

Pavel Zajíček

1951 – 2024

In May of this year, we lost Pavel Zajíček – a poet whose oeuvre was deeply imbedded in and inspired by music. The only band he ever started, DG 307, would repeatedly become defunct and come back to life, always in a new form and always with a convincing vision. Czech underground expert Petr Ferenc explores the development of Zajíček's art – in Czechoslovakia, in exile, and then upon his return to Prague – as well as presenting a selection of English translations of his lyrics.

Seventy-two-year-old Pavel Zajíček, who often shortened his name to Pavel Z, PZ, or simply Z, died on March 5th, 2024 after a prolonged illness which confined him to institutional care and made it impossible for him to continue his creative activities in the last seven years of his life. However, recordings and texts, never heard or read before, continued to be published during this period.

An artist can speak of luck if their work is received as comprehensible, unique in expression, and indivisible from a person of flesh and bones and their life story. Zajíček was one of those lucky few to achieve this, and particularly in the context of the Czech rock underground, he was considered a living classic.

His mortal coil contributed significantly to this legendary status. A tall, lean man with sharply cut features, long-haired at a time when hair was practically social capital, with a serious voice constructing the same kinds of sentences one could read and hear in his writing. We could ruminate on how an absence of stylisation blends with complete stylisation, with one becoming indistinguishable from the other, but these questions seemed irrelevant when one stood face to face with the poet, and the aura of authority that Zajíček radiated made it impossible to even utter them out loud. He was like a seismograph of pointless chatter, and it is a neat irony – and one he himself certainly realised, as did the film's director – that in *Knoflíkáři* (*Buttoners*, 1997,



directed by Petr Zelenka), he played the part of the radio host. Despite a certain reserve and reticence, he was a figure one could count on meeting at the central nodes of the liberated Prague underground following his return from exile, often seeming – as someone jokingly remarked in an opinion poll on Zajíček’s person and oeuvre by Revolver Revue magazine – a little like the Marlboro Man. At his funeral in Radotín, a village outside Prague where he lived as a young man, hundreds of people could not fit inside the church, and attendees included numerous celebrities and workers in fields in which art has long transformed into the entertainment industry. Thankfully, Zajíček never underwent this particular metamorphosis, instead choosing the path of artistic freedom, often at the cost of devastating poverty.

We could say that Zajíček was a poet of a single book; a single text. In his oeuvre, we cannot stylistically separate songs and diaries; diaries and poems; poems and prose; prose and, say, letters from prison. We could trace a retreat from rebellion and preachiness to self-reflection, intimacy, and tenderness. There are also constants, however, such as the archetypal language and frequent use of repetition, as well as the endless exploration of fundamental questions regarding the reality and authenticity of being. Zajíček’s world is both a world and a text, the record is often more real than reality, the detail speaks of the whole, and the universe is perhaps only a piece of absurd theatre featuring a profusion of masks. What is real are encounters, contacts, thoughts, that which can be felt immediately, that which inspires wonder. In the carnival of doubt and chaos, tangible beauty appears, love is sharply erotic, other meetings and friendships left innocently unspoken. One way to explore Zajíček’s output is by opening any book or booklet on a random page and being immediately transported into the realm composed of all the words he ever wrote. Though he disliked looking to the past, as he often proclaimed, his writing manages to overcome the gulf of time.

Particularly during the first stages in the development of DG 307, he relied on the effectiveness of repetition. He never relinquished the use of lists and anaphoras, but he achieved his most economical form of expression in 1979, with a song that contained only a single, endlessly repeated line: “My angel has left me.”

I Wrote a Tale of Three Cities

He was born in 1951, dropped out of the construction faculty, and, following a short DJ period in his early twenties (at the time, Western records were played by those lucky enough to have access to them, Zajíček included), he got to know the emerging Prague underground scene and soon started DG 307. The underground was a community that emerged with the onset of the so-called normalisation era, which followed the invasion of the armies of the Warsaw Pact countries in 1968 and was marked by stronger cultural and political control from the Communist Party. The underground’s centre of gravity were the Plastic People of the Universe and their artistic director, non-musician, art historian, and poet Ivan Martin Jirous (generally known as “Magor”, meaning Madman or Lunatic), who mostly operated among avant-garde visual artists. He followed Duchamp’s statement, “the great artist of tomorrow will go underground,” refusing to make concessions to the demands of ideological and monopolised cultural policy, instead choosing to depart from the official scene entirely. These demands included the obligation for all musicians to be registered with state “agencies”, to present their repertoire for approval, to undergo periodical requalification examinations that emphasised the verification of “political consciousness”, as well as the banning of English band-names and other forms of institutionalised censorship. The Plastic People were the only rock band who gave up the privileges of professional status. Playing in a “banned” group –

though the terminology of the regime would not use this word for some time still – made it impossible to make a living through music, forcing one to perform in secret, often under the veil of wedding celebrations, or for invited guests only, at communities in the countryside. These musicians had to be satisfied with working class job that held little prestige, or else face the danger of criminalisation – or at least increased interest and harassment – from the state’s repressive forces. By 1976, the sphere known as the underground (also referred to as Merry Ghetto or Druhá kultura; Second Culture) was experiencing increasing pressure, which led it to ally itself to political dissidents. This resulted in even greater repression, the imprisonment of the musicians, and a smear campaign in the media, as well as, around 1980, the so-called “Asanace” (Sanitation Act), whose aim was to force “inconvenient” musicians into exile by force. One of those who ultimately did decide to leave was Pavel Zajíček; his departure was preceded by imprisonment, violent interrogations, and the threat of further repression on the basis of a fabricated accusation of sexually assaulting an underage girl.

It must be added that while some artists (and not just artists) were gradually forced into the underground, others decided to make their life in the Merry Ghetto almost immediately as soon as they were able to do so. While the Plastic People were born in the freer context around the year 1968 and their path to the underground meant giving up on the benefits following from the status of rock stars, the other underground groups – DG 307, Umělá hmota, Dom – were *born* in the underground, and thus with an awareness of their non-existent chances at undisturbed activity, let alone commercial success. And one of the artists searching for an enclave of kindred souls was the strikingly apolitical Pavel Zajíček, who never encouraged the later use of terms such as “victim of repression”, “political prisoner”, or “dissident”.

This history, rid of nuances and simplified for the purposes of this article, has been described by numerous Czech-language books written by witnesses, popularisers, and researchers alike. For those interested in a detailed presentation in English, there is Trever Hagen’s *Living in the Merry Ghetto: The Music and Politics of the Czech Underground* (Oxford University Press, 2019), which avoids the usual simplifications and clichés that attempt to graft the Czechoslovak underground onto the incomparable milieu of the folk protest movement in the West. In the Eastern Bloc, the enemy of humanity was a monstrous form of precisely that system which the leftist malcontents in the West were clamouring for.

A number of Czech exiles settled in Vienna, the former imperial capital that lies close to the Czechoslovak borders. A highly organised Czech enclave developed, which, among other things, helped newly arriving émigrés. Zajíček, however, decided to completely sever



all links to that which he was forced to abandon, and opted to go to Sweden instead, where he wrote his last book in the Czech language for many years. (And let us add, for the sake of clarity, that all the books and albums produced in the underground were published by the artists themselves or else in a single copy; they would then be copied using samizdat and magnitizdat, and their possession would be persecuted at the same level as possession of so-called “exile literature”, which had to be smuggled into Czechoslovakia.)

In the mid-1980s, Zajíček settled in New York and worked on visual art, often producing sculptures and assemblages from found waste. No complete catalogue of his artworks has been compiled at the time of writing. He only returned to Czechia for good in 1995, five years after the fall of the Iron Curtain. For some time before then, he had lived between New York and Prague, where he restored DG 307.

Gift to the Shadows

“I didn’t want it to sound like the Plastic People,” Zajíček responded when asked about the foundations of his unique group. DG 307 really never sounded like anyone else and their roots were not in imitation. Zajíček himself, after all, refused to broaden his musical horizons by burning CDs and the like – he searched for his loves in other, more essential ways.

It wasn't that he didn't like the Plastic People – after all, he established DG 307 with his lifelong friend Milan “Mejla” Hlavsa, who started the Public People and was the group's bass guitarist, singer, and exclusive composer. Hlavsa gave the Plastic People their unmistakable repetitive sound combining the viola with the saxophone, abandoning guitars, and articulated a free and intuitive (rather than literal) inspiration from Frank Zappa, the Velvet Underground, free jazz, and Austrian-Hungarian brass bands.

DG 307, whose name is the abbreviation of the diagnosis for “transitive situational psychological disorders”, were to be different. At first, both artists saw the group as a reprieve. (There are two stories relating to the diagnosis: the first has to do with a psychiatric disorder that helped young boys avoid mandatory military service, the other claims that the authors were aiming for schizophrenia but got the numbers wrong.) Zajíček wanted to accompany his texts with “junkyard instruments”, while Hlavsa wanted to step beyond the already established genre that was tied to his name until his untimely death in 2001, shortly before his fiftieth birthday. And there was probably some internal “buddy” humour in it as well. After the group's first performance in 1973, however, which also included the famous lyrics “I run against a canvas with some shit / I'll sink the shit into the canvas” (later cited by the state media as part of the smear campaign), it was clear that the story of this group would be different. Zajíček wasn't capable of “light” rhymes, while Hlavsa couldn't provide “light” music, and DG 307 thus transformed from a side project into a fully-fledged band with a considerable line-up that saw instruments contrasted with non-instruments and noises with a significant portion of the heritage of sound poetry, and, intuitively, the voice-band, that is, a form of choral declamation introduced to the Czech context by the experimental theatre director Emil František Burian (1904–1959).

The use of non-instruments – sheets of metal, scraps of wood, agricultural machines, vacuum cleaners – was partly inspired by the experiments undertaken (more or less privately) at the turn of the 1960s and '70s by Aktual, Milan Knížák's group, in the small spa town of Mariánské Lázně. (Knížák was a striking figure in visual and action art, though his experiments in music have attracted more and more attention in recent years – see our article in CMQ 4/2013.) With a little hyperbole, we could say that the only fans of Aktual at the time were members of the circle around the Plastic People. Let us also note that industrial music only burst onto the avant-garde rock scene thanks to Western groups like Test Dept. and Einstürzende Neubauten in the late 1970s, by which time the music of DG 307 was already heading in a different direction.

The standard procedure for underground bands was to introduce an entirely new programme at each

of their sporadic concerts. The five concerts that DG 307 presented during the three years that Hlavsa was in the band presents the group in increasingly expanded instrumentations and in an increasingly tight, artistically articulate form without any contamination of uncertain experimentation or humorous breakouts. DG 307 recorded their repertoire in an improvised studio at the Houska Castle, inaccessible to the general public, where the Plastic People also recorded their debut, later released in Canada and France. Before one chapter in the history of the underground movement ended in arrests, court cases, and Zajíček's incarceration, Hlavsa left DG 307 – originally meant to be a recreational project, it had grown to demand his full attention. And that was something that Hlavsa had to reserve for the Plastic People of the Universe.

In 1979, at two concerts hosted by an underground community in the Northern Bohemian village of Nová Víska, DG 307 presented their new form. The spring concert was called *Dar stínům* (*Gift to the Shadows*), the autumn one *Pták utrženéj ze řetězu* (*The Bird That Broke Free From Its Chain*). For the former, the group performed behind a white screen, making holes in it for the latter concert. DG 307 were, at the time, a group of eight or nine people relying on acoustic instruments (mostly strings), recitation, and choral singing. The former wildness of the music and lyrics was transformed into introspection and absorption, non-musical elements (sand, stones, a prepared piano frame) became indelible components – rather than disruptors – in the compositions. The resulting music was unexpected, not dissimilar to contemporary chamber music, though created under utterly different conditions (mostly without notation and through the collective authorship of artists who mutually enriched each other). With *Dar stínům* and *Pták utrženéj ze řetězu*, DG 307 reached their peak. Half of the former programme was published in 1982 by Šafrán, a Swedish exile publisher of Czech literature and folk singer-songwriters, under the title *Gift to the Shadows*, the group's first album. The group never finished the originally planned trilogy: Zajíček emigrated and the forty-minute recording (i.e. half the length of both its predecessors) was named *Torzo*. Here, the group is highly economical, often making do with voices only, with Zajíček's contribution being limited to that of a lyricist.

These programmes were published as a trilogy on three occasions. First, in the early 1990s, in a wooden box, then as a 5CD collection, *Svědék spáleného času* (*Witness to Burnt Time*) with studio and live recordings of the first two programmes and an extensive Czech-English booklet with Zajíček's lyrics, period reflections, and an essay in which the author of this article explores Zajíček's magnum opus and the circumstances of its creation in considerable detail. *Svědék spáleného času* was published in 2013 by

Guerilla Records, whose catalogue includes most of the albums by the underground bands discussed here.

Zajíček did not work on music while living in exile. The single exception is his setting of several sections of T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* on the broken – spontaneously prepared – piano at the legendary Cold Storage, the rehearsal space of British group This Heat, located in a former cooling plant. This Heat were part of the independent, British-founded Rock in Opposition scene, whose members took an interest in the developments on the other side of the Iron Curtain, supporting Czech underground and alternative musicians beginning in the late 1970s, and performing numerous semi-legal concerts in Czechoslovakia in the decade before the fall of the Iron Curtain.

In the 1990s, DG 307 was renewed and history repeated itself. Zajíček and Hlavsa were once again at the core, the first realised programme *Uměle ochuceno / Artificially Flavored* (1992, Újezd) was partly tinged with lightness. After some time, the group became more serious, and Hlavsa departed once again.

The once dominant string section was complemented by a rock line-up, the number of non-musical instruments and voices was brought down. Both these tasks were now undertaken almost exclusively by Zajíček. The melodies of these new songs – and they were always songs from here on out – were relayed by the violin and cello. Zajíček gave up on singing and took to reciting instead. The most successful document of this era is *Siluety (Silhouettes)*, 1998) – some of the other

albums suffer from Zajíček's experimental approach to mixing and mastering, that is, fields he was not competent in but felt the need to try out.

After the year 2000, the group's discography began including a greater number of live recordings and fewer studio ventures. The group was wrenched from stagnation – in Zajíček's words, "saved" – by Tomáš Vtípil, two generations younger. Vtípil is a multi-instrumentalist, composer, and producer based in Brno, in whose work a propensity for the underground is only one facet of his stylistic omnivorousness. He introduced into the work of DG 307 electronic noise tracks and a melodic inventiveness that was less repetitive than that of the Hlavsa and post-Hlavsa eras.

The last album on which DG 307 introduced previously unpublished material is this year's *Sinusoida (Sine Curve)*. The forty-minute piece was performed by Zajíček with Vtípil and bass guitarist Michal Koval in September 2011 at Vagon in Prague, a legendary rock club. Zajíček's wounded voice reciting thirty or so short texts, selected, it seems, from diary entries, is significantly distorted, the holes in the overly austere concert recording filled in in the studio, in the autumn of 2023, by Vtípil's prepared instruments and electronics, as well as wordless female vocals. Pavel Zajíček will not live to see another album.

Any attempt at describing a unique human being is, by necessity, distorted and diminished. It is the art that is supposed to speak for the artists. A number of Pavel Zajíček's lyrics were translated into English in various album booklets, so let us leave the last words to him.



What Are We?

are we kids
who never had time to grow old?
or lunatics
who'll never drop dead and cold?

why do we so often
hate each other?
why do we build
fortresses of shit
on foundations of self-conceit?
of what are we afraid?

what's spectacular about us?
what's interesting about us?
we are the bearers of fear
we are the heralds of dust

what do we want?
where are we going?
when we arrive in nowhere
what will make us shit our pants
there?

are we kids
who never had time to grow old?
or lunatics
who'll never drop dead and cold?

*DG 307: (1973–75);
Globus International, 1991*

APsolutely Paper

I'd like to have
worlds made of paper
and also paper people
and a little petrol
some tinder in the box
a match-stick to light
a tool of delight
paper trees
paper houses
a paper chief
whose rule is brief
because I have
some tinder in the box
a match-stick to light
a tool of delight
high flames
blazing
paper stones
FIRST I'D SET ABLAZE
paper factories
paper bakeries
paper looney bins
paper history

A DEPRESSIVE COLONY

paper laws
paper delusions
paper revolutions
paper philosophers
PAPER ANYTHING!

*DG 307: (1973–75);
Globus International, 1991*

Neither / Nor

neither the sea nor dry land
neither light nor shadow
neither snake nor bird
neither silence nor screaming
neither vision nor blindness
neither nothing nor everything
neither paralysis nor movement
neither body nor shadow
neither falling nor flying
neither stench nor fragrance

neither neither neither

neither sea nor fragrance
neither light nor shadow
neither paralysis nor vision
neither flight nor silence
neither the dark nor stench
neither falling nor bird
neither blindness nor snake
neither body nor nothing
neither movement nor dry land
neither everything nor screaming...

*DG 307: Dar stinum
(Gift to the Shadows), 1979*

Blind Birds

we're blind birds
we fly there
without knowing where
even so
we fly there

*DG 307: Dar stinum
(Gift to the Shadows), 1979*

Tale I: New York – Prague – Paris

I wrote a tale of three cities
a tale of death and silence
a tale of chaos
a tale of grief and a tale of
celebrations
the morning sun's behind my window
and nothing is as it is...

new york prague paris

I wrote a tale of aimless wandering
a tale about labyrinth
a tale of "an artist who doesn't give
a shit about art"
a tale of the sounds of a city
a tale of light and darkness
the morning sun's behind my window
and nothing is as it is...

prague paris new york

I wrote a tale
that I burnt
a tale of a theatre of cruelty and
silence

a tale of night birds
a tale of a terrible dream
a tale of bloody tears
a tale of foreboding that the end is
nigh
the morning sun's behind my window
and nothing is as it is...

new york prague paris

*DG 307: Uměle ochuceno
(Artificially Flavored); 1992,
Újezd*

Tale II: Fragment of a Letter

together we walked through
the garden of flame,
the garden of lightness
we questioned nothing,
there was no need, for this garden
is a place of treasures, next
we entered the garden of reason
that crazy deception where the blind
lead the blind and faces
are deformed by dread and angst,
a ridiculous scene...
I return to the garden of the flame,
the garden of subtlety and silence
do not ask me why
my answer would be silence
naked words thrown against the wall:
FUCK IT!
you said that on the scorched plains
of wonder something started to rot
and wither
so that something else could begin
to grow
and this is my answer... if you wish
to talk about purity, you should first

walk through sewers full of shit, only
then you can speak of it, or not at all

you live a strange tale, full of angst
you live a strange tale, full of lost
battles

you live a strange tale, full of being
silent

you live a strange tale, full
of obsession

it is impossible to go back, impossible
to repose

I have learnt nothing, repeatedly
I enter the same river...

*DG 307: Uměle ochuceno
(Artificially Flavored); 1992, Újezd*

Walking Through a Land of Shards

I'm walking through a land of shards
A land of lights, a land of shadows

A land of passion, a land of sleep
Writing a story on your body

Like a salty storm at sea
In your eyes I burnt to death

What I don't want to forget
Those places where we dreamt

Those places of impossibility
Like desire that disappears

somewhere
Diaphanous and meaningless

Frantic and hopeless

On all journeys in all places
I awake in a strange dream

Writing a story on your body
Like a gentle storm at sea

I'm walking through a land of shards
A land of sleep

Writing a story on your body
Writing a story on your body

*DG 307: Kniha psaná chaosem
(A book Written by Chaos); 1994,
Globus International*

Silhouettes of Flying Birds

silhouettes of flying birds
and faces like books of chaos;
returning from somewhere
through the valley of silence
valley of amazement;
crossing burnt-down bridges
to set them on fire again;
listening to the sounds of Babylon

at 5 in the morning;
watching silhouettes of flying birds
as they vanish beyond the horizon

*DG 307: Siluety (Silhouettes),
Clavis, 1998*

7 Pearls

7 nights of blinding light
7 seas 7 passions

– 7 pearls –

7 edens

7 faces

7 cities and 7 worlds

7 nights

– 7 pearls –

7 nights of forgetting

7 nights of blinding light

– 7 pearls –

*DG 307: Siluety (Silhouettes),
Clavis, 1998*

Did Cain Kill Abel or Did Abel Kill Cain

delilah that suckled on your secret
and the whore of Babylon who came
6 times

did cain kill abel or did abel kill cain

a time of betrayal

a time of forgiveness

a time when you do not know

delilah that suckled on your secret
and the whore of Babylon who came
6 times

did cain kill abel or did abel kill cain

time is that which kills

time is that which is aflame

*DG 307: Siluety (Silhouettes),
Clavis, 1998*

The Sounds of Siren and Bells

The sounds of sirens and bells
on a Sunday morning.

The mirror reflecting!

The mirroring of what I feel.

To let it fall! To let it flow!

To let it grow! To let it live!

I just wanted to tell you something.

To whisper.

A few words. A few grains of sand.

A few lives rolled together.

A few tales.

Papers in my eyes began to burn.

And masks blinded by love.

Weather-beaten like faces

contorted in ecstasy

on a Sunday morning.

Those few words that I had for you.

Those few grains of sand.

Those few lives rolled together.

Those few stories.

The sounds of bells that I listen to

on a Sunday morning.

Masks, faces blinded by love.

The sounds of bells that I listen to, now.

*DG 307: Šepoty a výkřiky
(Cries and Whispers); Guerilla, 2004,
translated by Marek Tomin and Howard
Sidenberg*

Don't Be Cautious

Don't be cautious!

Above all, fear nothing!

Have no fear!

And go!

Melting snow is rushing from your
womb.

Your womb whispering tenderness.

Whispering in the tongue

of the deranged.

The tongue of those intoxicated by
the moment!

Don't be cautious!

Ask nothing!

Do not answer!

Be silent!

You do not want to hear anything.

Like the sounds of bodies ablaze.

Ablaze.

Ablaze...

Don't be cautious!

Fear nothing!

Have no fear!

And go!

*DG 307: Životy? Nebo bludné kruhy?
(Lives? Or Vicious Circles?);
Guerilla, 2013*

TRANSLATED BY MAREK TOMIN