

Jane Birkin

Oh! Pardon tu dormais...

Start time: 8pm

Approximate running time: 90 minutes, no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Martin Aston spoke with Jane Birkin about her upcoming show and the inspiration behind her latest record.

Four days before rehearsals begin for her forthcoming run of shows, Jane Birkin is experiencing mixed emotions. 'The stage has never been so much of a passion for me,' she admits. 'I just like working with the musicians, and travelling, hopping on to a train and going elsewhere. It's always a bit more worrying in Paris and London: it's nice to see family and friends but it's the knowing they might come! Perhaps the reason why I have lived in France is so I could do my own thing without being seen.'

As an actor as well as a singer, and probably one of the most famous Brits living in France, Birkin has been 'seen' through the years. Yet her level of exposure and engagement seem to be entirely on her own terms. Following her 2008 album *Enfants D'Hiver*, she only resurfaced in 2017 with *Birkin/Gainsbourg: Le Symphonique*, an orchestrated collection of songs that the legendary French singer Serge Gainsbourg – Birkin's former love of twelve years – had written for her. It wasn't until 2020 that Birkin released an album of new songs, *Oh! Pardon Tu Dormais...*, which she was touring summer 2021 until she suffered a mild stroke. Fully recovered now, she is again picking up the torch and back at the Barbican, where she last presented the *Symphonique* album.

Birkin will never – and will probably never want to – shake off her association with the irrepressible Gainsbourg – a partnership that began in 1969 with their infamous single 'Je T'Aime... Moi Non Plus' – a number one across Europe – and peaking with the 1971 album *Histoire De Melody Nelson*. But it's her preceding relationship with the British composer John Barry, a marriage that lasted from 1965 to 1968, that has a more direct link to *Oh! Pardon Tu Dormais...*. Namely, their daughter Kate, who died in 2013 after falling from the window of her apartment in Paris.

Birkin's album addresses that tragedy, and the knock-on effect on her emotions and memories. As well as a beautiful and haunting – and haunted – record, steeped in piano, strings and cinematic tension, *Oh! Pardon Tu Dormais...* is an extraordinarily honest document. 'I didn't know how to make it otherwise,' she says. 'I've always been attached to personal songs written by others.'

It was her good friend, Étienne Daho – another legend of French pop – who had initially suggested that Birkin could find an outlet for her pain and loss by returning to a play that she had written in the nineties (later adapted into a book and then a cinematic short), also called *Oh! Pardon Du Dormais...* The title (in English, *Oh! Sorry You Were Asleep...*), she says, 'is that thing of not being able to sleep at night, and you can't have a conversation because they're sleeping. I look back at my diaries, and I had this feeling when I was with John Barry! Waking him up to ask if he loved me. I must have been quite maddening myself!'

With this renewed focus, new songs began to emerge, co-written by Daho and multi-instrumentalist/arranger Jean-Louis Piérot. One of them was 'Ghosts'. A melody written by

barbican

Piérot reminded Birkin of Disney's *Fantasia*, 'When the ghosts come out of the graveyard,' she recalls, which inspired her own troubled visions: '*Your shadows clustered about my sleepy head / solemnly I evoke the dead.*'

'Ghosts' was the first lyric that Birkin had ever written in English; the second was the album's restless finale 'Catch Me If You Can' ('*Children calling from forgotten hills / I'm on my way, home to you*'). 'I was happy to see that Étienne was so happy with what I'd initially done,' she recalls. 'Writing was exciting because we egged each other on – it wasn't as lonely as writing on your own. And it went really fast.'

'Cigarettes' is another emotional *tour de force*: a strangely cabaret-jaunty melody for a brutal lyric: (translated from French) '*And on the ground we found her / Did she open the window / In fact to chase away the smoke?*' But there are playful moments too, like 'Pas D'Accord' and the title track, a duet with Daho. 'If I'd been left on my own,' says Birkin, 'I would have been rather melancholic and sad. Étienne wanted to get me out of that and be a bit more exciting.'

Daho's involvement extends to Birkin's current live show. 'He wanted me to start off with the introduction to 'Je T'Aime...Moi Non Plus', like I was when I first arrived in France. He's mixed up a lot of other old songs, including four from *Histoire De Melody Nelson*. I've never sung songs from that album on stage before, which I really like because I can see people are so pleased to hear them. But I do a lot of the current album. And it's the same musicians that played on the record, so it follows the sound of the album too.'

Notwithstanding Birkin's anxieties regarding which of her family and friends will see her show at the Barbican, the audience will be able to see and hear an artist at her most intimate and vulnerable, but also at her peak, bringing to life what is surely her finest solo album in a career that stretches back just over six decades. Catch her if you can.

Performers

Jane Birkin vocals

Jean-Louis Piérot piano, guitar

François Poggio guitar

Colin Russeil drums

Produced by the Barbican



The City of London Corporation is the founder and principal funder of the Barbican Centre