

# Dálava

Jo Frost speaks to Julia Úlehla and Aram Bajakian about their experimental project based on a book of old Moravian folk songs

The opening track of *The Book of Transfigurations* starts with a recording of a man stridently singing in Czech, accompanied by *cimbalom*. This is followed by the clarion voice of a woman, joined by electric guitar. The second singer is Julia Úlehla and the first was her late Czech grandfather Jura (Jiří).

*The Book of Transfigurations* is the second album by Dálava, which was founded by Úlehla and her husband Aram Bajakian. *Dálava* is a Czech word that refers to the disappearing line on the horizon where the land and sky merge – “the fuzzy part,” explains Úlehla, describing how it’s become a metaphor for their exploration of old Moravian folk songs.

The catalyst for the project was discovering a book written by Úlehla’s great-grandfather, Dr Vladimír Úlehla (1888-1947): *Živá Píseň* (Living Song). A biologist, he also worked as an ethnomusicologist and was involved in setting up the Strážnice International Folklore Festival in 1946. His book, published posthumously in 1949, was an in-depth study of the folk traditions of Strážnice, in Moravia. Dr Úlehla saw songs as ‘living organisms’ linked to their environment.

Originally from Tennessee, Úlehla and Bajakian met at high school in Massachusetts. Bajakian then moved to New York where he became a sought-after guitarist for the likes of Lou Reed and John Zorn. A former opera singer, Úlehla was working with an Italian theatre company when she became pregnant, so they moved back to New York. “Then I found this book of my great-grandfather,” Úlehla says. “It started somehow like a conversation between me and the songs in the book.”

They decided to conduct their own experiment, to see how these songs



Emma Joelle

would metamorphose within their new North American surroundings. “We didn’t want to refer so much to the tradition, we wanted to see if we could make something that was a strong living thing, grow it from the inside out, rather than from the concept in.”

“As a jazz musician, the songs are musically interesting,” says Bajakian. “They have a real meat to them; the harmonies are really strange, like 12-tone music by Schoenberg.”

All the songs feature transfigurations of some sort: whether it’s a girl becoming a married woman, a boy becoming a soldier, a mother becoming a widow. The themes are universal – of lost love, sorrow and the futility of war. ‘Na Strážnickém Rynku/War’ is particularly moving, originally performed by a great aunt of Dr Úlehla in 1906. Julia Úlehla’s impassioned delivery perfectly encapsulates the sense of helplessness when faced with an impending war.

One of the most fascinating aspects for Dálava has been performing the music in the Czech Republic. “I had a big fear that people would throw

tomatoes at us and hate what we do because it’s so violently outside the tradition!” admits Úlehla. “People don’t know a lot of these songs, partly because they’re really old and they fell out of practice. Also the book had a complicated history as the ideas inside it were not appreciated by the Communist regime.” Today however, the book is taught in schools; it’s also been translated and will be published by an ethnomusicology journal.

The album is not so much a fusion, more an exciting collision of tradition with experimentation, one that will equally appeal to fans of folk, avant-garde improv and jazz. “The majority of people are really moved by it, as we’re doing it with feeling,” says Bajakian. “And they respond with feeling,” Úlehla agrees. The book is clearly a very personal, ongoing passion for Úlehla: “It’s full of really inspiring theories about music and life and the idea of a song as a living organism.” ♦

**+ ALBUM** *The Book of Transfigurations* will be reviewed in the next issue