

30 years since the death of Jacques Brel: his life, his art, his legacy

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Jacques Brel was one of the great representatives of French *chanson* in the post-World War II period. Born into a bourgeois family, Brel rejected the future awaiting him in his father's cardboard factory and turned to singing. At the height of his success, in 1967, he chose to stop singing to devote himself to theater and cinema.

Brel's boundless enthusiasm toward life, his inexhaustible energy and his respect for ordinary people remain unforgettable. Born on the eve of the Great Depression, he experienced the Second World War and the German invasion of Belgium, the Algerian independence struggle in the late 1950s and the mass radicalization of the 1960s. Those events profoundly marked Brel's life and art, as well as that of other contemporary singers and artists.

Brel was born in Brussels, the Belgian capital, in April 1929. His father, Romain Brel, had worked some 20 years for the import-export corporation Cominex, during which time he spent several years in the Congo, then a Belgian colony. In 1926, he returned to Brussels and, in 1929, held a post on the company's board of directors. Shortly after, Armand Vanneste, his brother-in-law, offered to partner with him in founding Vanneste & Brel, a company making cardboard.

It was into this well-to-do Brussels bourgeois family that Jacques Brel was born, and this would permit him to avoid, for the most part, the miseries brought on by the economic crisis that hit the world in 1929, when the Wall Street crash occurred.

Jacques Brel had a conservative education highly influenced by the Catholic Church. Particularly gifted in reading and writing, he began to face difficulties in the sixth grade and was forced to repeat three school years. Nevertheless, he maintained a strong interest in reading (Verlaine, Hugo, St-Exupéry, Camus...) and his writings were often read aloud by the teacher in class as a model for the other pupils. About his childhood, Brel would say this: "I had a childhood where almost nothing happened; there was a relatively pleasant established order. It was not rough at all.... It was calm and inevitably morose."

In this relatively calm childhood, an event helped the young Brel to see through the sanitized world of the Brussels bourgeoisie and the Catholic Church: the Second World War, which would devastate Belgium. On May 10, 1940, the German army took the strategic fort of Eben-Emael in eastern Belgium, and two weeks later, King Leopold III surrendered and the Belgian army stopped fighting. This campaign of the German army, which would come to be known as the "Campaign of Eighteen Days," would cost the lives of more than 12,000 Belgians, more than the half of them civilians. Some 225,000 Belgian soldiers were deported to Germany, and 70,000 remained there until the end of the war. In the face of sustained resistance against the occupation, the German occupying forces took more than 43,000 political prisoners.

Brel often made references to the war in his songs. He tried to understand its origins, to denounce it, to oppose it. Besides the song "May 40," which he would write at the end of his life and which made direct reference to the German invasion, he would write, in the middle of the Algerian war, "Quand on n'a que l'amour" ("If we only have love") in 1956 and "La Colombe" ("The Dove") in 1959. The English version of "Quand on n'a que l'amour" would be performed by other artists during demonstrations against the Vietnam War in the United States. "La Colombe," a profoundly antimilitarist song, would also be covered in the context of the opposition toward the Vietnam War, notably by American singers Judy Collins and Joan Baez. The song includes the following verses:

*Why statues towering brave
Above the last defeat,
Old words and lies repeat
Across a new made grave*

*Dead ash without a spark,
Where cities glittered bright,
Where guns probe every light,
And crush it in the dark.*

At the beginning of the summer of 1947, when he was 18 years old, Brel learned that he had to repeat his third grade in classical college. So his father gave him a full-time job in his cardboard factory where he then worked for five years. Brel was never really comfortable in the different jobs he was assigned at the factory. He was bored and preferred to play soccer with the workers instead of giving them orders. Of his departure from the factory in 1953, he would say, "I was bored. I lived within a cautious bourgeois milieu. I was bored. I didn't spit on the way I lived nor on the bourgeoisie of my parents; no, I was bored."

When he was working at the factory, he joined Franche Cordée, a charitable organization that put on shows in orphanages, hospitals and retirement homes. It was as a member of this organization that Brel began to write songs and, at the beginning of the 1950s, to play bars in Brussels. The lyrics of his songs were conservative and reflected his religious education and the discussions that were held within Franche Cordée. For

Brel, an appeal to “good feelings” or “good values” was supposedly sufficient to alleviate social problems. In a song named “La Bastille,” written at the beginning of the 1950s and released in 1955, Brel, mocking the historical achievements of the French Revolution, asked the bourgeoisie and the working class to “love each other.”

In May 1953, Brel sent a demo recording to Jacques Canetti, a famed artistic director, who contributed to the discovery and promotion of countless artists such as Edith Piaf, Boris Vian, Georges Brassens, Serge Gainsbourg and many more. Even if Brel was still far from creating the songs that would bring him renown, Canetti took note of the recording and invited him to come to Paris.

Brel decided to quit his management job at the cardboard factory and go to Paris to try his luck. His father agreed to let him go, but warned him that he couldn’t come back to the factory if he couldn’t make a career as a singer. Brel’s decision to go to Paris was one of the most important of his life. In its seething political and social climate—the French working class went out on a general strike in August 1953—Brel, along with numerous other artists of his time, was increasingly pushed to the left.

In 1956, as the Algerian war of independence from French colonialism was intensifying, Brel wrote “Quand on n’a que l’amour” (See video), which was released on his second album and testified to the singer’s own opposition to the war. Even if this song is still imbued with a Christian idealism, which is evident throughout the entire album, it is nevertheless significant and an indication of songs to come. Brel tries to show what he sees, not only putting emphasis on what is pleasant or what should be, but on what is. He tries to describe the feelings of powerlessness felt toward war and other social injustices.

The singing technique used by Brel, the crescendo (a technique consisting of increasing the intensity of the voice and music as the song progresses), suggested that people had much more than “only love” with which to oppose war. Moreover, the defiant and explosive manner in which the song ended would be used many times by Brel and would come to be known as the “Brelian crescendo.”

In 1959, he released his fourth album. That album was the product of many years of effort and reflection, and it was this album that would help propel him into the ranks of the great singers. His understanding of the reality that surrounded him had deepened significantly since arriving in Paris. The descriptions he made of characters and situations were much more complex. The listener would now have the impression that his characters really existed. One could recognize oneself in them.

Also contributing to the success of this fourth album and those that followed was the music that accompanied the singer’s talent. Since 1956 and 1957, Brel had surrounded himself with the first-rate musicians François Rauber and Gerard Jouannest. Each had received a first prize from the Conservatoire National de Musique de Paris, and they both accompanied Brel through his entire career. Melodies were composed by Rauber or Jouannest, or both together, with or without Brel. In 1960, accordionist Jean Corti joined the group.

Especially noteworthy on the 1959 album are such songs as “La Colombe,” “La valse à mille temps,” “Les Flamandes,” “Seul,” and Brel’s most famous song “Ne me quitte pas.” This artistic masterpiece was translated into more than 15 languages and heard all over the world. In the US alone, more than 270 versions of “Ne me quitte pas” were recorded.

This song (See video) depicts a lover promising the impossible to prevent his departing companion from leaving when it is already much too late to resolve their problems. He feels abandoned and he knows his pleas will not be heard. But even as he knows it won’t work, he’s trying—he must. As he sings and makes his promises, he begins to cry. Brel captures this simple little drama, universally experienced by millions of human beings, remarkably well.

The 1960s would be a very prolific time for Brel. He wrote more than

80 songs, and some years gave more than 300 concerts. He sang in many countries, including Canada, the US, Djibouti, Finland and the USSR. Brel’s performances on stage were phenomenal. With all his intensity, he behaved like an actor and was able to personify the characters of his songs. On stage, his facial expressions and body language combined with the orchestration of the band and his own lyrics to create a most mesmerizing and fully formed art. The iconic image of Brel, finally, is of the singer on stage with his arms outstretched like wings, his face dripping with sweat.

Brel’s appearance at Carnegie Hall in New York City in 1965 inspired a musical revue created by composer Mort Schuman and poet Eric Blau. “Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris” featured 25 songs by Brel translated into English. The piece ran for five years in New York and played in a number of countries including Great Britain, Canada, South Africa and Sweden.

Despite his immense popularity, Brel didn’t hesitate to give numerous free or low-cost concerts for various groups. Several times, he brought his entire team, who were in solidarity with Brel and his approach, to play at a retirement home or for disabled children.

In explaining these and other gestures, Brel refused to talk about charity: “Talk about generosity, not charity. I detest charity. I spend my time doing it simply because I am too weak to impose justice.”

On the heels of the growing radicalization of the international working class in the 1960s, Brel sang, in 1962, at the World Festival of Youth For Peace in Helsinki, Finland, and, in 1965, he participated in a demonstration in Brussels against atomic bombing and testing. During the events of May 1968 in France, a massive uprising by the youth and the working class, leading to a strike of 10 million people, Brel maintained an attitude of passive sympathy. He contented himself with saying the youth were “very right in calling everything into question,” and he joined a big demonstration called by the trade unions, on May 13, in Paris, in which 800,000 people participated. On his album recorded between May and September 1968, no reference is made to the events.

Brel publicly supported Michel Rocard’s Unified Socialist Party (PSU), a left reformist party, during the French elections of 1967, and one of his musicians, Gérard Jouannest, was a member of the Communist Party.

Whatever his political views, the profound sense of injustice that Brel felt, his generosity, his respect for the people surrounding him and his desire to help them contributed to the creation of his most beautiful songs. Among them:

“Amsterdam,” written in 1964

See video

In this explosive song where he reveals once again his mastery of the crescendo, Brel attempts to put himself in the shoes of sailors, while showing the harshness of their day-to-day struggles. All through the song, beauty flows alongside ugliness, misery touches pleasure and dream straddles harsh reality. Jean Corti’s accordion gives the song the flavor of folk music, which suits perfectly the characters in the work.

He described the fate reserved for a sailor in these lyrics:

*In the port of Amsterdam
There’s a sailor who dies
Full of beer, full of cries
In a drunken town fight*

Brel follows immediately with these words:

*In the port of Amsterdam
There’s a sailor who’s born
On a hot muggy morn
By the dawn’s early light*

This is part of what makes beautiful many of Brel’s songs. He doesn’t idealize the sailors, nor does he denigrate them. They are, entirely, human beings trying to survive through all their difficulties.

“Jef,” written in 1964

See video

The titular character in “Jef” is down on his luck, overweight, an alcoholic and only recently abandoned by the “bleach blonde” girlfriend who has reduced him to tears. His friend, portrayed by Brel, tries to console him, but has nothing very great to offer him, only dreams. He sings to Jef:

*Then we'll find ourselves a bench,
we'll talk about America
where we'll go when we have money
And if you're still sad
or even if you just look it
I'll tell you how
you become a Rockefeller*

“Mathilde,” written in 1964

See video

In “Mathilde,” Brel captures perfectly the sensation of loving someone in spite of oneself, the feeling of loving and hating someone at once. In the song, Brel’s character first commands his arms not to reach out to strike Mathilde. Then he tells them not to reach out to hold her or embrace her. He seems to be saying about Mathilde, “I could kill her for making me love her this way, for the way I’ve been made to surrender myself to her so completely.” There is something essential about life that he captures here.

Beginning in 1964, Brel began to consider retiring from music. He was an honest artist and taking the easiest paths or repeating himself didn’t interest him. He was searching out new forms with which to express himself. In 1967, discussing his departure from the music scene, he declared: “I left the day I realized I had an ounce of talent.... I stopped singing for honest reasons; not for reasons of exhaustion.” Singing was important for him, but that was not all. He found that he had an interest in cinema and theater as well as sailing and flying planes. It was those fields of interest that he would explore for the rest of his life.

But Brel could not stay away from music for long, and he wrote an album in 1968 on which there was, notably, the song “Vesoul,” where Brel was accompanied by a remarkable performance from celebrated French accordionist Marcel Azzola. Toward the end of 1968, Brel played Don Quixote in the play *Man of La Mancha*, which he had himself adapted to French. From 1969 to 1973, he acted in movies such as *L’aventure c’est l’aventure* from French director Claude Lelouch. Brel also wrote and directed movies of his own (*Franz*, *Far West*).

In 1974, aboard a sailing ship, Brel left for the Canary Islands, near Morocco. He eventually weighed anchor at the Marquesas Islands, in French Polynesia. Just before leaving for the Marquesas, he was diagnosed with lung cancer and was forced to undergo an operation. He returned to France to record a final album called *Les Marquises*. Feelings of injustice, respect and generosity that pushed him to produce his best songs were still present on that album. There were excellent songs like “Jaurès,” “Orly” and “Voir un ami pleurer.” Jacques Brel died in Paris on October 9, 1978, at the age of 49. He was buried in the Marquesas.

Brel left behind a rich legacy, one that is worth reconsidering today. Once again, the ugly and hideous face of capitalism is emerging: war, social misery and the threat of dictatorship.

It was these injustices that profoundly revolted Brel, whether in Belgium of the 1930s and 1940s, in France of the 1950s or as a global citizen in the 1960s and 1970s. He questioned himself on the human condition and criticized the society surrounding him. His songs encouraged and still encourage us today more than ever to do the same.

Jacques Brel always remained honest towards his intense feeling of injustice. “I make note of a certain number of things which profoundly outrage me. This makes me furious, I shout.... But I cannot submit to that. Yes, I want to shout, yes I want to cry; but I don’t want to resign myself

to it.”

* * *

For readers less familiar with Brel’s works, these are some songs recommended by the authors of this article:

1956: Quand on n’a que l’amour

1959: La valse à mille temps, Seul, Ne me quitte pas, La tendresse, La colombe

1961: Marieke, Le moribond, Vivre debout, Le prochain amour, Les prénoms de Paris

1962: Les bourgeois, Le plat pays, Madeleine, Bruxelles, Rosa, La parlote, Les bigotes

1963: Les vieux, La Fanette, Il neige sur Liège, Pourquoi faut-il que les hommes s’ennuient?

1964: Amsterdam, Jef, Mathilde, Les bonbons, Le dernier repas, Au suivant, Les timides, Le tango funèbre

1965: Ces gens-là, Fernand, Grand-mère, Les désespérés, La chanson de Jacky

1967: Mon enfance, Mon père disait, Les cœurs tendres, La chanson des vieux amants

1968: Vesoul, Regarde bien petit, L’éclusier, La bière, La quête

1977: Jaurès, Orly, Les remparts de Varsovie, Voir un ami pleurer, Les Marquises

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