, 54, came to New York from London in 1981, earning a couple hundred dollars a month as a music critic for the groundbreaking British magazine *The Face*. Thirteen years later, at just 36, he graduated to one of the city's top jobs: editorial director of Condé Nast publications. He stepped down in 2005, complaining that the magazine business had become "conventional" and "business-driven" and now spends his days on various entrepreneurial and artistic ventures, including helping run an organic farm in upstate New York with his friend André Balazs.

Leon, a globe-trotting Frenchman from the Loire Valley, arrived in the city 13 years ago. The 39-year-old worked in marketing but quickly shifted to the art world, cofounding an influential downtown gallery while developing his own thriving career as a sound installation artist. Now the pair has collaborated on a pop record: Leon's second album, *Jeux d'Artifices*, produced by Truman. It is part Gallic, part British—and as quintessentially New York as any record you will hear this year.

It's a lush, cinematic rock suite, with 11 songs burnished to a lustrous shade of noir. The album tells the tale of doomed romance during the city's latest gilded age: Beneath the billowing guitar atmospherics, you can detect the rustle of hedge-fund dollars, the triumphal blare of the city's new business and art-world elite. The influence of Serge Gainsbourg is audible in the opulent sonic textures, in the cheeky wordplay of Leon's French lyrics and, especially, in his whispery talk-singing—a vocal style pioneered by Gainsbourg that gives every song the feel of a slightly scandalous confession.

The album pretends to be a curio, a whimsical "game of artifices," as the title puts it. But Truman and Leon can't hide their ambitions. Neither man is prone to operating on a modest scale. One of Truman's latest projects was a postmodern reimagining of a 19th-century traveling circus. Leon, who recently designed a massive sound sculpture at the Park Avenue Armory for Audemar Piguet, is currently putting the finishing touches on Golden Horns, a 35-story sound sculpture in a residential tower in Istanbul. It's no surprise that Truman and Leon have made something audacious: a sprawling old-fashioned art-rock concept album. The word that springs to mind is neither French nor English, but one in New York's unofficial second language, Yiddish: chutzpah.

Truman On Leon



VEGGING OUT | Truman overseeing the organic farm at Locusts on Hudson, which he owns with his friend André Balazs

I MET SEBASTIEN IN DECEMBER OF 2009. We were both in Mustique, during New Year's. He was staying with Jay Jopling, the London art dealer. I was staying with Bryan Ferry, the musician. It was these two pockets of London that were sort of suspicious of each other, in the way that English people can be. We talked about music and bonded over Serge Gainsbourg.

I think you can bond quicker over music than anything. It's a throwback to teenage years: You know, if you like the same bands, you're probably going to be friends. He started telling me about some songs he had been writing and played me some snippets. Sebastien had had a particular experience of New York.

The record is quite autobiographical. It begins with him walking through Chinatown. Then he's at the Boom Boom Room. Then two songs later he's at a penthouse meeting this fantastically chic Japanese girl who becomes his love—and his downfall. Anyone who's

moved here from anywhere has to have the quintessential crazy New York experience, which is usually related to something decadent: drugs, love affairs, nightlife, crazy self-destructive behavior, crazy ambitions. You come here broke and three weeks later you're at some hedge-fund majordomo's party, drinking champagne. The record is very much in that vein and tells that story—in a very romantic way. While listening to these songs, I became my usual opinionated self. So Sebastien ended up saying: "Why don't you produce it?"

I began my career as a music critic. I would say everything that was wrong with a record, but it was too late to do anything about it. With this, I was able to be an actual protagonist rather than an after-the-fact assassin. I don't know how to work a mixing board at all, but I'd been in the studio with Roxy Music quite a bit, because of my friendship with Bryan (Ferry). When he was making a record I'd go in and give my thoughts. I was also close with Malcolm McLaren. His style of working was extraordinary. He wasn't a musician, but he'd hire someone who was. He'd sit in the corner and the musician would just try things. Malcolm would say, "No, no, no, no." It was such a conceptual approach to making music.

Though this album is in French, it's a New York record. It sounds good here. Most songs today are mixed for the dance floor, but it seems to me the experience that people are having of music is listening to it while walking through the streets. Essentially everyone is in their own movie. I like the idea of this record as a walking record. It is cinematic. This is music for existential strolling, if you will.

Leon On Truman

JAMES LOVES BEING IN THE STUDIO. He's a natural. I love how he speaks about music. He'd say, "You know, I feel like this song is like a stroll through the jungle in Tanzania. You have the birds, but I can't hear the elephants stomping the ground." I'd say, "You mean you need more bass?" "Yes." It's fantastic. James is like a poet in the studio.

He's also a perfectionist. He'll listen to something a hundred times before he gives his opinion. And then his opinion is so precise. He's the perfect producer in that respect. The typical James move is "that song is too long." My songs tend to be long: six, seven minutes. With James it's "two minutes, 50 seconds—no more!"

NOISE MACHINE | Leon, in front of a sound installation he created for Audemars Piguet at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.



I started writing songs about what was happening in my life, my relationship at the time. But because I'm kind of a reserved person, I didn't want to write it in English. I wrote it in French so more people could not understand what I was saying. But James didn't compromise on the content. He said, "If you want to be an artist, you have to expose yourself."

"James is a perfectionist. My songs tend to be long: six, seven minutes. With James it's 'two minutes, 50 seconds—no more!' "

I think French language lends itself very well to rhythm and melody without being sung. And I think that spoken word is easier to do that with. Usually when I write, I like finding a riff and making it the basis of the song. I like the modal approach to music, because it's more hypnotic. I try to create sound that doesn't have a beginning or an end—you're just in the middle of it.

This album is a very New York record. I came to the city in '99. It was the Internet boom. I just couldn't believe the energy—and the nonsense. It was absurd; I couldn't see the economic viability of so many of these Internet projects. I was like, "This is my kind of place—a nonsense place!" I really dove into the art world. That's what makes New York special: The fact that it's so open. Being an artist is a natural thing here. When I go to Paris and say I am an artist, they say to me: "Okay, but how do you really make a living?"

James and I are doing another album together. It's in English. I feel self-conscious giving my lyrics to him, because I'm not a very good writer in English. James is a great writer. I think I'll give him some texts, he'll make it into poetry, and I'll turn those poems into songs. But James will be James: He is still going to shorten the songs.

—Edited from Jody Rosen's interviews with Sebastien Leon and James Truman.