

**UNDERGROUND ELDER, PLASTIC PEOPLE  
SAXOPHONIST, POET AND GARDENER  
Vratislav Brabenec (\*1943)**

Vratislav Brabenec was born on 28 April 1943 in Horní Počernice on the outskirts of Prague. His parents were clerks. After 1948 his father was forced to work in a factory before finding a job at the Ministry of Transport. His mother was musically gifted, a trait Vratislav inherited. From 13 he played clarinet and from 15 saxophone. He then progressed to tenor saxophone, which he performed at dances with his first “Communist youth” group, Akord.

After elementary school he studied to be a gardener at the Secondary Agricultural School in Mělník. On graduating in 1961 he was placed in charge of looking after the greenery in Příbram, which he managed to stick at for 18 months. He later took care of several parks in Bohemian and Canada. He left for Prague at 18 and, influenced by his friendship with Svatopluk Karásek, whom he had known since 1960, enrolled at the Comenius Evangelical Theological Faculty. However, he failed to graduate, devoting himself more to the bohemian than spiritual life.

The music Brabenec liked was at odds with the rock’n’roll and rock that represented the norm at the turn of the 1970s. He was more into jazz, free jazz and some psychedelic rock. He played with various wild outfits. One, the Sen noci svatojánské band (Midsummer Night’s Dream Band), achieved a degree renown. They were popular with the artists’ group The Crusader School of Pure Humour Without Jokes, of which he was a member and through which he knew Ivan M. Jirous. The latter saw in Brabenec a means of breathing new artistic life into the group The Plastic People of the Universe, for whose artistic direction he felt responsible. Despite leader Milan Hlavsa’s declaration that he couldn’t imagine “some flute” in the band Brabenec became a member of the Plastics in 1972, eventually winning Hlavsa over.

Music historians date the characteristic Plastic People sound to Brabenec’s arrival. This was immediately apparent on the LP Egon Bondy’s Happy Hearts Club Banned, as well as on the classical projects that Brabenec contributed to spiritually and in authorial terms, in particular Pašijové hry (The Passion Play) and Co znamená vésti koně (What a Bigger Horse Means). One peculiar aspect of the Plastics’ existence was the fact that as a group without recordings, meaning without official permission, they played virtually no concerts. They could only appear at private events, which they managed to do roughly twice a year. “Otherwise we led idle coffeehouse lives,” said Brabenec, with some exaggeration. In

parallel, Brabenec re-cultivated parks to earn a living. For instance, the chateau park at Měšice near Prague represented a kind of land art of the Czech underground.

But it was not only artistically that Brabenec, whose Cubist nose became a logo of the Czech underground, made a mark on history. He was involved in a landmark 1976 court case when he and friends were found guilty of “expressing disrespect to society and disregard for its moral principles” by “in particular the systematic repetition and emphasis of vulgar phrases”. Brabenec, Pavel Zajíček and Svatopluk Karásek received eight months while the repeat offender Jirous got a year and a half. The process resulted in the creation of Charter 77, which Brabenec signed on his release from prison.

In subsequent years Brabenec was subject to intense police pressure aimed at forcing him out of the country. He decided on that course after the feigned kidnapping of his four-year-old child. In 1982 he and his wife Marie Benetková moved first to Austria and later to Canada, where he again met his Canadian bandmate Paul Wilson, and experienced the countryside for which he had particularly longed. At least going by his poems, of which he published several collections and which combine a beatnik-style authenticity of expression and the visionary preaching he picked up during his years studying divinity.

Since returning to his homeland in the 1990s Brabenec has been an active member of the Plastic People and a constantly creative guardian of the legacy of the Czech underground.

*Text by Jiří Peňás*