

THE SONGS OF JACQUES BREL

Performed by JOHN WATERS

With Stewart D'Arrietta (piano) and Michael Kluger (accordion)

Jacques Brel was a singer/songwriter born in Belgium and adopted and loved by the French as an untouchable icon of the art of the 'chansonnier' - the traditional singers of dramatic, definitively French songs. Songs of love, death, human folly and the rightful place of the dispossessed. Brel died in 1978 at the age of 49 - his cancer no doubt not helped by the Gauloise cigarette that constantly dangled from his lips. He had led a life true to his deep belief in socialism and human rights. He constantly performed for the public at ticket prices that he refused to raise despite the pleading of promoters, and he left behind a sometimes contentious but everlasting legacy.

In 1966, when singer/actor John Waters was seventeen years old, he left London for Ostend in Belgium to 'hang out' with French-speaking teenage friends for a couple of weeks. It was there that he first heard a Jacques Brel song. It was performed by a street singer, and John was taken by the passionate delivery and evocative lyrics. John was a rock singer, and he felt that this music delivered the same nihilistic abandon and exuberance as the rock and pop music of the day, despite being a very different, very traditionally French genre. John instantly knew that he'd found a lifelong passion.

By 1962 John was living in Sydney, and he was invited to perform in the cabaret show 'Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris', which comprised of Brel's songs translated rather loosely, and wasn't a hit. From there his work was mainly in the 'rock-opera' scene, as well as branching out into a career as a screen actor, but John's first choice of private party music was more often than not a highly charged voice and guitar delivery of Jacques Brel's 'Amsterdam'.

John still always felt that Brel's music had been poorly translated into English. Most famously, Canadian poet Rod McEwan took the haunting 'Ne Me Quitte Pas' and turned it into an international favourite of hundreds of singers called 'If You Go Away' with soft and sentimental lyrics of his own. Brel's title is in fact an agonised cry of 'Don't Leave Me'. (As John says: "A very different proposition!") Worried that Australians would shy away from anything in a 'foreign' language, it was a while before John dared to put a set of his favourite Brel songs together and sing them in French to a Sydney audience.

However, in 1998 that is exactly what John did. He prepared some spoken English introductions to the songs in order to 'set the scene' of the lyrical journey. His friend Stewart D'Arrietta gathered a band of versatile musicians, including the virtuoso (and in this music indispensable) 'accordioniste' Michael Kluger, and they performed 'Café Brel' at the Seymour centre and on tour in Melbourne and Adelaide, to high critical acclaim. Most treasured by John of the reviews he received was in the French language newspaper 'Le Courier Australien' which reported that "Monsieur Waters nous a rendu notre bien-aimé Jacques". (Mr Waters has given us back our beloved Jacques).

Brel's songs were last revisited by John Waters and his band in a tour of 2010, and it seems the lure of this material will not go away. John and Stewart have been invited to perform in Avignon in Provence in mid 2022, and with the addition of Michael Kluger on accordion they will firstly have the pleasure of revisiting the Adelaide Fringe where they have already been embraced by audiences at their world renowned "Lennon Through a Glass Onion" show.

John's announcement of the latest excursion into Brel's world is simple:

"This is a place I simply have to go to. As he was dying, Brel is reported to have said 'don't talk about me when I'm gone. If you love me, please shut up'. So I'll just sing his songs."