THE TRAVEL ALMANAC

Charlotte Gainsbourg

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CHARLOTTE GAINSBOURG

INTERVIEW *Brooke Chroman*
SELF PORTRAITS *Charlotte Gainsbourg*

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We chatted with Charlotte Gainsbourg on a wintry day in New York's West Village, where the French/English singer and actress recently moved with her family. The daughter of icons Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin, Gainsbourg has continued in the family tradition, becoming a contemporary artistic force through her own powerful work on the stage and screen. The muse of such artists as filmmaker Lars von Trier and Louis Vuitton chief designer Nicholas Ghesquière, Gainsbourg possesses a kind of effortlessness that is magnetic in its appeal. Here, the actress takes a rare pause from raising her three children, writing her upcoming album and shooting a new film to talk with us about the freedom she feels in her new city, the complications of living a life often void of anonymity, and memories of her childhood vacations. As a "visual contemplation" of our discussion, Gainsbourg created a special series of self-portraits for The Travel Almanac, in a further exploration of her relationship between identity and place.

You're living here [in the West Village] now?

Yeah, it's nice. I'm still discovering everything. I'd never spent more than a week in New York before so it's all very new.

Were you ready for a change?

Yeah, I really wanted it. It's a new vision, which is what I was hoping for. I don't know how long we'll stay but it's lovely just to discover. Even a place as famous as New York, I had no idea what it was really like from the inside. It's completely different when you live in a place, going to get groceries and stupid things like that, going to the school . . .

How old are your kids now?

I have a son who's 17, a daughter who's 12, and a little girl who's three and a half.

When you look at them, can you remember yourself at their ages?

Yeah, but not my son. It's too different between a boy and a girl. I didn't realize what a boy went through! The adolescence, all of that, I just remember specifically being a girl, discovering sexuality, everything. He has a completely different world, so his 17 has nothing to do with mine. It's different with my eldest daughter, but I can also see the changes in generations. She looks like what I would've been like at 15. Everything goes much faster, just being aware of everything all the time, not being very protected, but that's how life is today. So we can't just cut off the Internet and all the social networking, even though I did try . . . *[Laughs]*

I always wonder how that is for parents. I see them with their kids at restaurants, plugged into an iPad watching a movie. We're really living in a different world now, so how do you negotiate that with children?

It's never-ending negotiations. And it's weird that I always refer to my own childhood, but it was a different time. You know, "in my time," I sound as if I'm 70.

[Both laugh]

That's not so far back!

But children didn't speak. You know, we were allowed to come to restaurants and things like that, but we had to be quiet and put our hands on the table. It was very strict and at the same time my parents were wild. So the whole thing made it a little strange—not to my eyes, but today I realize that it was completely an opposition of being very strict and very free in your mind.

It seems like you grew up in a very artistic environment. Did you feel a separation between art and life growing up?

No, and I actually didn't feel that I lived in an artistic environment. Not at all. My parents always were very, very modest about the artistic side. It would've felt like they were showing off if they were portraying themselves as artists. They were

having fun. Their main thing was to go out and, you know, have fun in discotheques. The only work process that I could see was my father on his piano sometimes, and then the studio sessions where they were recording. But they didn't come home with their work. I was really aware of his work once they split, because then I saw both a little more closely, one to one. Then when I was 12 my father took me into his work. I worked with him, and then I worked on my own. Of course I was aware of my mother's films; she took me on sets and all that, but it wasn't as if we were living with artists. I think that's the beginning of my embarrassment with saying I'm an artist. It seems pretentious.

What do you say when people ask you what you do? Why do you think it's embarrassing for you?

It is embarrassing! Because that's the connotation that I was brought up with. When I'm doing films, I don't feel like I'm doing art. It's rather . . . maybe if I were a director I would have a little more of that ambition. Writing lyrics and doing music, I really don't want to have any look on who I am. It doesn't help me in any sort of way. And everybody has a streak of expression. I was looking at this documentary about Vivian Maier. And it's just incredible to see how you can go through a whole life and then make a postmortem, discovering the whole artistic aspect of someone. There's this idea that artists are supposed to have open minds and have a kind of freedom, but really I can't and I don't feel artistic.

So you've carried the idea that an artist is not a distinctive kind of person into your own family?

Yes, because in my family in the past everyone was expressing themselves. Through photography, film, music, they were all doing everything. My grandfather never worked in his life and was in the Navy during the war, and then he was a painter. He never sold his paintings, but that was his thing. So even non-professionally, everyone was just doing something. Also this thing of not only being an actress or a singer, but trying different things. I never felt embarrassed trying different things. In France they tend to say that once you're an actress you're an actress, or a singer a singer; you can't really touch everything.

Does coming to New York help in terms of putting yourself in a different space?

Yes, it has always helped. The only time I moved somewhere specifically for music was for the album with Beck, because it happened in Los Angeles, and it was such a relief to be able to do only that. Whereas in Paris, I'm just overwhelmed by everything that happens. I've lived there for such a long time; it's hard to cut yourself off from what's going on. Here, I don't have many friends and I don't have a social life yet, so it's just about the album that I'm trying to do, so that's great. And then I'm able to shoot a film too, which is a lot of fun.

Which film are you working on now?

"I remember my grandmother's house in London had a fire, and everything was burned, all the memories and pictures, and she was so happy . . . [Laughs] She felt like a weight had lifted, and she was fine with it."

It's called The Oppenheimer Strategies and the director is Joseph Cedar. He's from Israel, and because he's a foreigner too there's something less intimidating about the fact that people are like me—discovering like me. It's helpful and the experience is wonderful.

What kind of environment do you like to surround yourself with, when you're writing here?

I haven't discovered a lot about the city yet. I've been to museums and stuff like that, but I tend to stay only in this area, walking a lot—which is new for me because in Paris I never walk—doing things I know I won't have time for, once work starts full-time. I go and drop my children off, pick them up, do dinner, get the groceries, that's all I do . . . *[Laughs]* I have no references, which is exactly what I was looking for. Even references to films—of course everybody knows New York—but they don't come to me. I find the city beautiful but it's not an inspiration, it's just a blank page, which is very helpful. I can completely isolate myself in the house that we have, and I'm in a studio in Brooklyn so I go back and forth, but the writing process has been very surprising. I've always thought I wouldn't be able to write because I put a lot of pressure on myself, being my father's daughter, because I admire his stuff so much, I thought I'll never even get near that. Then finally I was okay with the fact that I could do whatever I could do. To not judge myself too harshly and just try and do something, and then . . . we'll see. I was able to write mostly in French, a little in English. At first I thought I'll try and maybe just throw everything away and meet a writer and get some help, and now I might keep things. *[Laughs]*

Is it helpful not to have familiar items around you?

Yes, I remember my grandmother's house in London had a fire, and everything was burned, all the memories and pictures, and she was so happy . . . *[Laughs]* She felt like a weight had lifted, and she was fine with it. We were all so sad.

I can imagine that yes, it's just so hard not to accumulate stuff.

It's hard, especially when you have children. You think maybe they'll want to see this, so I keep everything. It's so stupid. I'd love to be more specific, but to make choices is such a difficult thing and when you throw things away you make a choice.

Are there things you need when you travel?

If I'm traveling without my family, I take pictures and a piece of clothing from every one of them. Some piece that has been worn, so it has a bit of a scent. Apart from that, tea is the only thing I feel a little miserable if I don't have. In Paris I had a very precious Japanese place. Here I haven't really looked, so I haven't found that Japanese tea place yet. I'm sure it exists. I was into Matcha for a short period, and then all that Genmaicha, but also the smoked one, Hojicha. I can't have any kind of tea. It has to brew in a certain way, with the boiler at the right temperature. I can do two days of basic tea, but not more. I feel like an old lady because of that . . . *[Laughs]*

Do you have favorite places you like to visit with your family?

With Yvan, we used to rent places in Paris. I think in the first 10 years we moved 14 times. It wasn't that we weren't happy in a place, it was just that having different lives we changed, and then having children, we continued moving and then calmed down. With traveling it's similar, in the sense that we don't always go to the same country house. It's funny not to replicate what I had during my childhood; we had a country house, and because my father was scared of flights we would take the train even to London, which was very special. For holidays we only went to Normandy, to this tiny cottage my mother had bought and those were the best summers I ever had. It was always the same place, the same people, and I'm giving the complete opposite to my own children, but they're longing for one place. I think children love repetition.

Can you tell me about the train ride?

First of all, I had two rides. The first was a night train to London, because my mother's family was all there. So I would be with my older sister Kate in one little cabin with two bunk beds, my parents in the other bunk beds. Just going to sleep with that sound of the train is something wonderful. Then waking up at four or five in the morning and seeing the train go on the water, the boats from that window when you push the blinds up. The whole thing was just . . . it was magical for me. I loved it. And then the second ride was to Normandy, because my father didn't have a driver's license and my mother is a terrible driver. I don't think she minds me saying, she's quite proud actually of having bumped into one of the legs of the Eiffel Tower.

[Both laugh]

That is an accomplishment!

So we went to Normandy in a taxi . . . *[Laughs]* And he would smoke his head off, Gitanes with no filter, and we were behind coughing because I had asthma. And it was perfect.

It sounds like it. There's something about routine . . .

Yes, but the routine with alcohol and drunkenness! My memory has taken it all to the good side, the fun side, but you know it wasn't only fun. I've repainted everything and I'm conscious that it's the way it was in my head. My sister used to have a completely different memory; she used to say, "Really, you thought it was

great? It was horrible." *[Laughs]*

Do certain places in Paris still evoke memories from your childhood?

Oh, a lot. My childhood is really split in two; there's Rue de Verneuil with my father and then Rue de la Tour with my mother, after they split. My father's place is really special because I've kept it like a ghost house. It's a little weird, but that's my way of dealing with it. This house on Rue de Verneuil is covered with graffiti because people come and write stuff about him. Of course it wasn't like that when I was a child; his notoriety really grew when I was about 15, so before that our house was discrete and nobody came. Then it became sort of a public place. It's in Saint-Germain and times have changed; it was 40 years ago I guess it was already quite posh, but it's become only about antique shops and there's not a lot of real life going on. At the time, it was very quiet and I just remember walking in the streets, being with my sister, roller-skating with those antique roller skates. *[Laughs]* You know those? And walking our dog, Nana, it's just so far away . . . then Rue de la Tour is all my adolescence with my mother and step-father, it was a different life. I was very different with my father and with my mother, in terms of my persona. I was secretive with my mother, not shy, but I had secrets. With my father I was able to be very stubborn, because I was spoiled. I wasn't a brat, but I was spoiled and loved and sort of cherished on weekends, so it was different. My mother had the bad time, you know, the school time.

I think it's a lot more common for women.

[Laughs] Yes, I think it's quite unfair. It took me a long time to realize everything she'd done, and the beauty of what she gave me. I lost my father really young, too young. I was 19 and he became sort of a god. I've always loved my mother, that's not the problem, but today I realize how precious she is and everything she's given me. I think you can tend to look at mothers with only reproaches . . . *[Laughs]* Also, I had two different mothers. With my father she was sort of this beauty, dressing up in the evening, going to parties, and being drunk with my father. It was a very, very social life. When they split and she had my little sister, Lou, she became a completely different woman. She discovered family life, family dinners and just being much more normal, I guess.

Would you say those memories are a part of your work now?

Yes, now that I'm writing an album and really trying to write, which was not the case before—I was trying to get ideas on previous albums, but never just being on my own and coming up with whatever I had inside—I'm realizing how turned towards childhood and memories I am. I mean everything revolves around my father's death; there's before that, and after. It just guided me through so many things. I was talking with someone yesterday who was saying how much they were anxious to be through with their childhood, and to be grown up. They didn't hate their childhood, it was just maybe that they were eager to become re-

sponsible. I'm exactly the opposite. I didn't want to let go. I was perfectly comfortable with no responsibilities.

[Both laughing]

I'm with you. I always thought there would be a difference between childhood and adulthood—like you'd feel like an adult when you bought a house, or a salad spinner. But maybe you never stop feeling like a kid.

[Laughing] I have the impression that I'm pretending. When I see other parents in school that have done everything right and their lunchbox is perfect, I feel I'm a real fraud. But I've felt like that with everything, so . . .

Do you ever go back to visit your childhood homes?

I do, but it's always a little painful, because it's as if my father were going to come through the door. It's really strange. Time has stopped. Going back to reality afterwards is always a little heavy and depressing, so I tend to protect myself from that and not go too often. I feel that he doesn't belong to me. When you're a child, you think your parents belong to you. No sharing . . . *[Laughs]* But I've always felt, since he died, that people felt the right to say that they were suffering as much as I was. You know, that was so strange.

This summer I was in a restaurant in Saint-Germain, and I saw a woman give you a book and say some nice things to you. You were very gracious. But I thought that it must be a strange experience, negotiating a private life and a public persona, where people feel that they know you or your family.

Yes, it's exactly this notion of negotiating your own feelings and the fact that I was brought up to be polite, so there's no question of pushing someone away, especially since people are really sweet with me in France. They sort of put me together with this whole family bunch. They have to say that they love my father, my mother, my sisters, and they have the right to share what they have to share. But it's always hard—especially when I'm struggling so much with the pain of having lost my father, having to deal with people talking about their own memories of him. And because he had *many* stories with taxi drivers, there's always one telling me how incredible he was, and you have to listen. I mean there are lots of things more difficult than that, but it was a strange thing, having to deal with that every day of your life. Every day you have to refer to your parents, which is not a bad thing, but when you're trying to look for yourself it's really hard. When I came here to New York it was so rejuvenating to either not be recognized at all, or when people came up to me they talked about my films. I was amazed! It's very refreshing . . . ⬩