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THE INTERVIEW: SEBASTIEN LEON AND JAMES TRUMAN

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Designer turned musician Sebastien Leon met journalist turned entrepreneur turned producer James Truman in Mustique one New Year's Eve when Sebastien was staying at Jay Jopling's house and James at Bryan Ferry's. The pair bonded over a mutual love of Serge Gainsbourg records and merrily promised to work together – culminating in 'Jeux d'Artices', an album about Sebastien's inner turmoil and heartache that was the first record ever produced by James. We sit down with the pair to discuss their past, present and future.

SEBASTIEN, CAN YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOUR PASSION FOR MUSIC STARTED?

SL: I grew up in a tiny village in the middle of corn fields in the Loire Valley, with very few other kids around. Very little was happening. In my solitude, I dreamt of imaginary landscapes, and realised that music had the ability to nurture my wandering mind. I remember the time when CDs were first released. People were suddenly throwing away their whole collections, starting with a cousin of mine giving me dozens of records; the Stones, the Beatles, Jimmy Hendrix, the Doors, the Velvet, Bowie, Pink Floyd, some Elvis too. I loved them all. I decided to be more proactive with my mental escapades and convinced my parents to buy me an electric guitar. I was 12 and I have been playing ever since. Playing music for me is a spatial experience, it is mind travel. Traveling with my guitar is my sanity.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU GROWING UP?

SL: My parents had taken me on a trip to both Hollywood and New York when I was around 14, and when it left a very strong impression on me. All of a sudden everything I had seen in movies was real. The cars were big, the landscapes interminable, the skies blue, the towers like pillars of a civilisation. I too could lead my life like in the movies. I became obsessed with America, I knew I had to live there someday. I didn't quite know where in America, but somewhere with a history of music and cinema. And I started with New Orleans in the late 90s, not that I liked jazz in particular, but was attracted by the mystique of a lost French influence.

WHY DID YOU MOVE FROM INTERIOR DESIGN INTO MUSIC – WAS IT SOMETHING THAT YOU ALWAYS ASPIRED TO?

SL: I don't consider myself an interior designer, rather I create installations, I design exhibitions and sets for shows, and make sound sculptures. I started incorporating multi-channel sound installations in my work about five years ago, because sound transports people, it captures their mind and makes them forget the world outside. As soon as I started making music for my installations, I connected with a whole community of musicians, producers, engineers, and realised that these were my people, that I belonged with them. Since then music has been part of my daily life as much as design. I don't plan to leave one for the other, I find myself in both.

TELL US WHAT THE INSPIRATION BEHIND 'JEUX D'ARTIFICES' WAS – BOTH MUSICALLY AND LYRICALLY?

SL: I was going through a rough time personally, alienated in my marriage and in love with a Japanese femme fatale who offered me an erotic escape. It became a drug, and I knew it was not going to end well, but I still went for it. This is the story I allude to in 'Jeux d'Artifices'. I wrote some prose at that time not making much of it, but when I met James Truman, he told me "that's the record we're going to make". It might remind people of Serge Gainsbourg's spoken records 'Melody Nelson' and 'l'Homme a la Tête de Chou' which I absolutely love, but in France the tradition of spoken words in music goes way beyond Gainsbourg. It spans from Léo Ferré and Yves Montand to the Marseilles hip hop.

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE CONTEMPORARY MUSIC SCENE?

SL: I'm not sure how it is in the UK, but I personally love living in Brooklyn, the scene here is so vibrant and diverse. Last night I improvised an evening at Joe's Pub and the burlesque singer Lady Rizzo performed an outstanding cabaret act, and tonight I'm seeing the Afrobeat band Antibalas at the Brooklyn Masonic Temple. This multi-ethnic/multi-genre dynamic is all I like about this city, it is inclusive, there is room for everyone. This diversity naturally seeps into my music, as it does for many other bands here. I use "exotic" instruments like the cora, the harmonium, the lap-steel guitar and the vibraphone on my record, but so does TV On the Radio for instance who recently recorded a few songs with Libyan band Tinariwen. I can sense an increasing lushness in the texture of sound today.

DO YOU SEE A HUGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MUSIC IN THE UK AND ON THE CONTINENT, IN PARTICULAR FRANCE, AND TO THE US WHERE YOU'RE BASED NOW?

SL: I have been away from France for almost twenty years, so the French music I hear is mainly the one that crosses the Atlantic. I do like Justice, Daft Punk, Air, M83, Phoenix and Sebastien Tellier. I love the quality of their music production, the concepts behind their shows, and ultimately the personages they embody. I'm not sure that we should consider them as French music as they all sing in English, but since frontiers are so porous these days, does that really matter? I actually just worked on a show in Paris for a fantastic Angolan dance and music movement called Kuduro, somewhere between rap, capoeira and 70s Nigerian funk. I think that Paris is very receptive to world music, probably due to its colonial history and diaspora.

HOW HAS LIVING IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES AND CULTURES CHANGED YOUR OUTLOOK ON MUSIC?

SL: I have lived in various countries it's true, and each one has its own musical culture, context and sometimes even scales. But I must say I have learnt the most from being in New York, and from working here with people from all backgrounds. A few years ago, I recorded some music using a lot of Alan Lomax samples; he was the founding father of musicology and field recordings, and I have had to listen to hours and hours of his tapes dating back from the 30s to the 70s, documenting carnivals in the West Indies, descendants of slaves in the Mississippi prisons, polyphonic ensembles in Corsica etc. None of the people he recorded were professional musicians, rather making music was both the soundtrack to their lives and a social experience, both elements that left a lasting impression on me. I think this is why I play music.

JAMES, HOW DID YOU MEET SEBASTIEN? WHAT WERE YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF HIM?

JT: I met Sebastien in the Caribbean a couple of Christmases past. We were each staying as guests with friends and it turned out we both lived in New York and had friends and tastes in common. My immediate impression of him was that he was extremely French! He played some songs on guitar and sang one night, and I was charmed by his Gallic balladeer manner.

DID YOU HAVE VERY SIMILAR MUSICAL TASTES, IS THAT WHY THE UNION WORKED SO WELL?

JT: We bonded over Serge Gainsbourg, in fact, and particularly our admiration for his two concept albums, 'Histoire de Melody Nelson' and 'L'Homme à Tête de Chou'. I had visited Gainsbourg in Paris a while before he died, when he was, characteristically, extremely drunk and very funny, and I never tire of telling the story. Sebastien, for his part, had a scholarly knowledge of how Gainsbourg fit into the pantheon of great French pop stars.

YOU MIXED THE RECORD IN LA WITH JAMIE CANDILORO AT THE SUGGESTION OF MICHAEL STIPE, WHAT HAPPENED THERE, HOW DID YOU MEET HIM?

JT: Sebastien and I had a rough mix of the record, which to my ears sounded very unfinished and we weren't sure what to do next. I ran into Michael, who I've known through the years, at a party and he immediately told me we needed to work with Jamie, who had mixed a lot of classic REM. And he was absolutely right.

YOU RECORDED IN BOTH NY AND JAMAICA – DID THE DIFFERENT LOCATIONS AFFECT THE OVERALL SOUND OF THE TRACKS?

JT: Jamaica came about through another friendship. I'd known Jon Baker many decades past, when we were both newly arrived from London and navigating New York. Jon had been a club promoter, then a record executive. More recently he'd opened Gee Jam Hotel and recording studio in Jamaica. Sebastien and I were looking to add some female vocals to the record, and weren't quite sure where to go. We didn't want an urban R&B sound. So I asked Jon, and he invited us down to Jamaica and found us three fantastic singers from Kingston.

DID YOU ARGUE ABOUT THE ALBUM AND HOW IT SHOULD SOUND? IF SO, HOW DID YOU COMPROMISE?

JT: There was not any real argument. Being an editor, I generally wanted the songs to be shorter, and succeeded except for the first song, which clocks in at over seven minutes. But I was able to shorten another four minute song to 45 seconds!

THIS IS THE FIRST RECORD YOU'VE EVER PRODUCED – WHY HAVE YOU WAITED UNTIL NOW?

JT: I'd never really thought about producing a record, honestly. I'd spent time in the studio with musicians and never lost my love of music, but in my years in fashion magazines it had become more of a hobby. It's funny to me how much fuss is made about the fashion-music connection. In my experience, most fashion people don't really get music, and vice versa.

ARE YOU PLANNING ON TURNING YOUR BACK ON JOURNALISM FOR GOOD TO CONCENTRATE ON MUSIC?

JT: I actually turned my back on journalism seven years ago, when I left Conde Nast. Since then, I've started a circus, gotten involved in the food and wine businesses, and am co-owner of an organic farm. Together with music, I find these things more fulfilling than magazines.

WHAT'S NEXT?

JT: Sebastien and I have just started work on a new record. We think this one may be in English.