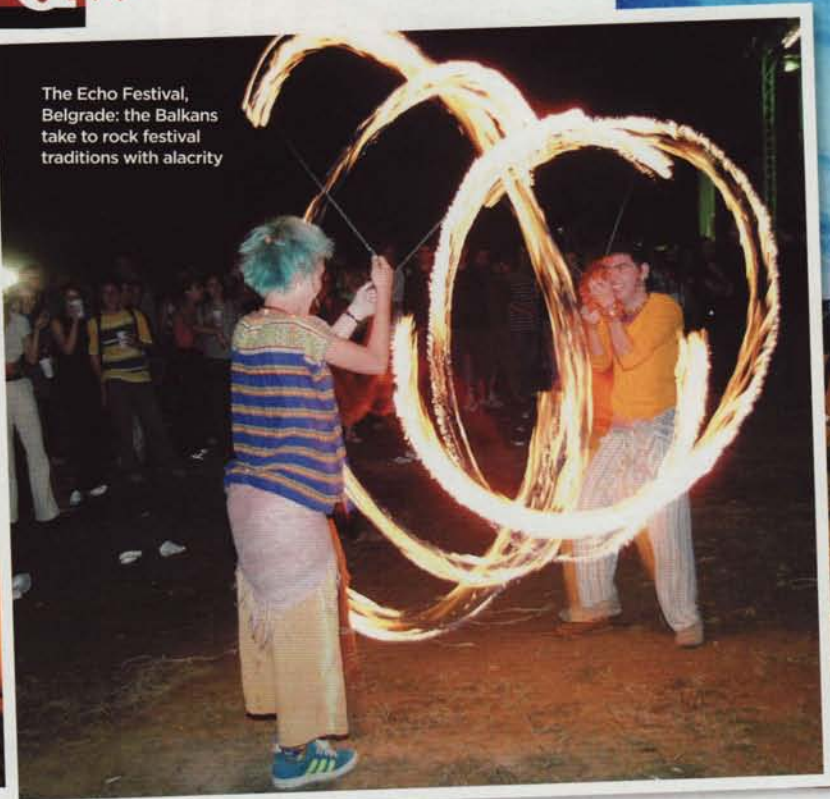




The Echo Festival, Belgrade: the Balkans take to rock festival traditions with alacrity



The Love-In on Big

How best to heal the wounds of a nation ruined by war, organised crime, economic collapse and the egregious nationalist Euro-pop called “turbo-folk”? With a four-day punk, jungle and techno rave on the former frontline between the Austrian and Turkish Empires, of course. **MATTHEW COLLIN** travels to the New Serbia to witness a countercultural rebirth so ecstatic that even the Prime Minister turned up to get down.

ECHO FESTIVAL

Lido, Belgrade, Serbia
July 10-14

*Sonic Youth, Burning Spear,
Morcheeba, Matthew Herbert Big
Band, Carl Craig*

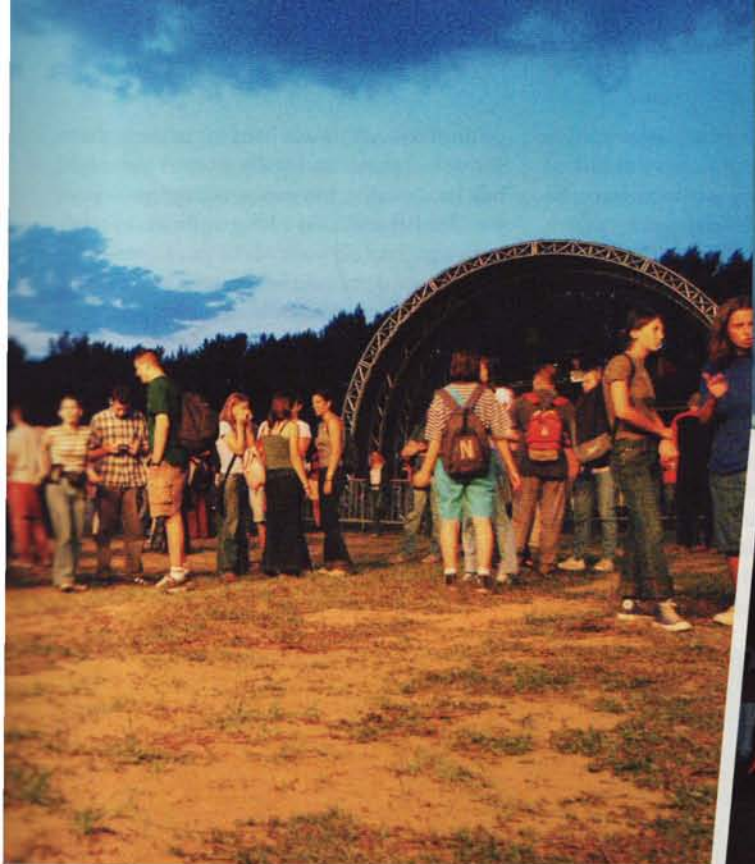
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STANISLAV MILOJKOVIC

SHORTLY AFTER SEVEN O’CLOCK on Sunday night, I’m in a tiny radio studio in the dingy attic of a tower block in central Belgrade when the presenter gets a call on her mobile. She immediately turns to the microphone and announces: “Echo Festival is cancelled tonight. I will give you more news when I have it.” After several hours of heavy rain, the island where the festival is taking place has become totally waterlogged. The showpiece final day of the festival, featuring Sonic Youth – heroes in Serbia, they never played here during the cultural and social isolation of the Slobodan Milosevic decade – has been called off. The presenter looks downcast. “Catastrophe,” she mutters.

And yet thirty hours later, Sonic Youth are

into their first encore, the menacing chime of *Shadow Of A Doubt*. Bassist and singer Kim Gordon skips around the stage in a Dalmatian-spotted frock, leaping onto the backs of the guitarists in jubilation. After a decade of experimental albums, it’s easy to forget how vital the art-thrash pioneers sound live. Feeding on the crowd’s enthusiasm, they make a beautiful, raggedy noise, cocooned in feedback. Thousands of people are churning up the mud, and they’re ecstatic. The downpour eventually stopped, and the festival organisers dropped the entrance fee and convinced Sonic Youth to extend their visit for one of the biggest free parties the city has seen. On the DJ stage, venerated Detroit techno figure Carl Craig blasts out slinky electro-jazz; he chose to stay and play too.

Echo’s organisers say they started out with



Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore (left) and Kim Gordon: heroes in Serbia



War Island

the finest of motives: to bring fresh sounds to an aurally-starved country, to forge links with the rest of Europe and show young people in the West that Belgrade has more to offer than war crimes, gang violence and political strife. One of them, Daniel Simpson, used to be a *New York Times* correspondent here, but says he felt the stories his editors demanded were outdated stereotypes: "No one ever sees anything coming out of this region apart from miserable stories about war, corruption and drug trafficking. I thought if we could have something really alive in the centre of the city in a beautiful location it could be a catalyst, it could give people new influences and inspiration."

But we're in the Balkans, and nothing's that simple here. The problems began with Echo's choice of venue, the sandy end of an island in the River Danube. It's called the Big War Island because it was on the frontline between the Austrian and Turkish empires as they fought to control southern Europe hundreds of years ago, but is now a nature reserve and home to various protected birds. Environmentalists circulated a petition saying the festival would damage the eco-system; a media furore ensued, which was only quelled when the council and the British ambassador intervened. Then there was the date chosen for the event – only a few days after Exit, a larger and better-established festival in Novi Sad, a city an hour away to the north. Exit was founded four years ago by veterans

of the anti-Milosevic student protest movement, and this year offered a populist line-up including Tricky, the Stereo MC's and Moloko. It was hard to see how the counterculturalists of such an impoverished country could afford to attend both events. On top of that, Echo's programme was far more daring – too daring, some suggested, packed full of cult dance DJs – and consequently the turn-out was below expectations, barring the final day's free-for-all, when numbers hit 80,000.

Simpson is happy to dismiss the tribulations of staging the festival. But he does suggest there were darker forces at work in the background. He speaks of chancers demanding bribes, jealous competitors stirring up trouble in the local press and factional in-fighting amongst politicians. "I've figured out more about Balkan politics doing this than I ever did

"Every state has its own mafia," the Serbian Justice Minister explained recently. "The problem is here, the mafia wanted its own state."



Burning Spear chants down Milosevic, to the punters' delight (above left)

working for the *New York Times*," he says wryly. Mired in what, from the outside, looked like true Balkan chaos, the festival always looked as if it was on the brink of falling apart before it started. Even those who don't see eye to eye with the organisers are now willing to give them some respect for pulling it off.

THERE'S A STRONG BRITISH presence here. The Bristol stage offers drum'n'bass and hip hop from the likes of Roni Size's colleague DJ Suv and More Rockers, (better know as Smith & Mighty); the London Xpress stage is programmed by the respected house label Nuphonic. On the opening night, London Xpress is thrilling. Avant-garde house DJ Maurice Fulton, wearing a Skinny Puppy T-shirt, plays records from beyond the outer lim- >>

its of disco; Scottish double-act Twitch & Wilkes stir the Ramones' *Sheena Is A Punk Rocker* and Johnny Cash's rendition of Depeche Mode's *Personal Jesus* into brutal techno loops, to the amazement and admiration of Belgrade's best DJs. "If I played such music here, they'd throw tomatoes or bottles," one tells me, "I'd be removed from the stage."

Security is tight; flanking the DJs are musclemen in black militia-style uniforms. They look like a Serbian version of Public Enemy's Security of the First World entourage, both scarily hard and laughably camp. But this is no joke. The Belgrade district where the festival is happening was home to the Zemun Clan, the criminals and wartime nationalist fighters who are thought to have assassinated the Prime Minister, Zoran Djindjic, in March. After the killing, a state of emergency was declared and over ten thousand people were arrested. "Every state has its own mafia. The problem is here, the mafia wanted its own state," the Serbian Justice Minister Vladan Batic explained recently. These days, after the state of emergency, you don't see as many leather-jacketed goons driving black Mercedes through the city centre. A lot of them are in jail or in hiding.

Serbia's favourite pop star was also caught in the net as the cops swooped. Ceca – real name Svetlana Raznatovic – was the most prominent exponent of what's known as 'turbo-folk', a cheesy mixture of Eurodance and traditional Balkan melodies. She was also married to the fearsome warlord and crime boss Arkan, who was shot and killed in the lobby of a Belgrade hotel in 2000. When police raided Ceca's house, they found a huge cache of firearms; then they accused her of having links to the Zemun Clan. The weapons charges were eventually dropped and Ceca was finally released during the week of the Echo festival – but her career is tarnished. Last year, she played to 100,000 fans at Red Star Belgrade's stadium. Now her videos aren't even being shown on the tacky TV stations that turned turbo-folk into the soundtrack of Milosevic's militarist adventures. Indeed, one of them, the notorious TV Pink, whose owner was once the political ally of Milosevic's wife, is broadcasting Echo.

Echo's Daniel Simpson says he has no worries about gangsters muscling in on the festival: "If we looked like we were making a lot of money perhaps we'd get a visit from Mr Big. But in this country Mr Big is usually very good friends with the government. We're more likely to get a call from the legitimate authorities."

Simpson says organised crime hardly touches most people's lives (apart from screwing up their country). He's right in the sense that there's no overt menace, but a friend of mine has a different take. She runs a hip Hoxton-style bar in Belgrade's Old Town that resembles a traditional Yugoslavian school classroom, except with Bruce Lee's portrait above the blackboard instead of Tito's. She says she's being gouged by her landlord and hassled by a mobster who runs a nearby brothel, and will probably have to move out. And as if to prove

that the Mafiosi haven't been neutralised, a bomb goes off outside the Ministry of Justice during the festival. Nobody is injured, but local crime experts say it's an ominous warning from the wise guys to the government.

ALONG WITH THE SLEEK SOUL of Morcheeba and the warped brassiness of the Matthew Herbert Big Band, Belgrade rockers Darkwood Dub are one of the biggest draws on Echo's main stage. They're harder and sharper than when I last saw them play three years ago at a protest rave. The songs ascend to intense crescendos, before dissolving into shimmers of echoing guitar and electronics, while singer Vuca jogs and prowls like a shaven-headed Balkan Bez. There are hints of New

go until recently, it was hard to get music from Europe or America legally. Even if you could buy it, it was far too expensive for most people. But Belgrade has a long tradition of alternative pop dating back to the punk era. There was a huge demand for Western recordings, and the gap was filled by bootleggers who lined the streets outside the Student Cultural Centre in central Belgrade, hawking illicit copies of everything from David Bowie and Buena Vista Social Club to Underworld. Now most of the bootleggers have been cleared off the pavements by the police, apart from a few seedy geezers with holdalls stuffed with tatty CDs, although many still operate clandestinely from their flats or by email.

Even though Darkwood Dub were boot-



British rappers Fun'Da'Mental make a populist point

A bomb goes off outside the Ministry Of Justice during the festival, an ominous warning from the wise guys.

Order, French jazz-housers St Germain and Talking Heads circa 1979. Their music tunes in to the same electronically-enhanced punk-funk vibrations as bands like Group 4, LCD Soundsystem and The Rapture; if they were American, they'd be seriously chic. But their Belgrade background gives them a distinctive edge. While acts like Group 4 reflect the bohemian post-Giuliani NY scene, Darkwood Dub map the post-revolutionary chaos and uncertainty of a country that barely knows its own name any more. Their latest album is titled, optimistically, *Life Begins At 30*, a reference to their own ages and to the potential for new opportunities in post-Milosevic Serbia.

For now, those opportunities are limited. Darkwood Dub struggle to survive as professional musicians, making more cash from gigs, soundtracks and adverts than they do from CD sales. "It's barely enough, it's really hard but it's possible," guitarist Vladimir Jeric tells me later. Because Serbia was under an economic embar-

legged and lost potential royalties, guitarist Vladimir Jeric won't condemn the pirates wholeheartedly. "Of course it's time to stop that really obvious theft of intellectual property," he says. "But the pirates did something very important in the nineties in Belgrade: they kept us sane. It was almost impossible

to maintain healthy communication with the rest of the world, with the embargo and sanctions. The pirates kept us well informed, so huge credit to them for that."

At Belgrade's most underground radio station, SKC, one of its presenters agrees. SKC can't afford any CDs, says Milos Djukanovic "Everything we play is MP3s from the Internet I don't have one original CD in my collection and I have a lot of CDs. It's because I don't have ten pounds to buy a CD. I don't know any one who buys original CDs. And it's not just music, it's computer programs too. You can buy anything for less than two pounds."

Music was a vital element of the resistance to the Milosevic regime. Bands used satire and surrealism to lampoon the authorities and maintain a sense of community amidst the madness. Listening to Public Enemy or The Pixies rather than turbo-folk demonstrate young people's dissent against the state's cultural propaganda. Radio B92 was the fearless

voice of alternative Belgrade during the Milosevic years, and was shut down four times by the regime for telling the truth about the political situation while playing a fierce brew of indie rock, rap and techno. It has become so well-known that even Kim Gordon applauded its courage at the end of Sonic Youth's set at Echo: "We need to keep our radio free!" she declared. "I think you know about that here..."

Although B92's music policy has become more populist, the station is still controversial; the Serbian Alastair Campbell, former government spin doctor 'Baby' Popovic, is suing it for reporting that he pressured the media to broadcast stories his way. But as B92 has become a serious media player, its underground niche has been occupied by lo-fi broad-

war, Babylon was very real indeed.

Some hope that festivals like Echo will act as a magnet for young European tourists, just as Glastonbury and the Love Parade bring people to Britain and Germany. It's part of a new, outward-looking image of modernity – what they're calling the 'new Serbia' – that politicians and businessmen are eager to promote. The prime minister, Zoran Zizkovic, even turns up on Echo's final day, wearing a denim jacket and smiling for the camera.

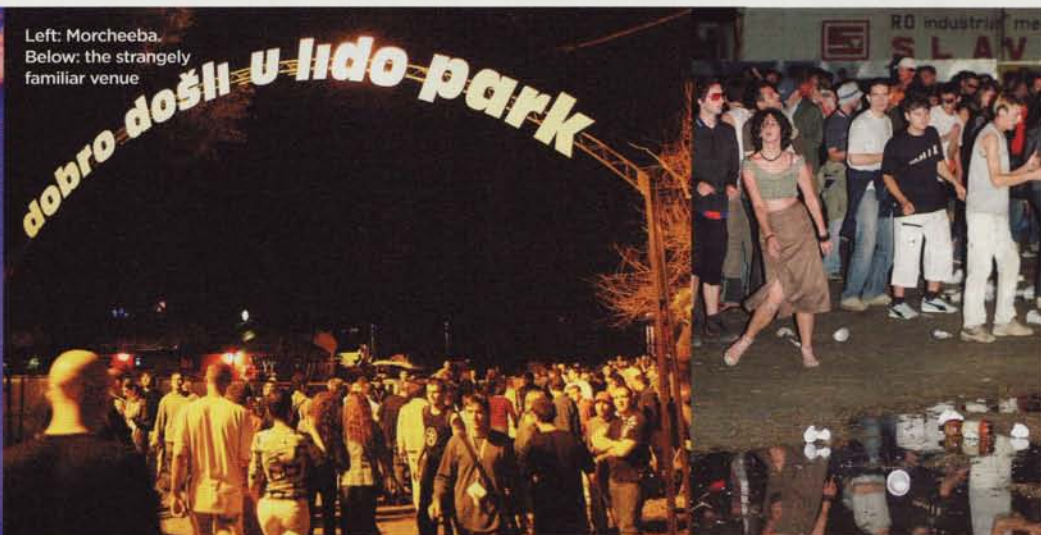
This is a country in a state of flux. Someone optimistically suggests to me that Belgrade could be like Madrid after the dictator General Franco died, when there was an explosion of cultural activity called the *movida*, spawning creative talents like film-maker Pedro

Miomir Grujic, alias Fleka, was a DJ on B92 and the promoter of a radical 1980s art-punk club. He supplied vocals for The KLF's track *The Magnificent* on the War Child *Help* album; Bill Drummond said he had a "wildly charismatic, Beefheartian rumble of a voice that tore through you like some Slavic Howlin' Wolf". Fleka kept a capricious spirit of invention alive in the darkest years, when Belgrade was, in his words, a "zombie town". For him, insanity was the only sane response. When I met him in 1999 he was almost blind and found it difficult to get around, but he was still eager to talk about his avant-garde vision.

The line from Fleka to Echo is a long and twisted one. Fleka attempted to mirror the psychological disintegration of a city where



Left: Morcheeba.
Below: the strangely familiar venue



casters like SKC and 949. SKC is an outlet for young hip-hop fanatics, skate kids and junglists. It operates out of a scruffy little studio that looks like a student's bedroom, a mess of posters, photos and record sleeves. Its computer melted in a recent fire but still works somehow. Barely controlled confusion reigns. "We just tell some jokes, smoke some weed and speak some crazy stuff into the mike," says SKC's Milos Djukanovic. "A lot of lunatics turn up and we let them say anything. Also soccer fans have their own show because no one else will let them say what they want."

What all three of Belgrade's alternative radio stations have in common is a love of reggae. Reggae is enormously popular in Belgrade; Echo has an entire stage devoted to veteran dub preachers like Jah Shaka, David Rodigan and Manasseh. On the main stage, white-bearded rootsman Burning Spear's easy-listening jams, with their sweet horns and Rasta lyrics, get a rapturous response. He looks overjoyed, almost taken aback by the fervour. One wonders what Marcus Garvey and Haile Selassie mean to these Orthodox Christian Serbs, but there's something in reggae's rebel-rockers mythology and tales of suffering and redemption that strike a deep chord here. For those in Belgrade who yearned for a life beyond nationalism, oppression and

Post-Milosevic, Jamie Oliver is the biggest TV sensation and Beckham is on billboards promoting Pepsi.

Almodóvar. Others think it'll be more like Moscow in the Yeltsin years, with a robber-baron oligarchy looting huge fortunes amidst the economic anarchy. Since the revolution that deposed Milosevic in 2000, there's more imported sportswear and designer clothes stores in central Belgrade. Cheeky-chappie chef Jamie Oliver is the biggest TV sensation, David Beckham appears on countless billboards promoting Pepsi, and the new Harry Potter is all over the bookshops. But all this apparent affluence is superficial. Outside the downtown area, prices of basic goods are rocketing and the population is becoming increasingly impoverished and desperate.

Does the fact that the country now has two major rock festivals indicate that Serbia is opening up? It's too soon to tell, everyone I speak to agrees. What is certain that an old era has come to an end – in more ways than one. While I'm in Belgrade, one of its greatest counterculture figures dies after a long illness.

morality and community were being ripped apart. Echo hopes to be part of the reconstruction, building something new from the rubble of a renegade state. Both wanted to be cultural catalysts. Neither thought it would be easy. There's another link too; a couple of days after Fleka's death, Detroit techno stars Derrick May and Carl Craig play at an Echo party at Akademija, the scuzzy basement club that the B92 DJ once ran. Two eras in underground culture collide, and the energy is phenomenal.

Back in the attic studio of Radio 949, presenter Svetlana Lazic wants to believe that Echo represents a small step forwards for Belgrade: "I would really like to see a lot of foreigners coming here – not just to see the bands perform, but to see the place and the people, who are strange but beautiful, sweet as well as crazy," she says. "We need people to see the good side of us. If everyone keeps hearing all these bad things about us, they'll believe it. They'll think I'm a killer even if I'm planting flowers and raising children. That's why it's important."

Matthew Collin is the author of THIS IS SERBIA CALLING: ROCK'N'ROLL RADIO AND BELGRADE'S UNDERGROUND RESISTANCE (Serpent's Tail).