

MEANDERING OF THE SOUL



Stubbleman is the alter ego of music producer Pascal Gabriel, who had a number-one hit in the UK in 1988 with *The Theme from S'Express*, and has worked with some of the world's biggest artists, including Dido and Kylie Minogue. His latest work is an ambient three-movement album about the iconic cycling climb of Mont Ventoux and his experience of riding up it. *Rouleur* and Stubbleman spend a day on the mountain

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On July 5, 2017, at 7:42am, Pascal Gabriel set off from his home west of Mont Ventoux on a bike he built himself under the guidance of master frame builder Dave Yates. Gabriel's bike, made using Reynolds 531 tubing, has elegant lines of steel finished in British racing green, with the word 'Angel' running along the downtube – a reference to the Angel Gabriel and also to his London home at the time in Islington, just near the Angel underground station.

He pedalled through the vineyards of some of the Rhône's finest appellations – Gigondas, Vacqueyras, Beaumes-de-Venise – and on towards Bédoin, where the climb to the summit of Mont Ventoux begins. In spite of the fact his knee was sore, likely from the previous week, which had been spent in the Alps in the company of

a few cycling friends who organise an annual excursion known to the participants as the 'week of pain', he was making good time. He knew the road well: the draggy first five kilometres, the sharp left turn at Saint-Estève, the horrible and relentless steep climb under the trees to Chalet Reynard, and the final zigzag through the scree to the weather station at the top. He'd been making roughly the same time as a German rider who kept overtaking him, then stopping to drink, but the company was bugging him a little, so he pressed on as hard as he could and left the German behind.

From Bédoin to summit, Gabriel had taken one hour, 46 minutes and 43 seconds. His best time.

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The email – header: ‘Stubbleman - 1:46:43 The Ventoux Trilogy’ – landed a few minutes before half past five on a Wednesday afternoon, just as I was about to finish work. Normally I might have left it for the next day, but the combination of words was a little weird and piqued my interest.

I opened the email. There was a list of 18 song tracks, downloadable as long as I agreed to the terms and conditions not to share the files, and a few paragraphs of text from a music promotion company.

“Stubbleman is the alter ego of maverick British composer and producer Pascal Gabriel,” it read. “From humble beginnings in a Belgian punk band, Pascal moved to London in 1979 to form a string of art-school experimental bands, until he discovered the joys of the recording studio and established himself as an innovative producer and songwriter. He gained recognition by producing and co-writing two of the iconic tracks that defined the late ‘80s UK techno and breakbeat explosion: *Theme from S’Express* (S’Express) and *Beat Dis* (Bomb The Bass). He went on to produce and mix for a wide range of artists

from Wire, Inspiral Carpets, Erasure and Goldfrapp to pop divas such as Dido, Kylie Minogue, Debbie Harry and many others.”

Some of *Rouleur*’s younger readers may not have heard of the *Theme from S’Express*, which reached number one in the UK charts for two weeks in April 1988, but go and listen to it (preferably paying for the download so that the artists get their money). It’s four minutes of exuberant, high-energy house music with a driving pulse, incredibly catchy lyrics, brassy samples and an omnipresent hissing hi-hat on the off-beat. When you’ve listened to it, recall that house music was a new wave crashing over the youth culture of 1988 and energising it with a sound and a style that nobody had ever heard before. If you then imagine being a 15-year-old boy who was into music in that world, you’ll understand why I immediately downloaded the tracks and started to listen.

1:46:43 *The Ventoux Trilogy* is Pascal Gabriel’s attempt to convert the feeling and experience of riding up Mont Ventoux into music, and the 18 tracks are organised into three ‘movements’, which correspond

with the three ‘phases’ of the climb from Bédoin to the summit: the drag through olive groves and vineyards to Saint-Estève, the ascent through the forest, and the famous ‘moonscape’ landscape at the top. (‘Stubbleman’ is a side project from Gabriel’s day job of making pop music – Stubbleman makes ambient music, while the name derives from a nickname given to him by the house staff of the restaurant he used to frequent years ago in London. The staff had names for all the regular customers – Mr Hot Chocolate Man, Mr Double Barrel... Gabriel was always unshaven, so the staff used to refer to him as ‘Stubbleman’, and even after he started dating the owner, now his wife, the name stuck. When he was looking for a name and identity for his ambient side project, it seemed a natural fit.)

By the end of the eighth track, I had already replied to the publicist who sent the email requesting an interview with Stubbleman. Even by that point, the music had created a perfect dreamy image of Mont Ventoux in my mind, washed through with a sense of nostalgia for the ambient music I listened to in my late teens and early 20s.



“There is something godlike about Mont Ventoux. It’s always there, always watching you”

The music was a conduit for my mind to drift to my own memories and experiences of Ventoux – humidity and heat, buzzing cicadas, scrubby, rocky terrain, views tinged blue with distance and the infinite, light feeling of nothing but bright space above.

I ended up listening to the full album, all one hour, 46 minutes and 43 seconds of it, in one go. Then I listened to it again when doing the chores I hadn’t got round to because I was listening to it the first time. I was getting foreboding forest from track four, *The Green Cathedral*. Track eight, *On Hallowed Ground*, made me feel like I was floating on air. Track 16, *Rising with the Angels*, was a trilling explosion of endorphins followed by a gentle fallout. The music was ethereal and panoramic – it didn’t make me think about cycling as a mechanical action, it made me think about the *feeling* of cycling.

Music is both limited and has infinite scope, because the art form isn’t ‘of’ anything. Figurative painting looks like its subject – you could paint a picture of Mont Ventoux and any cycling fan could identify it. A piece of literal writing or poetry: the same. Petrarch did this in 1336. It’s more

difficult to represent literal things using music, because it’s abstract. But if there’s one thing music does well, it’s evoking feeling. You could say the same of cycling.

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Gabriel discovered cycling as an activity about 15 years ago. I think he loves it as much as he loves music, which is saying something. And at the same time as he was evolving the Stubbleman project with its first album, *Mountains and Plains*, ambient reflections on a road trip across the USA, he started wondering if he could find any common ground between his passions.

“I decided I wanted to find a way of marrying my two loves, music and cycling. I wanted to find a way of intrinsically incorporating the co-ordinates of a cycling outing – the heart rate, the power and so on, into music. I’m sure there had to be some kind of relation there, because I get very inspired when I go cycling.”

Gabriel tried various ways of using his rides to create and inspire music. He attempted to match notes to various aspects



of a ride over a small local col, the Madeleine – one note when there was a tree on one side, another for a tree on the other, the bigger the tree, the lower the note, perhaps a chord when he crossed a bridge... But it didn't work out. "It didn't reflect the music I wanted to create," he says.

The penny-drop moment came when he found Photosounder, a piece of software which converts graphic data into music and sound. Gabriel recalled his 2017 ride up Ventoux and downloaded the Strava file, including his heart rate trace, cadence, speed and power.

"I fed them into Photosounder. You can regulate the pitch, sound and musicality, and I got something. I had these four pieces, all of which were one hour, 46, 43, merging together and never quite being the same. I ended up with this long one hour, 46, 43 drone of these four tracks.

"I listened to that and started jamming on the piano, thinking this is quite cool. At points, I thought, that's one piece... and maybe it changes key here, so here is the next bit. I worked my way up the climb, from the beginning to the end. I could have

ended up with 12 pieces, or 25. I ended up with 18, because that's what the drone suggested to me.

"For example, at the point where I came to the Saint-Estève turn, it was really hard and there was no melody. I never found better than that, so I thought, that has to be it. Like any artistic creation, you have to think, okay, this is not the direction I wanted it to go, but it is telling me this is what it wants to be."

The turn at Saint-Estève is a signal moment in any ascent of Mont Ventoux. In the space of one sharp corner, the climb changes from the steady drag away from Bédoin into a tough section, 10 kilometres long and averaging around 10 per cent. It's where the second movement of *1:46:43 Ventoux Trilogy* begins, with track four, *The Green Cathedral*. "Even before I thought of making the album, I always described this bit as getting into the green cathedral, because that's what it's like. It's like a temple of cycling, completely covered," says Gabriel.

Ventoux is magnetic. Of course, it is a famous climb for cycling fans, not only because it sometimes appears in the Tour

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de France, but because when it does, chaos and unpredictability are often in the air, blown in on the citrus breeze of the pine forests. It is made of rock and earth, like any mountain, but it has an aura, composed of human memories, the madness of crowds and the invisible echo of the past.

"There is something quite godlike about Ventoux," says Gabriel. "It's always there, always watching you. I've cycled a lot of big climbs and Mont Ventoux is really the most mystical, the most magical. There is something about the scree at the top – you feel like you've gone through a little bit of hell before you get there, because you have the 10 kilometres before. In the summer, you are sweating a lot, even though you are in the shade. You sometimes see a bit of light, then you come out of it and you get into this almost paradisaical landscape of heavenly scree, which is actually a different kind of hell. It's a bit Dante-like – you climb into the different stages of the Inferno."

Though *1:46:43 Ventoux Trilogy* is a tangible product of Gabriel attempting to combine his two passions, he has

already found common ground between the two activities of cycling and music. In his production and creative work, his ideal method is to approach things with a clear head, almost trying to find a meditative state; when he cycles, the meditative state finds him.

"I like the repetition of cycling. The zen aspect. I've tried meditating, but it never works for me – I've never had the patience. For me, cycling is a kind of meditation. I love going out on my own, and after two hours, it's like being in a submarine. It's similar when I come to the studio to work – it takes a couple of hours to descend to that really profound level where nothing in the world matters, and all that matters is now. It's beautifully relaxing. I can't switch it on in 10 minutes – it takes time to forget about the world and forget about your worries. It wipes everything out and you are really thinking of now, and what you are doing. Cycling is similar, and that's why I love it."

There is also overlap between music and cycling in the sense of a journey. Bike rides are literal journeys, but no more so

than the metaphorical journey of making music, or engaging in any creative act. And for Pascal Gabriel, these are both intensely personal.

"I don't make music for other people," he says. "I love it when other people love it, and get what I'm doing, but my only compass, in pop or with Stubbleman, has been the feeling in my heart. If you lose track of that, and start creating a bassline or chord progression, thinking, 'I wonder if they'll like it,' you're on the road to nowhere. You won't please anyone and you can't second guess what people will like. Your only compass is your own feelings, to make it work. And if it works for you, hopefully there will be someone else who responds to that. The journey is what it's about, and the journey of creation is yours alone.

"I'm a pop writer as well, but this is a project that is ambient and instrumental. I wouldn't say it's more heartfelt, but it's personal. When I work in the pop world, I work with other artists, and it's verses, bridges and choruses. This work has no chorus. It's a meandering of the soul and the mind in a cycling climb." ●