

Shocking yet shy, provocative yet fragile, brutally honest yet fiercely protective, Charlotte Gainsbourg is crushingly aware of all her contradictions. But after years of personal struggle, has she finally found some...



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light in dark

issues?

'I'm only myself, and for me, that is just not enough'

It's 34 degrees in Paris, and Boulevard Saint-Germain is heavy with the heat. Office workers huddle in patches of shade, smoking, and outside Café de Floré, a chichi lady frantically wafts a fan rather than remove her Chanel tweed jacket. I've never seen this city so slow and sweaty. But inside Hotel Montalembert, the air-con is on ice mode and Charlotte Gainsbourg wears black leather Saint Laurent trousers and a long-sleeved black silk shirt. Her discreetly bare feet are the only sign it's unseasonably hot and she's not entirely untouched by the world outside. Though, as I later come to learn, Charlotte doesn't care much for staying in sync with 'the world outside', having spent most of her exceptional life at one remove; coolly distant yet piercingly engaged, riddled with self-doubt yet one of the bravest performers of our time. But then, the daughter of Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin was never going to be one of us. Her late father was a notorious actor, musician and *enfant terrible*. Her mother, now in her seventies, was a famous model, actor and singer in the Sixties and Seventies. Even if Charlotte wanted to be 'normal', the people who so idolised her iconic parents wouldn't let her. And that, she explains, is just a cross she's had to bear.

'I've always been very ashamed of my looks compared to my mother, and then the talent...', she tells me, speaking softly – a quirk she's inherited from Jane Birkin, whose famously breathy whispers on the 1969 record *Je t'aime... moi non plus* have been the soundtrack to many an amorous moment. 'My life is always in reference to them [her parents] when I'm in Paris,' she says. Charlotte now lives in New York with her husband Yvan Attal, a film director, and their three children, and finds it easier to be herself there, relatively free from the shadow of her parents' notoriety. 'I feel bad saying how liberating it is not to be in Paris, but every day I'm here, someone will say something about my family. But when I arrived in New York, I was so surprised that people would come to me referencing the Lars von Trier films [she famously starred in *Melancholia* and, in a part that involved her appearing to cut off her own clitoris, *Nymphomaniac*]. It was only me.'

Charlotte tells me that, for years, she refused to talk about her family because the narrative of her early life – her parents' very public affair, her father's battle with drink, his controversial song and music video *Lemon Incest*, which involved her, aged 13, lying on a bed semi-naked with a shirtless Serge – belonged to everyone but her. 'The upbringing was something I kept for myself, as if it was the last treasure I could claim,' she says.

She is quite still as she talks, except for her hands, which tremble with nervous energy. Since moving to the US three years ago, she says, 'Suddenly, I felt that I wanted to share things... even talking about my own private life. I feel so much more relaxed.'

On her new album, *Rest*, she opens up about her family and personal struggles in her work for the first time. The 11 tracks are a triumph – thanks, she suggests, to producer Sebastian Akhoté-Bozovic, the man behind French label Ed Banger. String-emblazoned electro-pop, Nouvelle Vague



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melancholy and even a jaunty disco number are eclectic but imbued with a spirit that's hard to pin down. And Charlotte's voice! Instantly, you're transported to the Marais, or strolling the Left Bank with a handsome intellectual on your arm – it's as French as a baguette in a beret. As Charlotte describes it: 'The idea of having a small voice and a strong, sort of brutal sound. That was appealing.' And having the music out in the world is, she tells me, cathartic, despite the process being arduous. 'The album was ready a year ago, but I didn't like the treatment of my voice. I think I was being picky because I wasn't ready for it to come out.'

Charlotte's accent when speaking English is clipped and old-fashioned – think Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. She doesn't sound 'foreign' until she asks, 'How do you say that word in English?', which takes me slightly aback.

She's humble to the point of self-deprecating about her own musical talents. 'When my father died, I was really compelled to do something in music, but I didn't feel I was a singer and I didn't feel I was a writer, so I wanted to work with other people.' (Beck, Air and Jarvis Cocker are all previous collaborators.)

With *Rest*, Charlotte has finally found her own way to write and express herself. But how? 'With sincerity. It was my only tool. I was able to be honest and then it was a question of not being ashamed of what I had to say. Even depicting my father's death. Nothing made me embarrassed. I wasn't shy about the crudeness of words. I didn't feel I had to hide myself.'

In 2013, while she was writing this album, Charlotte's half sister Kate, daughter of Jane Birkin and composer John Barry, died suddenly in Paris. Charlotte says: 'No one really knows what happened and >

there are still so many questions.' Kate's death weighs mightily on *Rest*, and songs talk directly to what Charlotte describes as the raw ugliness of grieving. 'The loss was so traumatic. So violent. So unexpected. It's hard when there are so many questions and you try to put the puzzle together. I still feel angry; I still feel that it's unfair.' She says she coped with this loss very differently to when Serge died of a heart attack. 'My father, it crushed me. I was not myself for years – until I had a baby, and then I was looking towards life a little more. It was painful.' Particularly so because she was still figuring herself out at that time, or, as she puts it, 'I wasn't someone yet; I wasn't modelled yet; I was 19.'

There's a real sense that Charlotte has finally found her voice, albeit later in life than she might have liked, but something in her still feels not quite connected – like two pieces of a puzzle that look like they should fit together, but no matter what way round you try them, they don't. I can't help but ask, 'Are you happy?'

There's silence, and for the first time in an hour I'm broken out of the spell of her captivating dialogue and am suddenly aware of the clattering of cutlery, as waiters set up tables for dinner in the hotel restaurant that lies just behind the door.

I like being pushed.

She seems disarmed momentarily, and there's a sharp intake of breath before, tentatively, she says, 'Um, I enjoy life more.' Another long pause. 'I can't say I'm happy, no. I have moments.' Finding her rhythm, she continues: 'Before, there was always a question about being alive or not. Once my father died, I wondered: "Do I want to be here or not?", and I didn't have an answer. Now, I really think I want to be here. And I think that's enough. My children give me most of that [happiness]. But I don't want to weigh too much on them.'

I ask Charlotte what kind of parent she is. I wonder if, due to her own parents' laissez-faire attitude, she is the opposite? 'My father was strict about manners, and it was funny because at the same time he was outrageously provocative. My mother had a very moral, generous perspective on things. So I hope I give both those things. But I'm not a good parent in that I don't think I'm very stable. I'm too vulnerable and I think they know...'

'You need too much from them?'

'Yes. They can be scared of hurting me. I think that's a real fault. My parents never showed me that...'

At 46, Charlotte is looking back on her parents' behaviour, and her own relationship with them, differently. In fact, she tells me she is making a documentary about her mother as a way to address their dynamic and the pressure of things unsaid between them. 'We are very close. There's something so precious that I can't really express it. That's why I wanted to film her, just to be able to tell her [how I feel] in this disguised way.'

I ask if her mum still worries about her. Charlotte says, 'She always worried about me. She always thought I was the fragile one. I had all sorts of accidents. Even when I was born, I had an enormous jaundice, so I was brought to another hospital, tubes in my nose... I was always sort of the one that you had to care about. In fact, my sister was the fragile one; I was always strong. In the end, I was always there. I had a brain haemorrhage [she had surgery to alleviate bleeding in the brain after a water skiing accident in 20017], and I broke a vertebra. I'm very solid.'

If you'll forgive the *Ab Fab* reference, I picture Charlotte as a kind of sensible Saffy to Jane and Serge's Eddie growing up, but I ask on the off chance whether she was ever a nightmare teenager – shouting and slamming doors – but no: 'I was very secretive. My sister was like that, though. I wish I had been; I wish I had had more of a normal teenage life, even just an argument. I was always too respectful, but in a dishonest way. Because of all the violence we had gone through – door slamming and smashing glasses and dishes, all of that – I was always the quiet one and I did everything secretly. I had love stories secretly, but it was very hard for my mother because she didn't know anything that was going on. I was a wall.'

'You wanted to make everything OK for your parents?' I suggest.

'I was impeccable. I had good marks. I wanted to go to boarding school. Always distant. I really regret that. It's part of my character, but that put an enormous distance between us. It made me unreachable.'

It's time to lighten the mood, so I ask if she's a morning person. I can guess the answer.

'No. I hate mornings. Even if I wake up at seven, I won't be able to function before 11 or 12.' For the record, 'peak' Charlotte Gainsbourg is between 6 and 7pm.

She sounds so fabulously, insolently French as she tells me this. So unlike her British and American actor peers, who power through sunrise spinning classes, drinking green juice and posting a #inspo Instagram, all before 9am. She's spent enough time in LA, though, to have dabbled in such lifestyle trends: 'The gluten-free and the lactose-free – I've done that. But now I've just gone back to being my own Parisian self!' In France, she says, 'It's so natural not to do the gym. And if you do exercising, don't say anything!'

When I ask Charlotte how she feels about getting older, her response is nothing if not brutally honest. 'No', she says simply, 'I don't enjoy [getting older]. I find it hard. Only now have I understood certain things and I wish I was 30 again. I wish I could make the most of my youth. Because now, I think I won't have the parts that I want. The age is a problem. You don't get that you're at your peak in your thirties, not when you're 46. I don't feel my age... so it's problematic.'


I suggest that music is an outlet that is less age-obsessed? 'Maybe, but I also have a feeling that music is for the young people. Of course, everyone listens to music, but I can see my children: they have an appetite for music that is symbolised by youth. There's something of a decline that I can't do anything about... it's not that nice.'

Charlotte tells me she doesn't enjoy performing her songs live on stage, or at least not yet. 'I believe I will enjoy it eventually. But it's not as easy as performing a role; I don't feel natural. It's because I'm only myself, and for me, that is not enough. I'd love to not care; to be able to do my own thing and to tell myself that if people come to see me it's because they know who I am and what to expect.'

I think there's a part of Charlotte that enjoys challenging herself in this way. 'Yeah,' she says. 'I like being pushed. I like effort. I like being uncomfortable. Because I'm not a performer in the sense that I have a loud voice or a real instrument; it's not enough of an effort. I have to find a way, but whatever I do, it has to cost me real effort.'

I ask why.

'Each time I've done a violent scene in films, that was the most happy. Because it was a moment where I forgot everything, where my unconfidence, and uneasiness... I didn't think about it; the action was stronger. Then, working with Lars, he took me to places where it was exactly that. The emotions were stronger than my own persona. I didn't have time to judge myself, and being in those rough places was a discovery. And I loved the suffering. There's a bit of masochism – but I feel alive.'

Rest is released on 17 November 

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