



PASCAL GABRIEL: THE SUNDAY INTERVIEW

Long distance producer,
songwriter to the stars,
Pascal Gabriel talks to
Tim London

by Tim London,
first published: September, 2025

approximate reading time: 14 minutes

"my job was to kind of say to the company, yes, yes. I'll do whatever you want, but actually do exactly what the artist wants anyway." Pascal Gabriel

In the mid-1980s I met Pascal Gabriel at Hollywood studios in Hackney, London where he produced some recordings for my group. He was immediately a charming and confident fellow, completely at home in the studio and, as a Belgian, already very much at home in Hackney. Shortly after that he had his breakthrough hits with S'Express and Bomb The Bass and subsequently has worked with a range of artists in the pop world, bringing an element of credibility and depth to, sometimes, otherwise flimsy performers and pre-dating the producer/writer likes of AJ Cook.

Throughout, he has kept the emphasis on undeniable choruses and the kind of clear production style that became a trademark of Mute Records (with whom he has a strong relationship), wherein the voice is front and centre and the personality of the singer is sold through the song. It's a particularly difficult thing to achieve so it's interesting that Pascal has taken a late turn in his music career that finds him making vocal-less ambient music. Tracks that last for many minutes more than the three and a half he is known for and which present mood rather than the inevitable journey to an aural sugar-smack of a chorus.

As Stubbleman, Pascal has made a series of recordings and the latest, themed on the Tour De France section up Mount Ventoux which he made whilst recording elements of his body's reaction to the hard climb on a smart watch as he cycled. It begins with the ding-a-ling of a bicycle bell and then you are left to wander in the soundscape by yourself and choose whether or not you are on a bike on a hard ride or floating in clouds watching someone else do all the hard work.

We caught up a couple of weeks back and talked about how he came to be half way up a mountain measuring his heart rate. I didn't get the answer but his journey to that point has been a long and interesting one.

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Tim: Going right back, you're in your first punk band, The Razors. What was punk like in Belgium at that time, in 1977?

Pascal: It was a liberation from the shackles of musicianship. I had a brother four years older than me, who was really into rock bands and complicated music. And when I heard the first Ramones album in the local record shop, it was an amazing revelation. I was like, I can do this.

So we got together a group of guys. I still had long hair then, of course, because I wanted to be like my brother. But I loved bands like AC DC, Purple and Led Zep and all this kind of stuff, Kiss as well. And then punk happened.

It was quite dangerous to be punk. You had the old rockers go beat up the punks, a bit like the mods and punks in the UK. We didn't really have mods in Belgium that I knew of, but we had the old rockers, the kind of guys with big, old leather jackets, big motorbikes and four or five years older than us, early 20s, and we were 16-17, sort of age group, just got our first mopeds...

I remember we went to buy the NME and we couldn't understand any of it, but we liked the photos and we could get the look. We came to London for a weekend, and came back with lots of badges, like Stiff, you know, 'if it ain't stiff it ain't worth a fuck'. All these kind of tiny fun badges. You couldn't get them in Belgium.

T: Any particular bands, apart from the Ramones, who you saw as being inspirational at that time?

P: The Damned's first album was a real big one. Well, The Ramones was the album that introduced me to punk, but I could already tell that The Damned were better produced. That first album sounds really solid and meaty and kind of still does now. It's really aged very well.

I never liked the Pistols. Some people in the gang I was with liked the Pistols. But I think the first album was a bit too double-tracked, it wasn't raw enough. It was a bit of a produce. I never got it. Then there was, of course, the other bands that we kind of vaguely read about in the NME like Eater, a band who were all super young. Early Generation X were good as well a little bit later.

Coming to London and walking down Oxford Street and seeing punks not being beaten up was quite a revelation. In our town we had to go out in groups. In London, no one cares. It was an amazing liberation to come to London.

Suicide introduced me to the more electronic side of punk. I suppose that was a little bit later, just maybe 77-78 maybe, I can't remember exactly, but to my mind, The Runaways came first, The Damned then Suicide, Cabaret Voltaire and that kind of late 70s electronic punk crossover thing.

I'm having open heart surgery next week, and
I'm listening to your album

T: It's quite complicated your career. You've worked with some really diverse artists, from completely opposite ends of the spectrum. What has been the difference when you've been working with the more Stars In Their Eyes, voice competition type people like Will Young say, and someone like Goldfrapp, someone who's got a little bit more edge to them?

P: I don't think there are many differences really. I think they're just different artists with different directions and and Will, although he was a winner of a TV program competition, he was a totally great guy, great professional, really nice to work with, had interesting ideas and really creative. I mean, he was just as creative as Alison Goldfrapp. I guess I have a wide taste. I think I can contribute with left-field people. Sometimes I contribute my pop side, if you like. And with pop people, I contribute my left-field side. I kind of sit somewhere vaguely in the middle of this thing.

T: You recorded with Billy Mackenzie, but that was in a later stage of his life when maybe things weren't so bright. How were those sessions for you, were they difficult?

P: It was not at all difficult. I had at the time, a reputation for being a guy who can work with what the industry considered difficult (artists). And I never found them difficult. I just found them discerning and and knowing what they want. We shouldn't necessarily want what the record company wants. And so my job was to to kind of say to the company, yes, yes. I'll do whatever you want, but actually do exactly what the artist wants.

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We worked really hard till really late in the morning. And he would have fantastic words like ('make it') more cinematic here and more panoramic over there. And I thought, I get it. I get it. We did some great work together. And then he died. He killed himself. It was just so awful.

I went to the funeral with a bunch of other people. It was very hard. And then his colleague, co-writer, Steve Aungel, who's a keyboard player, who had been working on new songs with Billy, asked me to finish one of the songs called Give Me Time.

It was very hard, really, really, really hard to work on the track of an artist that I think had become a friend, really, and had killed himself. I think I did it justice. It's a really good track, but, yeah, it would have been much better if he had been there.

The sonic quality of the vocals doesn't matter.
You can record on a two pence microphone and
on a 10 million pounds microphone, the
performance is what cuts it.

T: You work with some very good vocalists like Billy Mackenzie, then you work with other people whose voices are perhaps a little less naturally gifted. So what do you do? How do you vibe up a singer?

P: Record the minute they come in. I always have everything set up with the music and the rough backing track, or whatever I'm working on, one mic, two mics, maybe set up differently and really good balance in the cans, usually what I listen to in the speakers, is what they get. They get the same. So I adjust to whatever they want. And always record first day.

First few takes are nearly always the best. After that, you fix those bits.

Yeah, that's it. You know, the minute they start realising they're recording, if there's a red light or something, they freeze. And then get it gets complicated, and they think, 'people are going to actually listen to this'. You know, if they don't think anyone's going to listen to this but me, or they just trying an idea out, that's the moment.

The sonic quality of the vocals doesn't matter. You can record on a two pence microphone and on a 10 million pounds microphone, the performance is what cuts it. It might be better. It might not be better. You might want to destroy the quality of a 10,000k microphone to make it sound like a 100 pounds microphone, because it fits the track better.

Don't be proud. You know, with your mic, with your posh microphones. I mean, I've got posh microphones, but sometimes they're worse than really cheap microphones. Record all the time is the key.

T: On the other side of working with people who are really legendary and lovely people. Have you worked with anyone who's been a major pain in the ass? You don't have to name them, but can you describe what happened?

P: ***** (very well known singer in a very famous 'girl' band) was a fucking pain. Her dog shat everywhere, you know, then ran after our cat. She left her cigarette ash everywhere on the floor. It was just completely disrespectful and really not nice. I don't know what she was on, but she confused the verses, the choruses completely, couldn't remember a single melody.

T: You know that's going to be the headline, right?

P: Thank you. Tim, good, well, she was a nasty old Tory as well and she was really nasty to a friend of mine. A top-line writer I was working with, and she made her cry and said, 'you'll never work in this industry again'. She's is not a nice person.

Any mixing console. That's where the cooking happens. You know, you the rest of it is ingredients.

T: What is your favourite bit of gear, Pascal, perhaps ever, or maybe just your favourite bit at the moment?

P: A mixing console, any mixing console, because that's where, whether it's virtual or real, that's where things happen. You cut things out, you put things in, you make things lead or not lead, you pan them left and right. That's where the cooking happens. You know, you the rest of it is ingredients. You can write a great song and a great performance on the two track with an acoustic guitar or a sequencer and vocals, but the balance of it and where you place things is super important. So the mixing console is the piece of gear I couldn't live without.

T: Let's get on to Stubbleman. Where does the name come from?

P: Ah, the name comes from when I started going out with Pippa, my wife, she had a restaurant called Carnevale, and all the staff in the restaurant had a nickname for regular customers. I was Stubbleman. There was a guy called Mr. Hot Chocolate Man, there was Mr. Double Barrelled. Everyone had different nicknames. And when I started going out with Pippa all the staff were, 'oh, you're going out with Stubbleman'. So 30 years later, when I was looking for a name for the project, you know, names for projects are just a pain in the ass. It's really hard to find a name that's comfortable, that doesn't represent anything wrong in your head, and also that no one else has taken - Pippa said, 'why don't you use Stubbleman? it's quite good'. And so, yeah, so I looked it up. Stubbleman wasn't taken.

it was very difficult to introduce Cluster into Kylie Minogue

T: When you started considering creating more ambient sounding music, did you have any inspirational artists that you were looking at, or were you coming at it from a kind of a raw point of view, whereby you didn't know so much and you hadn't heard so much?

P: In the late 70s and early 80s, I loved early Brian Eno. I loved all the German rock ambient stuff, like Cluster (and) I was well aware of them throughout my pop career. They were always something that I listened to at home, but it was very difficult to introduce Cluster into Kylie Minogue. Sonically, maybe, but not in song structure or in the vocal placement.

The whole idea with Stubbleman was, in the early 80s, before I became, fortunately, successful in doing basically pop music, although it was left of centre pop music. I experimented a lot. I was in an art school band called Church of Friendly Valley in 1981 where we were basically sounding like Per Ubu. Basically we were Per Ubu, made in England. That's not ambient, of course, but I was really into experimental music, much more than pop music throughout the early 80s.

Then through doing Bomb the Bass and S'Express, I started to get offered a lot of more pop, because somehow I was quite good at it.

After 25 years of doing pop, I kind of missed experimentation and doing things without boundaries, or my boundaries anyway. Stubbleman was born after a trip where Pippa and I had taken 10 weeks to drive from the East Coast to the West Coast of the US. And throughout the trip, I recorded loads of ideas on my little computer. And I thought, maybe there's an album in this.

Actually, it was quite liberating. To not write for pop, you know. And so that was the first Stubbleman album.

T: The best ambient music is practical music, because it's not about it taking you somewhere, so much as you being somewhere or doing something and enhancing what you're doing. You've got the choice of diving in and immersing yourself, or you can just float on the surface and just let it, help things along. It's possible to make ambient music

with a minimal amount of musical talent or teaching. It's possible to do ambient music with the most basic equipment as well. It's kind of punky in its own way. Do you see it as being, how can I put this? Is it like making a punk song for you? Is it like if you know two chords write a song?

P: I never really think about it in those terms. I mean, Maybe it can be considered punk by itself, but I think it's just music. It's just music.

What's been really gratifying is one person sent me a message on Bandcamp, and he said, I'm having open heart surgery next week, and I'm listening to your album. And that's what motivated me to go through this. That's kind of heavy, but it's really great.

Any music contributes to the great of the world, to good things of the world. If the music is not hateful words or or dissing words or things that put people down, if I put joy in people's life with my music, I think that's brilliant. So I never think about it in punk terms or making people antagonise people. No, I'm not trying to do that. I'm just doing music to please myself and and if through that, I piss some people off, then that's their problem.

I had the same attitude, even when I did punk music, it was, yes, of course, I was a young, you know, spotty teenager, rebellious. But the pleasure was to please, to somehow get all the people on your side and think, we love this.

Wow, this guy's doing porn-art music with insects

T: What was the first time you used a sampler, and what did you sample?

P: The very first time I use a sampler was a Fairlight, the computer sampler thing. Because I was a programmer. During my engineering time, I worked with a client. What were they called? SPK, 'surgical penis clinic' (Klinik?). An Australian guy, and he'd done a whole album using insects as source of sounds. This is back in '84 maybe '83

So after helping him through recording the album and mixing it, I got to know the Fairlight. I became a Fairlight programmer for a company as well as freelance engineer. So I got to use the Fairlight. But it was fascinating. Wow, this guy's doing porn-art music with insects. Whoa, you know.

Stubbleman - Once the road (Official Video)



essential info

Pascal Gabriel's Stubbleman on Bandcamp [here → \(https://stubbleman.bandcamp.com/\)](https://stubbleman.bandcamp.com/).

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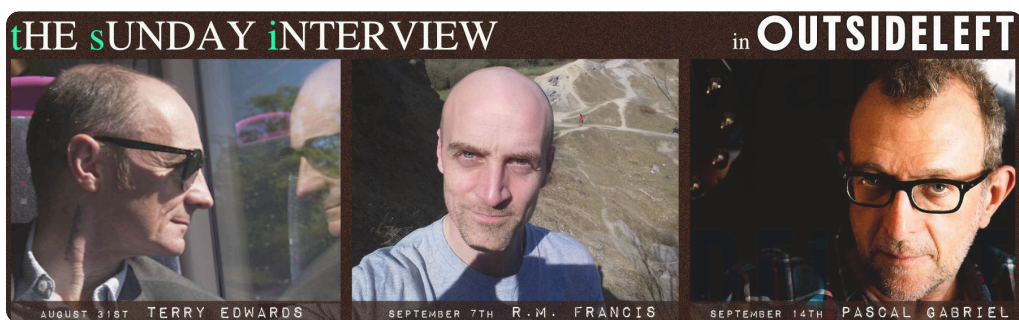
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[Tim London \(about.php?worker=tim-london\)](#)

Tim London is a musician, music producer and writer. Originally from a New Town in Essex he is at home amidst concrete and grand plans for the working class. Tim's latest thriller, *Smith*, is available now. Find out more at [timothy london.com](#) (<https://www.timothy london.com/>).

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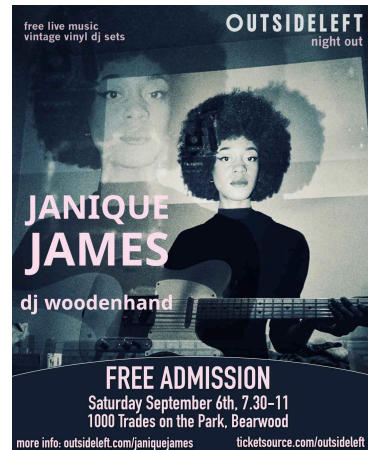
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Zig Zag Band

Ndzirombi

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