

Reflections on Ventoux *with Stubbleman*



WORDS/IMAGES: FAUSTO



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"Synchronicity is a meaningful coincidence of two or more events where something other than probability of chance is involved."

— Swiss psychologist Carl G. Jung

A few months ago, I received a message from a longtime dear friend and talented photographic contemporary, Nik Strangelove, asking if I knew Pascal Gabriel. He suggested I might like to as we shared electro pulses and pedals as interests and were sort of local to each other. It turned out that Pascal and his wife Pippa Ungar had met Nik at the home of their mutual friend Sandra, the daughter of Irmin Schmidt, the German keyboard player and founding member of the legendary band, Can, which Pascal had worked with. Sandra lives in Arles and friendships collided when Nik was attending the city's photographic festival—a festival I have long intended to go to but haven't.

Talk got to music, and then bicycles, and a frequency was uncovered. That was followed by investigation and listening, and my path to Provence was revealed.

Obviously, the thing to take when visiting somebody for dinner in a different region of France is a bottle of your area's wine. So, I lined up two bottles ready to pack and deliver to Provence: a sparkling blanquette (similar to a Prosecco) from Aude, where we lived until recently, and a bottle of the award-winning local red made at the end of the hillside lane we have moved to in the Pyrénées Orientales.

An hour into the drive east I realized I had left both bottles standing on the kitchen table. But such is the way here in the "deep south" of France that one can buy alcohol at a service station and sure enough both wines were waiting for me at an early stop on the motorway

that runs from Spain to Italy. Lined up on the shelves next to the maps and road atlases, they were a Freudian catastrophe waiting to happen no doubt, but for me that day they were a rescue package nonetheless.

Headed east, with the Mediterranean glistening to my right and the Pyrenees shrinking in the rearview mirror, I awaited my first view of the Maritime Alps, as their doorman and cycling storyteller, Mont Ventoux, watches over the posher side of southern France. My first glimpse of the lonely mountain was as usual on the crest of a hill, entering Provence on the motorway. There's even a sign pointing your eyes off the road to look at the "Géant de Provence." And there it was, unmistakable on the horizon. It is a special place standing alone with its earned folklore and documented cycling history.

After a bit of winding through Provençal suburbs and, true to form, getting lost, I was ushered into a warm residence by a smiling Belgian in a flat cap. This was the residence of Pascal and Pippa. Pascal is a musician, writer and composer with a deep and successful heritage in the music industry. From punk beginnings he found a groove in the late '80s with the evolution of house music and had huge success with hits from S'Express and Bomb the Bass. Work followed with artists like Wire, Goldfrapp, Ladyhawke, Erasure, Blondie, Kylie Minogue and Dido; and a personal frequency of his electronic roots ran under the name Stubbleman, blending modular synthesizers, recorded sounds and experimental instruments.



After warm greetings and a cup of tea gladly received from the humans and a head butt from Fausto the cat, I started to take in the clues around the walls to the interests of Pascal and Pippa. Posters I recognized, historic maps and Merckx commemorative plates guided me down a neat modern staircase to a studio made up of bleeps, lights and buttons. It was a little like discovering the lair of a Bond baddie, with screens, dials and lights, silent but alive and flashing. It reminded me of the shot in the 1983 movie “WarGames” as the camera elevates to display the defense department’s giant early detection computer screens at NORAD. I didn’t have a clue what anything in that studio was doing but felt quite at home there while it whirled away independently plotting, like the film’s anti-hero, the WOPR computer.

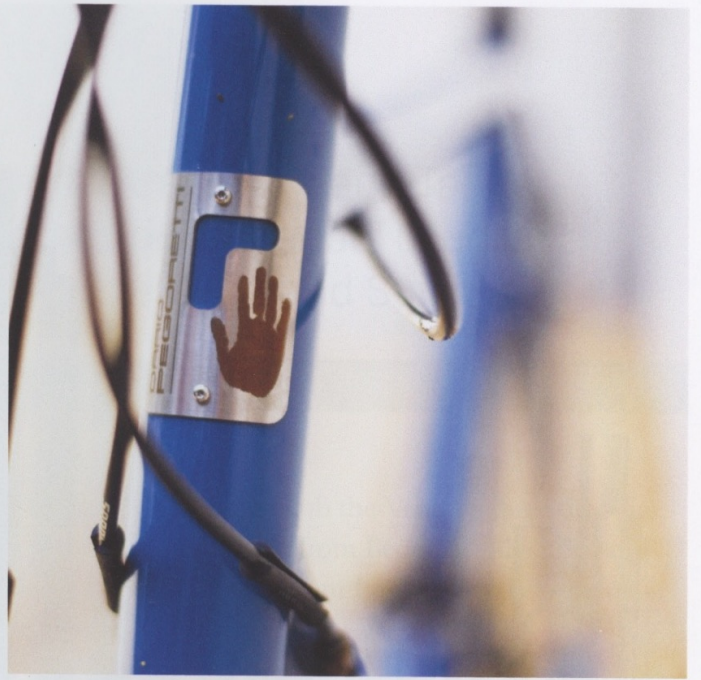
Pascal sat at a synthesizer in front of a large screen with images of Mont Ventoux running on it and twiddled some dials and pressed some buttons as sounds started to envelop the room through small but resonant loudspeakers. Cup of tea in hand, he started to tell me about his latest creation, “The Ventoux Trilogy,” an album inspired by and indeed formulated from the ascent of the nearby mountain. The album consists of 18 pieces arranged into three movements, each reflecting the atmosphere and environment of Ventoux’s three sections.

His personal cycling data—speed, power, heart rate and cadence—were recorded during an ascent and communicated to four modular synthesizer sequences with recordings, instrumental sections and melodies woven in. Realizing I probably wouldn’t know what the answer meant, I asked: What hardware was responsible

for the album once the data were ready for synthesizing? He replied, “On my modular synthesizer, using many different modules. Then used Macbeth (Scottish made!), Moog, Oberheim, Sequential, GRP and many other synths.” I was right, I didn’t know. But, to be fair, I had heard of Moog.

Listening to sections playing prominently but gently across the warm underground room, I found myself transfixed by the imagery of Ventoux on the large screen atop the desk. It was kind of meditation like, as I find riding my static bike trainer can be with the right pulses in my earphones. Mentioning this, conversation flowed to record collections and shared sonic interests. Bomb the Bass’s album “Into the Dragon” was a big influence in my personal musical journey from the electro ’80s into the electronic ’90s. A voyage that was to drive my tastes through genres and subgenres of dance music ever evolving from straight dance to more composed soundscape records to the point that the early ’90s WARP records Artificial Intelligence era was even self-described as “Electronic listening music from WARP.”

Pascal’s first album as Stubbleman was “Mountains and Plains,” a sonic journey inspired by a road trip through the U.S.; it interpreted observations and recorded sounds painted into an ambient soundscape with track names reflecting sections of the journey. It was a kind of sonic journal of the journey and, as can be the way of creativity, the journey often creates and delivers more so than the destination. This prompted him to look to his two passions, synths and pedals, with a mind to combining them in one creative portfolio.





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"The Ventoux Trilogy is not just about cycling," Pascal explained. "It is a meditation through human endurance, solitude, the raw beauty of nature."

Hearing him describe it as a meditation, I mentioned my desired state on the static pedals as thoughts blossomed: "Yes, I think the cross rhythms of cycling make it very meditative—even more so for a musician, I guess. The wheels, the heart rate, the pedaling cadence, the breathing, the white stripes on the road all combined make very interesting rhythm patterns, for one thing."

I no longer ride bikes free of a static trainer but when I did, I liked cycling solo. For hours and 100 miles, being alone with a bottle of water and my thoughts was a Zen-like experience. Perhaps it's an only-child syndrome but as much as I loved the social side to cycling being alone clicked my pedals into place. I would often find myself writing stories in my mind while pedaling all-day distances. Pascal shared this sense. "I ride on my own often. It's a kind of meditation to me. I can be creative in that state."

Pascal has climbed many of the great mountain passes but there's something about Mont Ventoux to him. More than it just being in his backyard. "I've done many other big climbs—Tourmalet, Galibier, Glandon, Iseran, Aubisque—but the Ventoux is a magical mountain; it is really special. Strange things happen there—Simpson, Froome running, Merckx collapsing—but not just in cycling. There is a spiritual side to this mountain that I haven't experienced in any other climbs, and it's been very inspiring. It may have to do with the fact that it stands alone, dominating and surrounded by plains, which has instilled many locals to load it with beliefs over the centuries—perhaps the mountain has absorbed these over the years and releases them if one is able to tap into them."

He thinks he has climbed Ventoux 30 or 40 times since 2010. It has become so normal a thing to do that he overlooked mentioning having done all three ascents in one day! "I forgot to say," he belatedly admitted, "[that]

a few years ago, I did climb the Ventoux three times in a day, by all three roads: from Bédoin, Malaucène and Sault. I got a certificate from Les Cinglés du Ventoux... It means 'The Crazies of the Ventoux'—ha, ha."

Pascal and his wife have climbed Ventoux on various bikes of different eras: Pippa on her bronze Wilier, Pascal on a Peugeot PX-10 of the mid-'60s, an Alan CX of the late '70s, a 1975 Gios, a 1978 Colnago, a Linskey titanium, his own Angel that he built at a Dave Yates frame-building school, the Pegoretti Responsorium that Dario Pegoretti hand delivered to him at Eroica.... "All my bikes did it at least once, but the Angel probably did it the most times, with the Pegoretti a close second," he said.

On a nearby wall are hung the line of bikes, including the Pegoretti, Colnago, Simpson-esque Peugeot, the Gios, the Alan, et cetera. I asked about Pegoretti's part in this story of synchronicity as I fondly remember sitting with Dario listening to various records we both owned, played on old valve amps we also had in common. His workshop reminded me of this studio time in a way.

"I have steel, aluminum and carbon bikes, but my first love is steel bikes, and especially Italian frames," Pascal said. "I'd always admired Dario's legendary work from afar, then I tried one of his frames in London—from the now-closed Mosquito Bikes—and really loved it. He was surprised I didn't want a fancy color scheme. I wanted it a discreet RAL color. When we spoke to arrange the delivery, we arranged to meet in Gaiole at L'Eroica—we go every year, and so did he. It was fab to meet him."

Then on to the Peugeot PX-10 in his collection that Simpson famously rode: "I bought this from a chap I was riding next to, going up the Ventoux on the 50th anniversary of Tom Simpson's death in July 2017. [It was a friendly ride organized by Tom's daughter Joanne.] He was part of a group from Michelin UK and was looking for a buyer. It was my size. I'd bought it by the time we reached the top...."



Bikes playing alongside music to him, I asked if they pre-dated synths in his life: “Personally, synths came first with Kraftwerk and Tangerine Dream, then came distortion and delay pedals used on a Farfisa organ when I discovered the U.S. band Suicide.”

As Pascal drifted off into a creative path with “oohs” and “aahs” at new sounds from familiar dials, my eyes wandered around this Aladdin’s cave of noise-makers. A flock of odd creature-looking wooden robots sat ready to stir into life once the humans had left the room, as if in a Disney fantasy movie. I asked if they were alive and their demonstration took my attention away from a viewfinder, as if they were playing a key block by tipping their heads to tap out enchanting notes like nodding oil pumps.

They were quite magical, so I asked about them. He replied, “The Piano Hammered percussions? Oh, I invented and made them to do live concerts to promote the first album. They were featured at a sold-out performance for the London Jazz Festival at the Purcell Room on the South Bank, and another concert at Isling-

ton’s Union Chapel. Sadly, Covid stopped all other live bookings.” That chapel in Islington, North London, is a special venue. It’s where I saw Mazzy Starr play 25 years ago. I could see an army of micro-piano-hammered percussionist robots giving a good show in there.

Pascal’s den became more interesting with each new discovery. As he rummaged around in a cupboard, he unearthed another homemade instrument blending an Indian Shruti box with a plug-in air fan attached to the back of it unlocking sounds from another continent’s melodic language. “The fan creates beautiful drones with interesting harmonics,” he said. It was like watching a masterclass in musical leftfield thinking.

All the while, “The Ventoux Trilogy” soundtracked my visit. Given how true, real life and hard worked it was to produce the data that forms its aural note, to call it ambient music feels like selling it short. I suppose that might be the section of the record store one would find it in, but this is a calm, tranquil, melodic, tense, beautiful, geographical and natural sounding one hour, 46 minutes and 43 seconds. Much like riding a bike solo, even not



up a mountain, but up that mountain undoubtedly.

It even stayed in my head at the dinner table for lunch—a gorgeous pasta salad knocked up by Pippa. Lunch tasted so good, I could see why she had a restaurant in London. “It was Pippa’s restaurant. I was just a customer there,” Pascal declared. “That’s where we met and my pseudonym originated. The staff there had nicknames for some of the customers—Mr. Hot Chocolate, Mr. Double Barrel...and Stubbleman!”

Back into the studio après-midi, I noticed the tiny rubber hands and feet on volume knobs across various synthesizers—a sweet touch grounding this hi-tech haven with a bit of fun. Smash hits are made in this room but so are smiles.

Having left it too late to get back home safely, I was offered a stay-over. So I had a lovely supper, a swim, an evening-long cuddle with Fausto, lost a sock and popped the first Stubbleman album “Mountains and Plains” onto an SD card to plug into the car’s dashboard the following day. On the drive home, it became one of a handful of albums I can have on repeat and not get sick

of. So, Richard H. Kirk’s “Virtual State,” the KLF’s “Chill Out” and Stubbleman’s “Mountains and Plains” now live together in my car.

My old friend Nik the photographer that this story started with had been typically astute. Pascal and I were on the same frequency. Are. I like and respect his observations and descriptions of Mont Ventoux as “hell like” but “mystical,” “magical” and “spiritual.” Pascal’s creativity and energy seem boundless and infectious. It’s as if that meeting in Arles that I didn’t manage to make yet again was meant not to happen so it could happen later in Provence. And will again I think, if not for the music alone, at least to recover my sock.

A few weeks after my visit to the synthesizer motherhip, I found myself on a train to the U.K. As it turned left to go up through France from the Mediterranean and Ventoux appeared once more, Stubbleman’s “Great River Road” from “Mountains and Plains” played on my iPod shuffle. Feeling some sort of meaningful coincidence, I messaged Pascal to tell him. His instant response, one word: “Synchronicity.” **FM**