



GUCA BRASS BAND FESTIVAL

Johnny Morris visits the unique western Serbian festival with more wedding bands per square mile than anywhere else on the planet

ALL PHOTOS: Jenny Matthews

“**Y**ou’ll have to grow a moustache,” advised my friend from Bosnia. “It’s the only way you’ll blend in.” I’d told him I was going to the Brass Band Festival in Guca (pronounced Gucha) in western Serbia and he was concerned about my safety. “You must remember that it was only two and half years ago that your country was helping bomb the Milosevic government into submission.”

He had a point. The combination of the wild Gypsy brass music and all-day *slivovica* (plum brandy) supping would certainly stir up emotions. Who knew how the Serbs would react to a Brit barging into the party? I had seen the films of the Yugoslavian director Emir Kusturica, *Underground*, *Time of the Gypsies* and *Black Cat White Cat* and loved the manic chaos of the wedding scenes whipped up by the searing trumpet solos and pumping brass rhythms. I wanted to experience the sound first-hand and by all accounts Guca was the place. On the second weekend of August the town hosts a sort of Serbian Brass Olympics bringing together the top orchestras and trumpet players for the

finals of a national competition. I couldn’t resist it, facial hair or not.

So I found myself on the outskirts of Guca, deep in the mountainous area of Dragacevo, 120km south-west of Belgrade in a bumper-to-bumper queue of tractors and beat-up old Yugos. The charm of the Guca festival is that it still feels like a local country fair with the whole neighbourhood getting in on the act. There is a tangible sense of excitement as the trumpet circus comes to town and people of all ages rush past the freshly harvested haystacks to join the Balkan carnival.

The festival has evolved since its inception in 1961 when the repertoire of the bands was state-controlled. Thanks to the improvisation skills and oriental flavour of the Roma (Gypsy) bands of southern Serbia, the music is much more expressive these days and there is now room for personality and individual talents to shine through.

In the busy market in the centre of Guca the stalls sell everything from blow-up Dalmatian dogs to wooden effigies of indicted war criminals marinating in bottles of *slivovica*. There are beer stands pumping out *pivo* straight from the tankers

into a non-stop stream of glasses. Then there is the meat. I’ve never seen so many roasted pigs’ and sheeps’ heads in my life. Recorded brass music blasts out from every makeshift bar and bootleg CD stall, with ‘Wedding Cocek’ from Goran Bregovic’s score for *Underground* as the unofficial anthem. My first sighting and sounding of a real live band was the guest Italian band Tutibanda processing up the main street with Ekrem Sajdic’s Gypsy Orchestra. They made a charming couple with the Italian’s lightweight Latin tunes contrasting well against the deep, dark strength of the Gypsy Orchestra’s sound. Musical *entente cordiale* at its best.

The rest of the performers appeared in the Saturday afternoon parade. There were about 40 groups in all, including the junior orchestras, dance troupes and folk choirs each led by a standard bearer carrying a Cyrillic name tag. As each costumed group waddled past, the overall effect was like being backstage in an enormous comic opera.

The two main musical events of the festival took place on the sports field on the edge of town. The first was the Saturday night concert that was going out on German



festival profile



television and had all the accompanying paraphernalia of a big broadcast production. The lighting rigs, microphones and camera tracks distracted a little from the spirit of the pure brass but as the television company had stumped up most of the sponsorship for the event, making it a free festival, it was hard to complain.

This year the festival organiser Ilija Stankovic had come up with the innovation of putting pairs of bands on stage at the same time. It worked very well with the combined orchestras providing a double strength sound and a tight running order. They played crowd-pleasing dance favourites, mainly the fast furious *kolos* and the slower bubbling *coceks*.

As I wandered through the crowd there seemed to be an awful lot of shirtless teenage males merrily jiggling to the brass beat. One six-foot hunk leaned over and asked me where I was from. Desperate to avoid a revengeful punch, I panicked and replied "I'm er... American." Talk about raising the stakes. The guy bent down, put his arms around me and bellowed, "I love America, welcome to Guca!" The partying carried on into the early hours and amazingly

there wasn't a single fight or boozy quarrel.

The main competition on the Sunday afternoon was a more formal affair with an introductory speech, the national anthem and the loudest gun salute on record. Listening to over 200 brass players on the same stage was very moving in more ways than one – the ground seemed to vibrate. Apparently the massed music is so powerful it can be heard 20km away. The music lacked the spark of the previous night's concert but to be fair to the

players, there was a lot at stake. The contest acts as a sort of musical trade show with many visiting promoters and concert organisers booking up bands for lucrative tours. And the winning bands are able to command high fees at Serbia's society weddings. Boban Markovic, Serbia's most celebrated bandleader, has won so often he's now barred.

Personally I found the true spirit of the music lay beyond the competition on the fringes of the festival. Many of the professional wedding bands fund their trip by playing around the cafés. It was pure joy to watch as a customer hires his band, makes a request and is then surrounded by a wall of music. A ten-piece orchestra a metre away from you is a truly invigorating experience. You can get a decent blast for around €20. If you want more, stuff a few hundred dinars in the trumpet horns or better still dunk the note in your pivo and slap it onto the head of the blower. Wedding band heaven. █

CD Recommendation

© *Fanfares en Délire – Golden Brass Summit - 40 Years of the Guca Festival (Network)*

A double CD of recordings going back to Guca's beginnings in 1961 with the current stars Ekrem Sajdic and Boban Markovic. Proceeds help supports the Guca Festival



This year's festival will be August 9-11. For more details visit www.galbeno.co.yu/guca