

PAGANINI OF THE CZECH UNDERGROUND

Jiří Kabeš

When in 1974 Ivan M. Jirous introduced one of the final “legal” performances by The Plastic People of the Universe he called Jiří Kabeš the “Paganini of the Czech underground”. Otherwise he’s been known since his youth as Kába, the guy with the bushy hair and the violins.

He was born on 26 March in 1946 in Křešín near Libochovice in the Litoměřice district. His parents soon moved to Prague and Kába attended school in Nusle, where he also learned the violin. He later added the guitar and theremin, the mythical electronic instrument controlled by hand movements and without touch.

In 1969 he enrolled at the well-known arts-focused Václav Hollar Secondary School. He was into rock’n’roll and at the age of 16 was in a band called The Teenagers. He graduated in 1964 and then served two-year military service. On his return he worked as a graphic artist at Tesla Karlín. He remained until the mid-1980s, despite StB pressure on his employers to let him go.

He came into contact with the Plastics in September 1970 through Michal Jernek, who had just left the group and was searching for a replacement. Kába hit it off with the Plastics and had his first concert with them just a few weeks later at Suchá near Nejdek in West Bohemian. Milan Knížák’s Aktuál were also on the bill. As well as for by playing, the Plastics and their fans were impressed by Kabeš’s long hair and look. Milan “Mejla” Hlavsa originally couldn’t conceive of the band including violin or viola. But thanks to Kába’s appearance and musical abilities, as well as the fact John Cale played viola in The Velvet Underground, the new stringed instrument was taken on board. Indeed it was his violin and viola that (co)created the classic sound that made the band recognisable after just a few bars. With Hlavsa, Josef Janíček and Vratislav Brabenec, Kabeš made up their classic line-up.

Kabeš has always been the type of musician who has faithfully and reliably created a sound but has no ambition to write music or lyrics. He has chiefly been concerned about music’s authenticity: “Mejla and I always said that it’s better to play good music badly than overblown crap.” He lived through the Plastics’ entire famous “story”, recorded classic LPs with them and played with them at concerts that entered underground legend (Postupice, Klukovice, Bojanovice, Havel’s Hrádeček). Naturally he was persecuted with them too. In

March 1976 he was arrested, along with other members and musicians, and remanded in custody for two months. He was not charged, however. This surprised many as his long-haired look undoubtedly made him good propaganda fodder. Well-known events led to Charter 77 which, however, Kabeš did not sign on the recommendation of Václav Havel; he was a Plastic and that was quite enough.

In the 1980s the band had virtually no chance to perform. They made records to which Kába contributed. He also played with The Old Teenagers, whose members intimated he shouldn't play with the Plastics. He walked out.

At the end of the 1980s Kába rejected Hlavsa's idea of searching for a compromise that could lead to public performances. When the latter announced he was leaving the band, he punched him. In the end, however, he consented to the renaming of the group as Půlnoc, which enabled a US tour and in June 1989 a show at Prague's Eden, where 9,000 people heard Plastics' songs as performed by Půlnoc.

Until the 1990s the Plastics dispersed, appearing with different outfits. Kabeš performed with Půlnoc, Echt! and the Velvet Underground Band. In 1992 he appeared at two-special Plastics' concerts at Prague's Roxy and Radost, but the band did not get back together. However, in 1997, when Vratislav Brabenec returned, they were finally motivated to do so by Václav Havel, who couldn't be refused. The Plastics again toured and made an LP. This was impacted by an illness to Milan Hlavsa, which he succumbed to on 5 January 2001. The Plastics decided to carry on, which they continue to do to this day on and off. Last year they broke up in their old age, though Jiří Kabeš now appears with Joe Karfiát in a line-up named PPU/New Generation.

Text by Jiří Peňás