

# CHARLOTTE GAINSBOURG



UNDER THE INTENSIVE CARE OF FRANCE'S FAVORITE DAUGHTER

Written by Gregg LaGambina | Photographed by Kurt Iswarienko



*OPPOSITE: Stretch leather leggings by HELMUT LANG, cotton butterfly sleeve top by IRO, and jewelry (model's own). THIS PAGE: Lace sleeve dress by JASMINE DI MILO.*



*Studded silk blazer by STELLA MCCARTNEY, nude patent leather maniacs by BRIAN ATWOOD, bisque gauze wool T-shirt by HELMUT LANG, and jewelry (model's own).*

[H]is old place perched halfway up a green hillside is about death and history and survival. Built upon a foundation of myths and cultivated half-truths, hovering on the air like the hummingbirds seeking out the pink bougainvillea blossoms that frame its shimmering blue pool. The Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles doesn't care whether you live or die. It just wants an easy clean-up and a good story for the next guest.

F. Scott Fitzgerald narrowly survived cardiac arrest here, John Belushi never left his bungalow bedroom alive, Helmut Newton careened his car into a retaining wall and drifted off prematurely into that forever-sleep waiting for us all. Despite all of that, there's croissants on a silver tray, please, grab a copy of *The Times*, and have a seat, we'll be with you in just a moment. Hey, is that Griffin Dunne getting on the elevator? Did you know Howard Hughes once lived here? Even if there are ghosts, there's so much goddamn whispering amongst the living here, the spirits are howling to be heard. Or is that music?

"Should we sit by the pool? It's so beautiful today."

Charlotte Gainsbourg nimbly navigates the crooked stone steps draped in ivy leading down behind the private bungalows that overlook the expansive patio. Watching her tiny frame, outfitted in black jeans and a loose-knit black top, her hair cut into straight bangs that stop just above the eyebrows, it's impossible not to think of her mother. (Or about death, history, and survival.)

There's a little-seen film from 1969, *La Piscine*, starring Alain Delon and Jane Birkin, filmed in a place similar to this, except in France, and in the countryside. And the pool is a menace, lurking in the background like a gun waiting to go off. Of course, someone—Delon or Birkin, or the lover that complicates their triangle—will drown, but when, how, and why, is obviously the mystery. The pool laps against the lip of bleached white concrete with the regularity of a hypnotist's pendulous pocket watch. Birkin is Charlotte's mother, of course. No one will drown here today, but here we are thinking of death again, staring into the blue depths, as strangers, speaking cautiously.

"Oh, it was very serious. I was really close to... I could have not lived," Gainsbourg says, balking at the word death, winding her way around it in recalling her accident from two years ago. "It was all very sudden."

Water-skiing during a vacation in the States in 2007, Gainsbourg lost control and suffered a head injury. When the headaches lingered too long, a doctor's visit back home revealed a possibly fatal cerebral hemorrhage lingering like a set trap. She underwent emergency brain surgery, emerging on the other side askew, of a different perspective, and, as an artist, imbued with something new to use, even if it wasn't immediately apparent what it was.

"I CAN'T SAY IT CHANGED MY LIFE, BUT IT'S TRUE THAT WHEN YOU WAKE UP—I DON'T MEAN PHYSICALLY WHEN YOU WAKE UP—BUT WHEN IT'S OVER AND YOU REALIZE THAT YOU ARE STILL THERE, THERE'S SOMETHING VERY EXHILARATING. BUT IT PASSES VERY, VERY QUICKLY AND YOU GO BACK TO NORMAL." she pauses, her fingers playing with the black iron lattice of the patio table. "I was petrified for a very long time. I didn't work for such a long time. I couldn't move from Paris because I needed to be close to the hospital, just in case. Everybody was always saying, 'Just in case.' When I think back about that time, I just needed to get away from my own fears and small miseries."

In her aspiration to be fearless, she fell into the world of Lars von Trier and his now infamous film *Antichrist*. Scenes of genital mutilation and torture and the brand of miserabilist surrealism that von Trier practices allowed Gainsbourg to play with trauma in fiction, perhaps getting the upper hand on the "small miseries" that plagued her in that real year of recovery. Or, as she says, "I just needed to dive into something very heavy that would also help me."

Lingering in the background, though, was this persistent music of the MRI (or, IRM in French). That intimidating cylindrical machine that induces paranoid claustrophobia in patients as they are submerged like a scribbled note into a pneumatic tube, was where Gainsbourg spent multiple sessions, as doctors mapped the progress of her post-operative convalescence.

The Magnetic Resonance Imaging machinery engulfs the patient with alarming sounds that spin in circles, flashing past the ear drum, appearing above and below in almost marine-like fluctuations, as if replicating a life lived inside a clamorous alarm clock on the verge of malfunction—underwater. It's a harrowing experience to most; doctors often recommend bringing along a favorite recording of music to help mask the sound. Patients can become disoriented or nauseous, simply giving up, retreating another day when their resolve has been restored. But, for Gainsbourg, this medical orchestra became another point of departure for her work.

"I knew I had wanted to do an album, but I had no idea it would [be] about the accident. I had a very bad time getting out of that whole accident, the surgery. Even if it was all just fine afterwards—it just lasted a few days, and it was over—but to get over it was very, very hard. I didn't really think of any work or anything in particular."

"But with those sounds," she continues. "When I first thought about putting them in a song, it was more about the energy and the wildness of it, and the disturbances, of course. But there was also something very agitated that I liked. It didn't frighten me. It wasn't to talk about that fear."

Though she was introduced to Beck a few years ago through a mutual friend, producer Nigel Godrich, Gainsbourg never imagined collaborating with him until the ideas for her new album, *IRM*, began to surface and become clearer.

"I was just thrilled that he wanted to work with me," she says, animated now, smiling. "He had apparently no idea what I had gone through, because at that time, we had just met and it was the beginning of our collaboration and I didn't go into very personal stuff."

In many respects, *IRM* sounds like a sonic cousin to Beck's *Modern Guilt* (2008) and *Mutations* (1998) with nods to French pop in the vein of Françoise Hardy (and, unavoidably, Gainsbourg's father Serge looms somewhere above, below, or in the background). The centerpiece, the title track, replicates the medical sounds of the brain scans she endured, pairing them with tribal percussion, transforming the distressful sterility of hospital noise into something danceable, yet without devolving into camp. The seeming miracle of the pairing is how Beck's intuition as producer, performer, writer, and lyricist, unearthed small revelations along the way, unwittingly referencing the recent near-tragedy in her life that he knew nothing about.

"It's funny because there's this one [song] called 'Master's Hands,' and we did it at the very start. He wrote the lyric, 'Drill my brain all full of holes/Patch it up before it leaks/These memories come two bits by three.' THERE'S THIS STRANGE

COMMUNICATION WHEN YOU WORK TOGETHER. I THINK HE JUST

UNDERSTOOD A LOT OF THE MOODS THAT I FELT VERY CLOSE TO

EVEN THE SONG 'LA COLLECTIONNEUSE' WHICH IS ABOUT COLLECTING

MEMORIES AND DEALING WITH LIFE AND DEATH AND WHAT YOU

HAVE INSIDE YOUR HEAD. HE HAS A WAY OF VISUALIZING THINGS. IT'S

A LOT OF IMAGES, WHICH I LOVE BECAUSE IT REMINDS ME OF FILMS.

At 38, this is only her third full-length recording. Although primarily an actress, it's not for reasons of conflict that her musical output hasn't matched the regularity of her film work. Just as any writer examining her work in music or film has trouble looking past her celebrated genealogy, the enormity of it isn't lost on her either.

"I did a first single—that I really love—that was done with my father, but on his record called 'Lemon Incest.' That was my first experience," sharing a rare recollection about Serge. "When I was fifteen or sixteen, he wrote me a whole album. It was such a different time, it was with him. That's why it took me so long to go back to music. Without him I didn't see why, or how, I could do it. Now, I'm very happy that I did have the courage to just take that step."

"That first album... I don't like my voice on that," she continues, looking at the ground now, moving a pebble with her foot. "I love what he did, but I'm not very proud of it."

Talk of death and history come back around, the sun higher up as noon approaches and the honks of agitated motorists are heard beyond the high wall that keeps them from view. She's here in Los Angeles a bit longer, rehearsing with a band, deciding whether she's comfortable enough to bring her new songs out on tour. Heading back up the cobble steps to the bungalow, she remarks about how her time spent in this city can be isolating, with everyone in their cars, forever occupied by private concerns.

"Seeing no one, talking to no one—it's a weird, weird city. I sometimes go to Ralphs [supermarket] at two in the morning just to see something, to see *someone*."

And even here, at one of the most celebrated hotels in the city at midday with the mad dazzle of open car trunks, dropped luggage, elevators being held, bells being rung, and iPhones chirping, Charlotte Gainsbourg weaves through the chattering lobby unseen, unremarked-upon, unnoticed. In this building built upon a thousand false histories and exaggerated deaths, a passing last question about her own legacy in light of her substantial pedigree sounds like the resolve of a person happily occupied with just one thing: survival.

"I don't think that way. I just hope I'll continue, I hope I'll get to meet new people. I just hope I get to do exciting things. And I hope that I'm at the beginning." [E]





Black lace sleeve dress by JASMINE DI MILO.  
Black suede pump with rhinestone detail by  
RENÉ CAOVIILLA.

Stylist: ANNIE JAGGER  
Hair: AVIVA PEREA  
Makeup: RACHEL GOODWIN

Beauty notes: Face and body foundation in Ivory  
#20 by MAKE UP FOR EVER, Écriture de Chanel  
automatic liquid eyeliner by CHANEL, Healthy  
Volume Mascara in Black by NEUTROGENA, Long

Wearing Brow Tint in Natural by ANASTASIA,  
Lip2Cheek in Promise by RMS BEAUTY, and Glam  
Balm by RODIAL.