

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Philip Sweeney takes a look at one of the most significant figures in 20th century music

JACQUES BREL

Jacques Brel may not be an obvious candidate for the pantheon of world music, but as one of the all-time greats of Francophone popular music, Brel's influence looms wherever France's quintessential style *chanson* is present in the cultural mix. Unlike his contemporary Serge Gainsbourg, Brel never incorporated exotic – now world – musics into his compositions. His Germanic roots exclude any of the Latin feeling some French singers display. Yet his style was a major reference for a generation of singer-songwriters such as the Portuguese José Afonso and the Spanish Joaquín Sabina and his songs are still to be found in the repertoires of some of the older West African bands. Today, most of the new young French artists purveying the musics known as *nouvelle chanson*, *chanson neo-réaliste* and *chanson minimaliste*, either claim Brel as a formative influence, or soon made it their business to listen to his work.

With Georges Brassens and Léo Ferré, Brel made up the great trinity which elevated *chanson* to its peak in the early 60s; it was intellectually acclaimed and also selling cartloads of records. His back catalogue still consistently sells over a quarter of a million CDs a year, and maintains the Brel Institute in Brussels, run by his widow and daughter. Last year,



the 25th anniversary of Brel's death, was a busy one for the Brel family, with a million-euro multimedia exhibition and numerous ceremonies and homages, not to mention dozens of huge posters bedecking Brussels. Brel was of course not French, but Belgian, and 'Belgitude', as Brel half-mockingly referred to it, features strongly in his lyrics, from the flat landscape of 'Le Plat Pays' to the faintly absurd inhabitants 'Les Bourgeois' and 'Les Flamandes' (Flemish Women).

Brel could mock the bourgeois and the Flemish because he was both. Born in 1929, his first experience of public singing was in a Catholic youth organisation, La Franche Cordée. His early songs bore a distinct religious shading which, coupled with a somewhat austere stage presence, earned him the nickname from Georges Brassens of l'Abbé Brel (Father Brel).

Brel's prime model was Charles Trenet, the author of France's most famous 20th century *chanson* 'La Mer'. "Without Trenet we'd all have been accountants," was a Brel aphorism, and indeed Brel's working years started in his father's cardboard factory. In the evenings he accompanied himself on his guitar in Brussels cabarets such as La Rose Noire, and gradually penetrated first Belgian and then Parisian showbusiness. He was spotted early by Jacques Canetti, the influential impresario and radio presenter, and given support slots on concert tours and in Paris cabarets, notably Les Trois Baudets, on the Right Bank, with mixed success. Brel worked indefatigably on the depth and precision of his lyrics and the intensity of his presentation, and in 1955 teamed up with the pianist Gérard Jouannest, and the orchestrator François Rauber, who began to broaden and polish the music. In 1958, Brel's ascent was marked by a triumphant season at the Olympia hall, and then, finally, a hit album, from which the song 'Ne Me Quitte Pas' (written to the singer Suzanne Gabriello, one of a succession of lovers) went on to become one of the all-time classics, not just in France, but worldwide.

The mature Brel combined a powerful, expressive voice, the r's rolled emphatically in the old style, with a rich repertoire of beautifully crafted, ambitiously poetic



compositions, full of word play, colour and dissection (often tragic) of the human condition. He was a mesmeric performer with a lot of the dramatic charisma of his predecessor, Edith Piaf. He toured incessantly, honing the songs he then recorded quickly with orchestra, a small group or just guitar. In 1967, exhausted, he abandoned live performance for acting and directing on stage – the Quixote adaptation *Man of La Mancha* – and in cinema. Then, with lung cancer diagnosed, he devoted himself to his yacht and plane and travel, ending up in the Marqueses Islands of French Polynesia. In 1977 he returned to make a last record, named simply *Brel*, which became a major media event, with record shops selling out on the morning of its release. The following year he died, and was buried near Paul Gauguin on the island of Hiva Oa.

Though 'Ne Me Quitte Pas' – usually weakly translated as 'If You Go Away' – has been covered across the globe, Brel's personal status in the Anglophone world is merely cult. In his lifetime, he was popularised in the US by Mort Shuman's stage revue *Jacques Brel is Alive & Well & Living In Paris*. Later, Scott Walker and

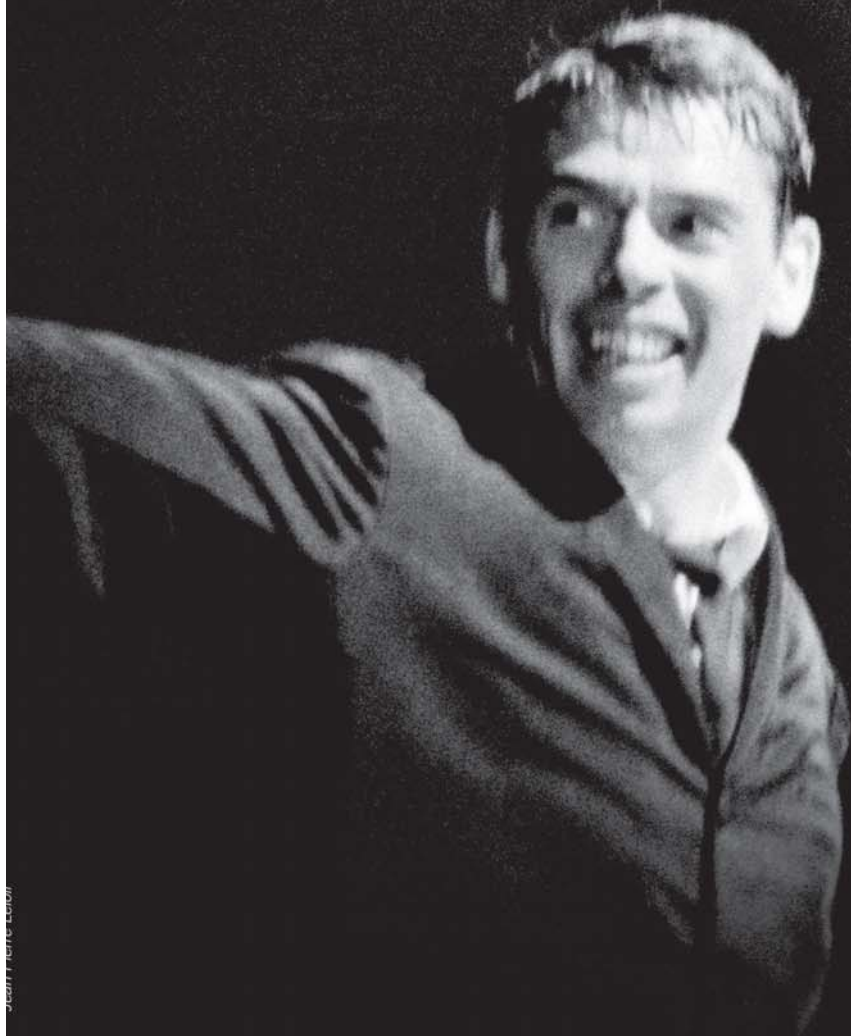
WIN!

We have five copies of
Brel: Infiniment to give away.

To enter, simply answer the
following question:

What nationality was Brel?

Usual *Songlines* competition rules apply. See p5
for details. Closing date April 23 2004.



Marc Almond made serious attempts to interpret his work, and a whole movement of UK singers – such as Barb Jungr, Leon Rosselson and Robb Johnson, who interestingly now use the term English chanson – see him as a forerunner.

But, because of their depth and power, Brel's songs do not translate well. Some

attempts, such as the US folk crooner Terry Jacks' execrable rendition of 'Les Moribonds' into 'Seasons In The Sun', must have turned away countless listeners. Although a generation of young French overlooked chanson in the rock years, Brel's influence has come back with numerous recent homages from top rock artists such as Noir

Désir and Alain Bashung, new chanson practitioners Arthur H, Kent and M, and French Maghrebi stars Faudel and Zebda. And 'Ne Me Quitte Pas' has started to turn up in curious new international versions: the Spanish flamenco singer Juanares, the Colombian salsero Yuri Buenaventura. Twenty-five years after his death, Brel's stature is as monumental as ever. **|**

RECOMMENDED DISCS

If you're feeling flush, buy *L'Integrale*, a limited-edition sweet tin box set (after Brel's 'Les Bonbons') containing Brel's complete works on 15 CDs plus a book. A more realistic choice is *Brel: Infiniment*, a new double CD set of 40 remastered tracks. All the classics: a terrific live 'Amsterdam', the dark Randy Newman-esque 'Ces Gens-Là', the beautiful 'Orly', and the witty 'Vesoul' with a virtuoso accordion part by Marcel Azzola. Plus five newly released tracks from 1977 (the perfectionist Brel didn't think they were ready), of which at least two, the superb 'L'Amour Est Mort' and 'Sans Exigences', are as heart-rendingly powerful as anything else Brel wrote. Both *L'Integrale* and *Brel: Infiniment* are on Barclay France/Universal.

***Brel: Infiniment* is reviewed in the Europe section. Also see DVDS.**



LIKE JACQUES BREL? THEN TRY...

✦ *Aux Suivants* (Polygram France, 1998)

A collection of Brel songs performed by a selection of important French artists from Alain Bashung and Noir Désir via Les Têtes Raides to Faudel and Zebda.

Otherwise, it's impossible to recommend just one artist, but listen for contemporary comparison to Georges Brassens, Juliette Greco and Barbara, and for contrast to Serge Gainsbourg. And for an idea of Brel's modern equivalent, the work of Les Têtes Raides is nowhere near as broad and powerful as Brel's, but has a distinct resonance of his interplay of text and music.

