

## The leading light of 1990s cassette culture Oleksandr Yurchenko is remembered in events in Western Ukraine and via a brand new edition of his collected works

By Olena Pohonchenkova

In May 2022, an underground hall inside Lviv Doll Theatre could barely accommodate the motley crowd that came to hear music archivist Vlad Yakovlev's "Mannered Music" lecture dedicated to 1990s Ukrainian cassette culture. The hall offered a respite from the late spring heat and the constant threat of Russian shelling; punk kids, internet bohemians and music obsessives from all over Ukraine sat quietly as if at some quasi-religious active listening session. But everyone fell completely silent only when a picture of two fantasy creatures on roller skates appeared on a projector screen, their half-moon faces joined in a kiss – Oleksandr Yurchenko's illustration from the cover of his 2020 tape release – and *Symphony No 1* began to play.

Copies of that 2020 Delta Shock tape, aimed at gathering money for Yurchenko's cancer treatment, sold out long ago. Sadly, he died in April that same year, aged 53. But a posthumous new edition of his solo music, *Recordings Vol 1 1991–2001*, has just been released by the Ukrainian sound archaeologists of the Shukai label. "With this compilation, we're launching the 1991–2001 decade series," says label head Dmytro Nikolaienko. "Yurchenko is the name that comes first, as his influence on 90s Ukrainian music is hard to overestimate. At the same time, he's one of the most underrated musicians of that era."

Yurchenko started out in the avant rock band Електрики (Electricians) where he played guitar alongside Ivan Moskalenko, Leonid Beley and Viktor Pushkar. The band existed for barely two years, performing noisy guitar experiments over off the wall drum machine beats. However, all of their members moved on to form other essential projects in the Kyiv underground. The most prominent of them was Yarn, a band that managed to balance Ukrainian folk motifs and a fantasy-like medieval aesthetic with an 80s dream pop haze.

In Yarn, Yurchenko switched from guitar to tsymbaly, a Ukrainian version of the hammer dulcimer, and started making string instruments of his own design. He used strings, a window frame and a guitar pick-up to construct a theorbo-like instrument that laid the sonic ground for Yarn's 1993 album *Verbna Nedilya*. That's when Yurchenko formed his signature sound – the high-pitched string drones and peculiar harmonies that became a constant in his subsequent music.

Later in the decade, with the spread



Oleksandr Yurchenko, 1990s

of more accessible electronic equipment, underground musicians switched to duos and solo projects realised in their bedroom studios, and the works of *Recordings Vol 1* were made around this time. With his wife Svitlana Neznal, Yurchenko started Merta Zara, a peculiar darkwave take on the traditional music of Ukraine and Central Asia, unreleased tracks from which are included on the new release.

Yurchenko was known to be an attentive collaborator, taking part in more electronica oriented projects with Pushkar and Beley; he made trippy downtempo in Blemish, proto-dungeon synth in Suphina's Little Beasts, and improvisational noise in Suphina Dentata. His most notable collaboration, however, is with avant folk visionary Svitlana Nianio.

"Oleksandr was always hunting for original ideas in the improvisation flow, for him this process was easy, almost flawless," Nianio recalls. "And he had a rich set of instruments for realising his artistic practice." The minimalistic piano passages of "Lisova Koletsya" and toy-like drone backgrounds of "Znayesh Yak? Rozkazhy" showcase Yurchenko's melodic strength and his ability to achieve any sound he wanted with the help of DIY instruments and found objects. *Recordings Vol 1* includes two excerpts from the "Znayesh Yak? Rozkazhy"

sessions, one of them performed with the help of a spinning top.

The greater part of the *Recordings Vol 1* project is taken up by *Symphony No 1* aka *Count To 100*, Yurchenko's 25 minute improvisation on a zither that he made from a longboard and played with a bow with additional delay effects and loops. Influenced by post-minimalism, yet rooted in the composer's indie rock background, it received comparisons to Glenn Branca's compositions linking New York's underground rock and avant garde scenes. Yurchenko recorded a few cassettes featuring *Count To 100* for friends in the mid-90s but continued editing the piece thereafter. *Recordings Vol 1* includes the never before published alternative 2001 version.

*Count To 100*, a free flowing sound meditation with reverberating passages and repetitions, seems to contain a piece of time torn out from the universal canvas. The new collection introduces the work of a composer who has never had their moment in the limelight, and offers a rare chance to get close to the 90s Ukrainian underground and one of its guiding lights. ○

Oleksandr Yurchenko's *Recordings Vol 1 1991–2001* is released by Shukai