



Famous French People

Serge Gainsbourg©

by Robert Shepherd

Hello, this is Robert Shepherd and welcome to Famous French. Today, EnglishWaves will explore the colourful life of singer/songwriter, Serge Gainsbourg.

He was born Lucien Ginsburg on 2nd April 1928 in Paris, along with his twin sister Liliane. They were the children of Jewish Ukrainian immigrants, Joseph and Olga, who escaped to Paris after the Russian Revolution in 1917.

When World War II started in 1939, Lucien was just 11-years-old, so he remained in Paris during the German occupation. Being Jewish only made things more difficult and in 1942, a law was introduced, which required Jews to wear yellow stars with the word "Juif" written on them. He later admitted the experience scarred him for life. "It was like you were a bull, branded with a red-hot iron," he said.

First Joseph, then the family, escaped to Limoges using false identification. Southern France was controlled by the French government, so it was slightly less dangerous for Jews. After the war ended, Lucien enrolled at a music school and began dating Elisabeth Levitsky. They married in 1951.

Joseph soon passed some of his piano gigs to Lucien. In 1954, Lucien joined France's songwriters' society, where he registered his first six songs – but he hated his name, so he changed it. He thought Serge sounded more Russian and he chose Gainsbourg because he loved the English painter, Thomas Gainsborough.

Gainsbourg and Elisabeth divorced in 1957, but word spread about his talent and a record deal with Philips followed.

French *chanson* fell out of vogue in the early 60s, because French youth preferred American and British rock 'n' roll and French imitations known as "yé-yé". Later, Gainsbourg began writing material for teen yé-yé star France Gall, including the hit "Les Sucettes" and "Poupée de Cire, Poupée de Son", which won the Eurovision Song Contest in 1965.

Gainsbourg married his second wife, Béatrice, in 1964 and they had a daughter called Natacha. However, they divorced two years later, before reuniting briefly in 1967. Their son Paul was born in 1968, but by that time Gainsbourg had fallen in love with the famous actress, Brigitte Bardot.

Often described as ugly, Gainsbourg attributed his appeal to women to his sense of vulnerability, as well as his bug eyes, stubble and perpetual halo of smoke from packs of Gitanes. Gainsbourg also said "ugliness is superior to beauty because it lasts longer".

Bardot and Gainsbourg sang his new songs such as "Bonnie and Clyde" and "Je t'aime ... moi non plus", an erotic duet peppered with groans and sighs. It was rumoured that Gainsbourg and Bardot became very amorous while recording it. To protect Bardot's image, the song wasn't released until 1986.

Bardot returned to her husband, while Gainsbourg fell for Jane Birkin, a British actress whose looks were the zeitgeist of the swinging London fashion scene. Gainsbourg rerecorded "Je t'aime ... moi non plus" with Birkin and released it as a single. The Vatican called the song obscene and the BBC banned it, but it still became Gainsbourg's only hit outside France.

In 1971, Birkin gave birth to their daughter, Charlotte. The same year, Gainsbourg and Birkin released *Histoire de Melody Nelson*, an album about a middle-aged man in a relationship with a 15-year-old girl.

Two years later, Gainsbourg suffered a heart attack, so he adopted a more relaxed persona, with a stubbly look that became his visual trademark.

In 1979, Gainsbourg worked with reggae stars Sly and Robbie to create the album "Aux Armes Etcetera". The title track was Gainsbourg's reggae version of the French national anthem, "La Marseillaise". The track's wording sparked controversy in France and French national newspaper *Le Figaro* said Gainsbourg's French citizenship should be revoked.

Birkin left him in 1980, because of his drinking and outlandish behaviour. A year later, Gainsbourg began seeing the younger singer Caroline Von Paulus, better known by her stage name, Bambou. In 1986, she gave birth to their son, Lucien.

Meanwhile, Gainsbourg became much more outrageous. On two separate occasions on live TV, he burned a 500-franc note in protest at high taxes and lewdly propositioned American singer Whitney Houston.

It was also during the 80s that Gainsbourg recorded "Lemon Incest" as a duet with his teenage daughter Charlotte. He also wrote songs for the young French singer Vanessa Paradis.

Gainsbourg's unhealthy lifestyle led to a fatal heart attack on 2nd March, 1991. He was buried in Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris, the final resting place of many great French writers and artists.

Stay tuned to EnglishWaves for more Famous French.