



# Mali on his mind

St Germain has made his comeback with a career-defining album

KEVIN DAVIES

## St Germain explains why he had to take a break from doing his music

JANE CORNWELL

There had been nothing for 15 years. Then, last October, plaster casts of a man's face — smiling, jowly, eyes gently closed — began turning up all over central Paris.

Painted in the colours of different flags, most of these masks were dotted along the Left Bank, peering blindly over the historic streets and squares where their subject grew up. Long-time fans soon cottoned on: St Germain, the French electronic pioneer, was back.

Still, St Germain was never really a name to which you could put a face. His sound — a hypnotic blend of electronic loops, percussive grooves and ambient snatches of jazz, soul and blues — was the thing.

He had emerged in the mid-1990s with *Boulevard*, a game-changing debut that sold a million copies and placed him in the vanguard of the French "touch" scene, a loosely connected group of Gallic electro-stylists that included Cassius, Daft Punk and Air. Five years later came *Tourist*, an album that shifted four million units and became synonymous with urban chic.

A subsequent 280-date, two-year-long tour took in several continents including Australia. "Such a very long way," murmurs

Ludovic Navarre, St Germain's quiet alter-ego, when we meet in a swanky hideaway hotel behind a gate on a hill in Montmartre. "But the crowds were so strong, thanking us for coming so far."

Then — nothing. While the chill-out lounges of the world waited, patiently serving their overpriced cocktails, St Germain went to ground like house music's own JD Salinger, and electronica doof-doofed on without him. It all got too much, playing the same songs night after night after night, he says now. He was hearing mega-hits such as *Rose Rouge*, with its infectious horn riff and sample of jazz singer Marlena Shaw singing "I want you to get together", in his sleep.

"I had to stop completely, take a break from doing my own music," says Navarre, 47, in his calm and serious way. "I went and did other things. I listened to a lot of South African house music. I produced an album for my trumpet player (Pascal Ohse). After a few years I realised I wanted to do something new. And so I began this very long journey of research."

St Germain's comeback could have been a damp squib. Instead he has made the album of his career. His newish self-titled record

marries those syncopated beats and vocal samples with the traditional music of Mali in West Africa, a country long hailed for its fecund musicality. Popular Mali-an rock outfit Songhoy Blues also is touring Australia this month, featuring on the WOMADelaide bill alongside St Germain and his line-up of musicians from West Africa, Brazil and elsewhere.

Mali wasn't his first choice. A large-scale concert in China with drummer and Afrobeat co-creator Tony Allen had sent him, via YouTube, in the direction of Nigeria ("house music and Afrobeat are very similar but I felt it had all been done before"). The internet took him to Ghana, home of the rhythmically complex highlife, which he deemed too tricky for non-Ghanaians to interpret.

So he continued through cyberspace to Mali, to the southern Wassoulou region with its impassioned nasal vocals and pentatonic licks played on instruments such as the kora harp, balafon xylophone and the kamale ngoni, a harp or lute.

"That was the trigger, that powerful bluesy sound," he says. "I'm lucky Paris has a large Malian community, with many people listening to and playing traditional music. In some parts of Paris, apart from the decor, it's like going to Mali itself."

The contributions of musicians including fleet-fingered guitarist Guimba Kouyate (Brian Eno's favourite axeman) and 21-string kora harp player Cherif Soumano (Roberto Fonseca, Dee Dee

Bridgewater) were recorded separately. Anything deemed unexceptional was discarded; the album took six years to make.

"At first I tried getting everyone together in the studio but they were all looking at me in a strange way," the notoriously finicky Navarre says with a smile. "We needed to get to know each other first."

**'I am never satisfied. This is the trouble. I want to make music I am proud of. But sometimes I even annoy myself'**

LUDOVIC NAVARRE

The album's first single, *Real Blues*, throws a vocal sample from *You Caused My Heart to Weep* by American bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins into the electro stew. It's a song that recalls the stirring yet silky vibe conjured on St Germain's glorious 2000 hit *Sure Thing*, which used elements of a track written by John Lee Hooker and Miles Davis for Dennis Hopper's 1990 film *The Hot Spot*.

"I got the same goosebump reaction to that Hopkins song as I did when I heard John Lee Hooker," says Navarre, who sought permission from the artists' estates to sample their work. "Early on I was afraid that blues purists would think I was being sacrilegious. Then I was told that Hooker loved

what I'd done, that he found it really interesting. I was thinking of inviting him to play on the world tour" — special guests included American jazz pianist Herbie Hancock and Jamaican guitarist Ernest Ranglin — "when he fell ill, which was very sad."

Like his two previous albums, St Germain's new record is dance music, not world music. Gigs at venues including the Troxy in London and the Bataclan in Paris, where he played on November 12, the evening before last year's horrific massacre ("I was asked why I didn't cancel the tour but we have to go on"), saw Navarre standing behind an altar-like mixing desk, flanked by his seven-piece band and building and layering sounds until hands were in the air, minds were in the zone and everybody was moving. "We always finish strong," he says. "That trance aspect of music has long been vital to Navarre, who taught himself computer-programming skills as a teenager when he was bedridden for two years following a moped crash in Paris, aged 16, that left him with a permanent limp.

The only son of an interior designer and a housewife, Ludovic went from being a sporty kid, an avid sailor and windsurfer to a cloistered invalid who found solace in music, especially dub and reggae. Sound design software on his computers ("an old MSX and then a Commodore") took him elsewhere. Remixing — changing elements of a song to give it fresh meaning — became his thing.

His career happened by chance after he walked into an independent record shop in Brussels and, emboldened by a DJ who had walked in before him and played "this unbearable stuff", gave a cassette of his demos to the guy behind the counter. Signings with small labels followed.

"The French rave scene was so tiny that I needed to find people to share the music with. I worked very hard, all by myself, without even a sound engineer," says the self-confessed loner, who has moved out to the Parisian suburbs and plans, sooner rather than later, to live by the sea. "I DJed at raves mainly; my first gig was playing to about 30 people in the middle of a forest."

Don't call him a DJ, though: it makes his band members cross. "They consider me a musician. If I try telling them I am not, they get angry with me. They feel that I understand African music," he says, glancing at the CD on the table between us, on its cover a photo of that cast of Navarre's face (the masks are a collaborative project with the Parisian street artist Gregos), covered by sand that leaves a gap in the shape of Africa.

The next St Germain album won't be so long coming. But it will be a long time yet all the same. "I am never satisfied," he says with a sigh. "This is the trouble. I want to make music I am proud of. But sometimes I even annoy myself."

*St Germain plays WOMADelaide, Sunday; The Forum, Melbourne, Monday; Enmore Theatre, Sydney, Tuesday.*



MAN RAY TRUST

Man Ray's *Glass Tears (Les Larmes)*, part of the collection

## Elton John reveals keen eye for photography

JACK MALVERN

Elton John became fascinated with photography when he was looking for something to distract him during his recovery from drug addiction.

"I went from complete darkness to brilliant sunshine," he said of the moment in 1991 when he bought his first vintage photograph, a year after rehab.

About 7000 pictures later he is sharing his passion with the public with an exhibition at Tate Modern devoted to modernist prints, including Man Ray's *Glass Tears* and Andre Kertesz's *Underwater Swimmer*.

Although John is known for lavish parties and extravagance — he once spent £293,000 (\$557,000) on flowers in less than two years — he is also known for having one of the most important photographic collections in the world.

Shoair Mavlian, curator of the show entitled *The Radical Eye: Modernist Photography from the Sir Elton John Collection*, says it would be unthinkable for a mainstream gallery to attempt an exhibition about modern photography without consulting him.

The exhibition, which opens in November, will be the first big display of John's collection in Britain since a show at the Baltic in Gateshead in 2007, when police seized a photograph of a naked young girl by Nan Goldin.

The Crown Prosecution Service later concluded that *Klara and Edda Belly Dancing* (1998) was not an indecent image, but the incident prompted John to withdraw the remainder of the photographs from the gallery after nine days.

That image will not feature in the Tate show, which will consist of 150 photographs taken from 1920 to 1950, when modernist photographers such as Ray and Berenice Abbott were exploring the limits of what cameras could do.

Mavlian says that there had been a "longstanding relationship between Tate and Elton John", who was a contributor to the *Duchamp*,

*Man Ray, Picabia* show in 2008. "Many photography curators have been to see his work over the years because he has a very large collection including works from 1900 to today," she says.

The singer, who does not take photographs himself, says he and David Furnish, his husband, regard the exhibition as a great honour.

"The modernist era in photography is one of the key moments within the medium and collecting work from this period has brought me great joy over the last 25 years," he says in a statement. "Each of these photographs serves as inspiration for me in my life; they line the walls of my homes and I consider them precious gems."

"We are thrilled to be part of this collaboration with Tate Modern and hope that the exhibition audience experiences as much joy in seeing the works as I have had in finding them."

Tate will not discuss the value of the collection, but works by Ray have fetched up to £800,000 at auction. John, whose fortune has been estimated at £270 million, bought his first print — a black-and-white male nude by Horst P. Horst — at a photography festival in the south of France. Within 10 years he had 2500 images and has collected at a similar rate since.

A sale of 70 of his photographs brought \$US900,000 in 2004 at Christie's in New York. He has spoken previously about his wish to make his collection public, although the fate of the collection appears to be undecided.

"I've always wanted to leave my photography collection to the nation," he said in 2010. "David and I probably have the largest private photography collection in the world, or one of them. There isn't a photography museum in England. There should be and I'd love to leave all the photographs to the nation and the (pop) memorabilia at the same time, so create a museum where you see my life."

THE TIMES

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