

Towards the end of the 1960s, 22-year-old English actress Jane Birkin met Serge Gainsbourg, a French actor nearly twice her age, on the set of the film *Slogan* in Paris. He was fresh from a break-up with Brigitte Bardot; she was nursing a broken heart after the end of her marriage to James Bond composer John Barry.

After a shaky start – Jane thought him arrogant and snobbish but soon realised he was actually quite shy – they fell madly in love and spent the next 12 years in a headstrong, often volatile, romance. Their union would produce not only hit records, including the steamy *Je t'aime... moi non plus*, which was denounced by the Vatican and banned by the BBC, but also a daughter, Charlotte, now an acclaimed actress.

Gainsbourg would go on to become one of France's most adored cultural icons, whose funeral in 1991 brought Paris to a standstill. Jane, meanwhile, would become a style

icon – with a Hermès bag named in her honour – and a much-loved national treasure in her adopted homeland. “For the French, Serge is first and foremost a poet in the same league as Baudelaire and Rimbaud. So it appeared to be a very unique attraction of opposites and it was, actually,” says Andrew Birkin, Jane’s brother.

Birkin got his own big break while working as the tea boy on the set of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* in England. The director was frustrated that the film crew couldn’t find a desert-like location he could use for the opening scene of the dawn of man, when Birkin piped up that he knew where to find one. Kubrick dispatched him to photograph the landscape and, impressed with the results, then sent him to Technicolor to learn about special effects and photography. “He was wonderful, unique almost as directors go, as he really would listen to what ideas you had, even though you were the tea boy,” he says.

In 1968, Birkin was based

in Paris scouting locations for Kubrick’s next project, a film about Napoleon. “I was taking about 15,000 photographs for him of places Napoleon had been, with the view to using them as front projection in the film.” At the same time, Jane was also in the French capital filming *Slogan* with Gainsbourg. Birkin instantly hit it off with his sister’s new lover. “As for first impressions, from my point of view, it was love at first sight,” he says. Serge couldn’t be more different from Jane’s first husband. “John Barry was 20 years older than her and a dour Yorkshireman. But Serge, even though he was also 20 years older, had a completely different temperament, oscillating between wild exuberance and black melancholy. He had that exhibitionist streak in him that most artists have and loved to shock people. But he could also be a deep, deep soul.”

Birkin started photographing the pair, often with the same cameras he was using for Kubrick’s project

B·O·H·E·M·I·A·N RHAPSODY

Ahead of a new exhibition of his personal photographs of Jane Birkin and Serge Gainsbourg, AIR talks to filmmaker Andrew Birkin about the couple’s enigmatic appeal

Jane & Serge in front of the Bodleian, Oxford, August 8, 1969. © Andrew Birkin.







Jane Birkin, Paris December 7, 1972. © Andrew Birkin.

so the reels were shipped back to Britain. "I remember Kubrick would occasionally say, 'what are these photographs of your girlfriend doing in here? You're meant to be taking photographs for me,'" Birkin laughs. Visiting Jane and Serge on a regular basis throughout the '70s, he amassed hundreds of intimate snaps of the couple's bohemian life with Jane's daughter Kate, from her marriage to Barry, and Charlotte. "I didn't have a family of my own at this stage, so I would hang out with them, especially if I had a break between movies. I never felt that it

was 'two's company, three's a crowd'. Because Serge and I were like a couple of schoolboys really, and Jane is just a year younger than me so we've always been very close."

The public was fascinated with the English Rose and heavy-drinking, charismatic artist. "I don't know of another relationship that was similar [in terms of public interest]. Of course, you've got Beckham, but somehow a footballer is not the same as a poet," he says. "I suppose to outsiders there was this element of beauty and the beast, Jane having been to girls' boarding school and

The ex-lovers remained close and Jane continued to record albums of Gainsbourg's lyrics. "Serge wrote some of the best songs that he ever wrote for Jane after they had technically broken up. And he remained a part of the family until he died. Even though he took up with [French actress] Bambou and they had a baby together, never a week went by when Jane and Serge didn't meet or talk at least. So, in a sense, it didn't really end, it just changed."

Charlotte, meanwhile, has kept her father's Paris house almost exactly as he left it – crammed

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the press presenting our parents as rather conventional, when in fact they weren't at all," says Birkin.

The couple eventually split in 1980 as Gainsbourg's heavy drinking took its toll on their relationship. "Serge was becoming increasingly alcoholic and it just gets rather boring if you're living with someone who is an alcoholic. And, at the same time, Jane was being wooed by film director Jacques Doillon and I suppose Serge was running out of steam," says Birkin. Jane and Doillon had a daughter, Lou, in 1982, who is also an actress and singer.

with mementos of his poetic, sometimes scandalous life. "Jane's never been back in it and doesn't want to because it evokes too many memories for her. She was totally distraught when Serge died and sort of rather blamed herself I think, that if she'd been around she could have prevented him drinking quite so much and smoking himself to death. But, in point of fact, nobody could have done," he says. She separated from Doillon, who could not compete with her grief for Gainsbourg, and has lived alone ever since.

Now, more than 30 years since his sister and Gainsbourg split, Birkin's photos of their life together are being displayed in a new exhibition at London's Proud Galleries. Which photo does he feel captures the essence of their relationship? "There's one of them in the back of a taxi where Serge is kissing Jane goodbye. Jane is looking slightly standoffish and playing a little hard-to-get and Serge's wonderful nose is in profile," says Birkin. "It was a relationship that was, perhaps like the best of relationships, never entirely stable, yet they deeply loved each other."

Jane and Serge by Andrew Birkin, Proud Chelsea, September 11 - October 26 2014, proud.co.uk