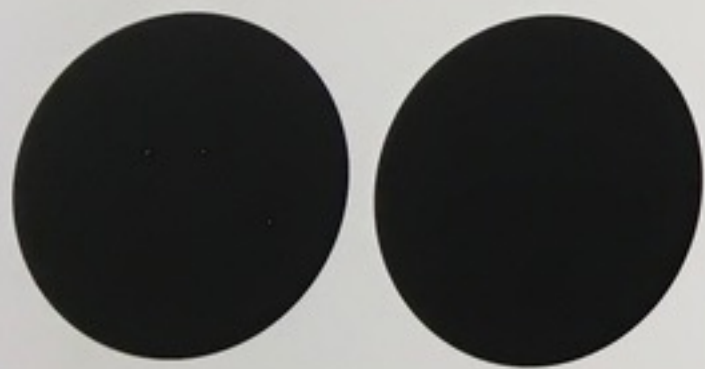


MASTERMINI



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Étienne Daho



The Boss of French Pop



INTERVIEW CLÉMENTINE GOLDSZAL

ÉTIENNE DAHO HAS BEEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF FRENCH POP FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS. MYSTERIOUS, REFLECTIVE AND WILDLY SUCCESSFUL, HE HAS FOLLOWED HIS INSTINCTS TO CREATE ONE OF THE MOST LONG-LASTING AND INVENTIVE CAREERS IN THE COUNTRY'S MUSIC SCENE, WEAVING TOGETHER FRENCH VARIETY AND POP, DARK LYRICS AND UPBEAT MUSIC, RECLUSIVENESS AND COLLABORATIONS.

Americans have The Boss. The French have Le Patron, Étienne Daho. Born in Oran, Algeria, and raised in Rennes, France, Daho has had the kind of all-encompassing success that can overwhelm and perturb. His second album, *La Notte, La Notte*, released in 1984, marked the birth of French pop and spawned many hit singles: "Tombé pour la France," "Le Grand Sommeil," "Bleu Comme Toi," "Week-end à Rome," "L'Homme qui Marche" and so on. Forever youthful and increasingly profound, Daho has since spun a curious web of a career, passionate and protean. A loner eager for collaborations (with Marianne Faithfull, Debbie Harry, Lou Doillon and Jane Birkin), an aesthete driven by flawless instinct and a model of freedom for the younger generation, Daho, with his eternal beginner's heart, remains an enigma, an equation that hopefully will never be solved.

"Songwriting," he says, "is a bit like a math problem. As you listen to the music looping, the sentences appear and fit together, following the relentless metrics of the melody." Listening to Daho in a loop has the same effect: the world, sometimes just for a few seconds, steps into line, tamed by the implacable metrics of his perfect songs.

**"I am not at all cerebral;
my only intelligence
my only talent, is instinct."**

CLÉMENTINE GOLDSZAL You recently toured with *Eden*, your seventh album, which came out over two decades ago, in 1996. A few years ago, you revived onstage *Pop Satori* on stage, which came out in 1986. What makes you want to revisit these past records?

ÉTIENNE DAHO *Eden* is special because it's my seventh album, but it feels like the first one. Picking a favorite among my albums is impossible – it would be like choosing a favorite among one's children – but *Eden* made it possible for me to be here in front of you. It gave me a future.

CG Was it a matter of life and death?

ED Yes. And a matter of starting a new life. The first 10 years of my career were about growth. Dahomania, success... It was a little surreal. It was very flattering, but at the same time, I didn't want to get too big for my boots. I was afraid of getting stuck in something that would kill me too soon, so I tried to take as much distance as possible, to take big breaks, which could have been fatal. *Eden* arrived after a four-year break. I started to talk about things I had never talked about before in my songs: childhood, the rather dramatic events of the Algerian War and so on.

CG Before that, did you feel like you had to conform to pop music's cheeriness?

ED No, it wasn't that. My songs have always had dark lyrics with upbeat music, and vice versa. "Le Grand Sommeil" is a song about suicide that gets everyone dancing. The same is true of "Tombé pour la France." They are serious songs, but no one understood that at the time. And that's what's good.

CG So, pop means speaking lightly about serious things and seriously about upbeat things?

ED Pop is about disguising frustrations, insecurities and sorrows, and turning them into something pretty. A song lasts three-and-a-half minutes. You can hum it in the shower, and be surprised by that feeling that the song has been written only for you, that it's a voice for you, that it's about you.

CG When you listen to your albums, do you still like them?

ED Yes, I really do. I have trouble looking at my image, but the sound is separate from me. Each record is a collective effort. It's an adventure, a chapter written by many hands. Today, the pictures in which I'm wearing absurd outfits make me laugh. I look at myself like a little brother to whom I would say, "Go get a haircut!"

CG Still, you always had a...

ED You've only seen the good pictures!

CG When your career started, you kept your real name and sang a great deal about your own life. What kind of relationship do you have today with Étienne Daho the public figure?

ED Success makes one a bit vulnerable at first. Popularity is like a monster coming into your living room – you panic. But my love for music helped me put up with the difficult part.

CG During your last tour, which followed the release of your album *Blitz*, you came onstage wearing a mask...

ED I really like Clovis Trouille, a Surrealist painter of the 1930s and '40s. His work was erotic, anticlerical and antimilitarist. The idea came from one of his paintings, in which he wears a mask. I wanted the musicians and myself to walk onstage wearing a domino mask. I found it beautiful and disturbing. It was in tune with the atmosphere of the concert's first stage set, which was red. We opened with "Les Filles du Canyon," a song about the Manson family, the Maenads, all those bloodthirsty warrior women. Plus, it allowed me to drop the mask after the first song.

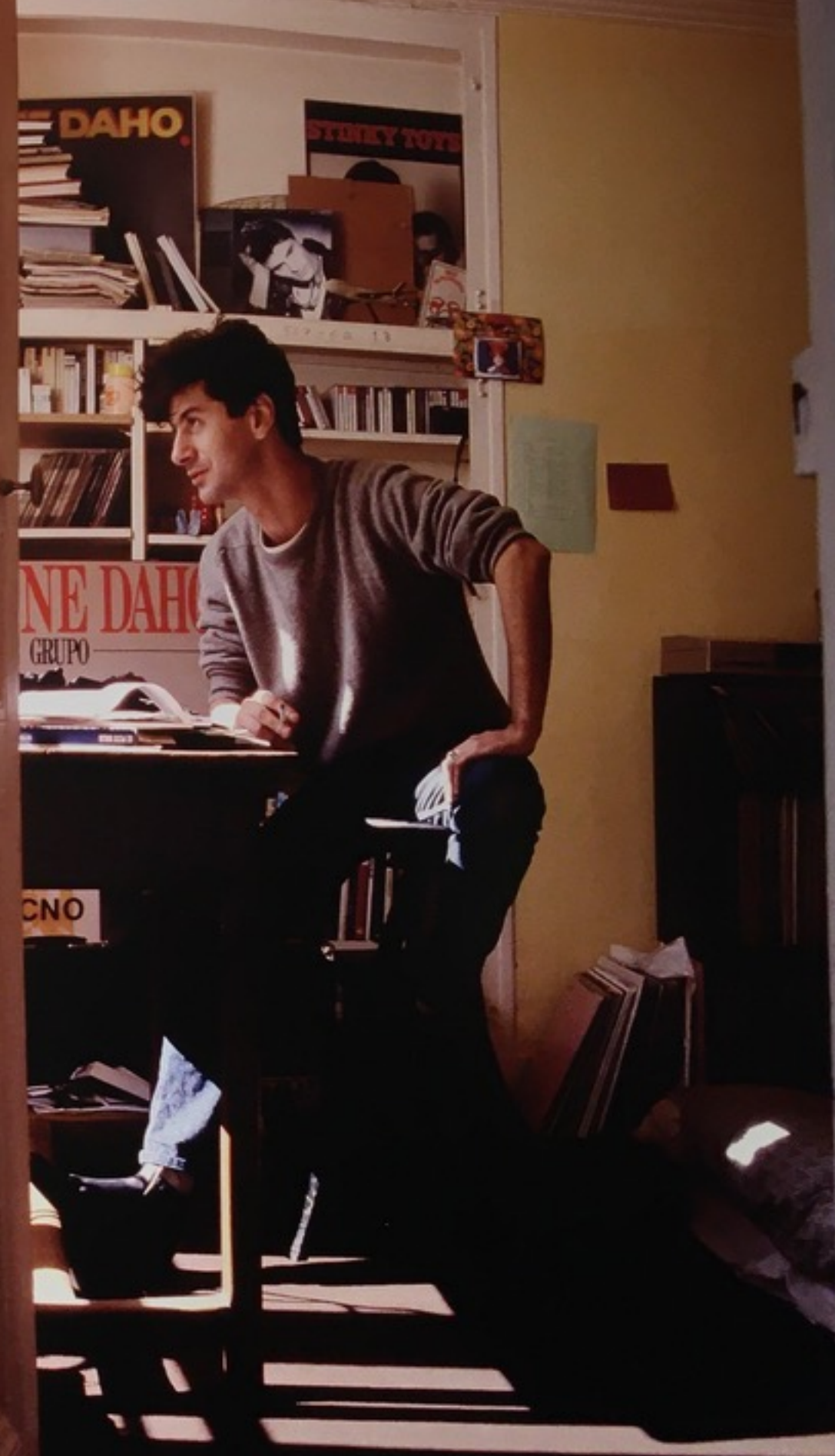
CG Something very theatrical runs through your work. Where does it come from?

ED It's a way of staging oneself; it's essential. Although you are exposed onstage, you are still protected: the lights and costumes are like armor.

CG You are very open in interviews, and your music is very intimate. What do you keep to yourself even as you continue to let yourself be seen more and more?

ED I don't think of intimacy as fragile. It's something very deep within you. And even if I give a lot – and I have never held back in my work or in what I give to those who love what I do, onstage or on record – I always find myself again. I have experienced that feeling of being looted, emptied, which once overwhelmed me with the terrifying idea that the best was behind me. It was that famous period after *Paris Aïe* and before *Eden*, when I was forced to stop and go back to basics.

CG In the song "Bleu Gitane," released as an outtake from your album *Les Chansons de l'Innocence Retrouvée* (2013), you mention Francis Bacon's relationship with his muse, George Dyer, as a "cruel ritual." Does your fascination with this story have to do with what the artist destroys for the sake of his art?



“Popularity is like a monster coming into your living room – you panic. But my love for music helped me put up with the difficult part.”



ED Yes, the way the artist skins his muse alive. It's both terrible and true.

CG Have you sacrificed people to your music?

ED Yes.

CG Do you feel remorse for it?

ED I would if I had done it consciously, but I only realized it afterward. And, fortunately, relationships change; people get back together and talk, they smooth things out. And it goes both ways: the muse also has a dictatorship over the artist.

CG Have you always felt that your music was worth these personal sacrifices?

ED When you decide to give yourself completely to a discipline, you sacrifice many things: sentimental balance, generosity toward your loved ones, family, friends. That's how it is. The life of an artist is a kind of habit we take on. I don't know if it's worth it, but I have no choice. My mind and body are made for that. The songs come through my body; I receive them.

CG Is everything you experience metabolized into a song?

ED To be an artist is to practice the art of transformation. So, yes, we are nourished by being in a couple, which is the form of relationship that makes it possible to repair oneself, to dive deep into suffering and frustration. I think the person we choose is always a mirror of our neuroses, and that a true mature relationship, absolutely loving and selfless, is a fantasy. Yet, like many people, I still hope to find it one day.

CG Your first artistic passion was photography. Do you still do it?

ED When I was 11, I was given a camera and started taking pictures of my family and friends, of album covers. I kept doing it for a while, but I was poor, and everything was expensive: film, paper, developing. I couldn't afford it. Then, when I started singing, I became the one who was photographed. In 1999, all my archives and negatives were destroyed when my house was flooded. Sound, images, photos – I lost a lot of things.

CG You recently collaborated with Malik Djoudi, who asked you to sing “A Tes Côtés” with him on his album *Tempéraments*. How did you two meet?

ED In 2016, I was honorary president of the Midi Festival in Hyères. I saw him onstage there and found him magical. He is strong yet vulnerable, very melancholic. I went up to him after the show to share my enthusiasm and a few months later, he offered me this wonderful song about friendship.

CG When you hear the word “pop,” what does it sound like to you? Pop as in “popular,” or pop as the verb “to pop”?

ED When I started out, pop was exclusively about '70s pop music, which also included rock. French songs were just variety, until the mixture of English-language pop and French variety blended into what has been called “French pop.” At first, I was rather off-piste. I didn't feel that I belonged to either pure rock or real variety, so I timidly suggested that I was a “popeur,” which was a way of creating an area of freedom that would allow me, if I wanted, to use any form of music for my songs. Everything would be pop.

CG And then, in the 1980s, pop became the dominant genre. Do you feel responsible?

ED I don't know. I am supposedly the godfather of it. I don't know if that's true, but it's nice to feel that you have contributed to something. I am part of a chain; I pass things on to people who will pass them on to others. Things keeps moving and changing. But I never asked myself that question. I used what was in my head. I sang as I spoke. Things happened naturally, without me having to think much. I am not at all cerebral; my only intelligence, my only talent, is instinct.

CG Have you ever been afraid of damaging that instinctive spontaneity by giving interviews in which you are asked, over and over, to explore its source?

ED It's possible... But even though I've given many interviews over the years, I don't think I've revealed the core. This interview has been translated from the French.

TOP OF THE POPS



A PLAYLIST OF POP SONGS, CURATED BY THE PATRON OF POP HIMSELF.

1. STUDIO ELECTROPHONIQUE
Buxton Palace Hotel (2019), Violette Records

2. FUR
Not Enough (2017), Not On Label Records

3. SONS OF RAPHAEL
A Nation of Bloodsuckers (2018), Because Music

4. MOÏSE TURIZER
Pigalle (2019), Not On Label Records

5. UNLOVED
Crash Boom Bang (2018), Heavenly Recordings

6. LUNEAPACHE
Onironautes (2019), Toolong Records

7. MGMT
Hand it Over (2018), Columbia Records

8. L'EPEE
Dreams (2019), A Recordings

9. BEACH HOUSE
Lose Your Smile (2018), Bella Union

10. RENDEZ-VOUS
Donna (demo) (2014), Zappruder

11. FAT WHITE FAMILY
Touch the Leather (2014), Hate Hate Hate Records

12. ODEZENNE
Salope d'amour (2018), Universal Music