

CULTURE

JAMES TRUMAN MAKES BEAUTIFUL MUSIC WITH SEBASTIEN LEON

The former magazine bigwig discusses his new gig: record producer

BY ADAM RATHE

Jeux d'Artifice, an album performed by "sound sculptor" Sebastien Leon and produced by first-timer Truman, comes out today. But it's funny to think that the pair's collaboration could have just ended up as a restaurant horror story.

Truman, the former editorial director of Conde Nast, was sitting down to dinner at Firefly on Mustique when another patron started playing his guitar. "I thought that it was a very brave gesture to bring your guitar to dinner and start serenading the restaurant," Truman says, sitting in the living room of his Greenwich Village home. "I was intrigued by that."

The troubadour was Leon, a former marketing executive Frenchman who'd made a name for himself in New York by creating soundscapes for art exhibits and events.

Leon's playing piqued the interest of Truman, who'd worked at music magazines like *Melody Maker* and *Spin* before Conde Nast. "We got to talking about music, particularly French music," Truman says. "I don't know as much as he does, but I've always had a great love for Serge Gainsbourg and so did Sebastien."

That conversation led to more discussions—and eventually a partnership. "We talked about the French pop scene and about American and English folk music," explains Leon. "Then we met in New York and we explored the idea of working on a record together, even though we didn't know what it was going to be."

The resulting album, *Jeux d'Artifice*, is a mesmerizing, atmospheric collection of songs that showcase Leon and that can be described as spoken word's smoldering French cousin

whispering sweet nothings over a crashing soundtrack of slow drums and sparse guitar. It's no accident that Leon name-checks spots like The Boom Boom Room or the now-defunct Soho Deitch Projects; his music takes inspiration from—and could score—the lifestyle around the louche, lower Manhattan scene.

“When I wrote the record, I was going out a lot,” Leon says. “When I wrote the song ‘Boom Boom,’ the club had just opened and it was this nightlife sanctuary. I believe that Boom Boom was as much about nightlife as Deitch was about the art world. They were happening places and you would find the same people in both. This record is a snapshot of how I felt in those days.”

Recorded in Brooklyn and Jamaica, the album is redolent of not only nightlife but also the romantic split that Leon was involved with at the time.

“I wanted the songs to be very hypnotic, which is why initially when I wrote them they were very long,” Leon says. “Then James came and cut them significantly. I was going for something very repetitive and droning. I was speaking on the songs because I was mentally too exhausted to sing. I had just separated from my wife and I didn't have much energy.”

Although a novice music producer, Truman had no problem applying his critical and editorial skills to what he heard. “I'm an editor by trade,” he says. “I thought the first should be longer and the rest should be shorter.”

Truman says he found the experience enthralling. “It didn't feel like there was a learning curve because I didn't work the board,” he says. “I had spent quite a lot of time in the studio watching artists, and it really is just about bringing your ideas and taste to something. I didn't come into the studio like Phil Spector. I was learning as it was going on. I knew enough music to know what was working and what wasn't.”

In fact, he says that he and Leon are already plotting to work on another album together and will start recording as soon as possible. Truman, who'd most recently worked on a multimedia art experience prior to *Jeux d'Artifice*, seems to have found a satisfying second act that suits him well.

About his previous project, he says, “I used the word 'circus' but it was more a free-form happening I was trying to make: a little traditional circus, a bit of Burning Man, a bit of an old medicine show. I worked for two years, but unfortunately it was impossible to look at as a business.”

He adds, “Of all the things I've been doing over the last few years, *this* is probably my favorite.”