



Marek Karcic

DRUGA GODBA, SLOVENIA

Jo Frost heads to Ljubljana, one of Europe's youngest and smallest capital cities, to experience its charms and the annual music festival in the heart of the country

Back in 1984, seven years before Slovenia became independent, a new music festival launched with one of the first reggae concerts in South-East Europe by Benjamin Zephaniah. Thirty years on, the festival has gone through many different permutations, but its adopted slogan *'Delimo si dobro glasbo!* (We Share Good Music) still rings true. Its 30th edition took place in May and featured a diverse line-up including Ethio-jazz veteran Mulatu Astatke, idiosyncratic Argentinian singer Juana Molina and Korean trad-rockers Jambinai.

One of the major influences on the festival was Radio Student, an independent radio station first established in 1969 as a result of the student riots that rocked many parts of Europe in 1968. In the 70s it was the only

Yugoslavian station playing jazz and rock music. "The alternative music scene was more important in the 80s," the festival's founder Zoran Pistotnik says. "Music was more critical, making political statements," he continues, explaining his incentive to set up the festival.

Bojan Djordjević, who runs Ring Ring festival in Belgrade, Serbia, says coming to Ljubljana in the mid-80s was like visiting a goldmine – the city was a huge reference point for many artists in South-East Europe. Druga Godba's current artistic director is Bogdan Benigar, who joined in 1992. He had been a music editor at Radio Student, where placing an importance on alternative culture was encouraged – a philosophy that continues to shape the ethos of the festival today. "We try to programme mainly new things," Benigar says, explaining

that audiences "expect that we will bring something that they will discover." The name Druga Godba actually translates as "That Other Music." "It's alternative, not mainstream. It can be mainstream somewhere but not here," he says.

Although Slovenia became an independent republic in 1991, it didn't join the EU until 2004, so those early days weren't easy. The format of the festival has gone through many changes but they have now streamlined the programme and come up with a formula that seems to work. The 29th edition was a 29-hour non-stop festival – with tickets priced at just €29 for the whole event. Next year it will be two nights with a special focus on the Glitterbeat label and the theme of 'Women's Voices'.

"The core Druga Godba audience would buy tickets no matter who the headliner is. They will take a risk," says Benigar. But he concedes that in order to sell tickets, they book at least one big-name act. Previous years they've had stars such as Youssou N'Dour, Cesaria Evora and Khaled. This year, for the first time, the headliner was Slovenian – the flamboyant singer Magnifico, together with the Serbian Army Orchestra. "A lot of people who would never go to see Magnifico went to see him as it was included in the price of the festival ticket – and they really liked it!" Benigar smiles. This closing night concert was held in Križanke –

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Petra Orehar, Jo Frost @ Europe Media



This image: The flamboyant Slovenian, Magnifico. Above: Korean rockers Jambinai. Above right: Mulatu Astatke. Right: AKC Metelkova Mesto



the courtyard of a former mid-13th-century monastery – a popular space in the city and one that is used for various festivals and events.

One of the beauties of a city-based festival is the variety of the venues on offer. Despite its small size, this is where Ljubljana excels. Besides the open-air, covered courtyard of Križanke, there's Kino Šiška, a 1960s modernist, public culture institution and auditorium where Mulatu Astatke and Bombino played. There are also late-night concerts held at AKC Metelkova Mesto – formerly the site of the ex-Yugoslavian army barracks. After independence, the barracks were taken over by squatters and eventually turned into an autonomous, alternative arts centre. It's a rambling, mural-covered block of buildings that on the Friday night of the festival, is swarming with locals. There are various venues within the complex: the Gala Hala room where American soul-jazz singer Akua Naru plays; in Channel Zero, a grimy-looking club, Jambinai

are doing their frenzied trad-heavy metal thing. In another tiny venue, the Chinese Jew's harp player Wang Li has a packed room completely captivated. "Nobody knew why he was there at that time and in that venue, but I knew it was going to work," Benigar says. *Dnevnik*, the national daily newspaper, picks out the Chinese musician as being one of the highlights of the festival in its five-star review. "If the acts are unknown, then there are no expectations!" This perhaps helps explain his logic in booking these new acts. "I like the idea of bringing artists I haven't seen before, otherwise the festival is boring, as you've seen it all before... It's quite risky, but it's a challenge."

Ljubljana's main concert hall, Cankarjev Dom also hosts concerts in its smaller Club space. On a gloriously warm Saturday lunchtime there was a double bill of Turkish quartet, Rubato, followed by Foltin, a rowdy Macedonian-Dutch-Slovenian collaboration, who conjure up a great party atmosphere.

In addition to all the music there are a series of talks and workshops that run throughout the year – not forgetting the many attractions within the city itself. *'Like Europe in miniature'*, boasts the city's tourist guide, and with its mixture of Baroque style architecture and art nouveau houses, plus its location between Vienna and Venice, there's a real confluence of Mediterranean and Central European cultures. It's worth exploring the medieval old town, climbing up to the hilltop castle, or walking along the banks of the Ljubljanica River, across its various beautiful bridges. Another big attraction for food lovers is that every Friday from May until October, Odprta Kuhna (Open Kitchen) takes place in the city's food market. All the nearby restaurants and food producers set up stalls and trestle tables for visitors to sit, have a drink and something to eat while watching the throng of locals and handful of tourists mingling. It's the perfect way to refuel between all the music, reflect on the many charms of this little-known city and wonder why this festival hasn't yet become a must-visit destination for culture and music lovers. ♦

➤ **DATES** The 2015 edition of *Druga Godba* runs from May 29-30
 ➤ **ONLINE** www.drugagodba.si