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New music books and publications

Balkan Beats: An Oral History

Robert Šoko & Robert Rigney

BalkanBeats Records Pbk 458 pp

Based in Berlin, Robert Rigney is an American journalist (and occasional contributor to *The Wire*'s Global Ear column) with an interest in the music of South East Europe. Which is to say, he's well placed to deliver this history of the Balkan Beats craze that arose in the nightspots of Berlin in the mid-1990s and peaked around 2010. He claims his book is inspired by and modelled after Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain's *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History Of Punk*. Not only does he use the same format of juxtaposing snippets of extensive interviews, he also documents a scene that many of its protagonists deemed (perhaps somewhat spuriously) to be "the new punk" inasmuch as it was, as Rigney explains, "created independent of music industry mechanisms, from the bottom up".

Where this book mainly differs is in focusing on one particular voice – that of Rigney's co-author Robert Šoko, whose reminiscences provide the narrative thrust. A native of central Bosnia, Šoko grew up listening to what he calls "hard-core punk" (though he identifies this as Rage Against The Machine, Nirvana and Sepultura) and fled his homeland just before Yugoslavia was ripped apart by war. Arriving in Berlin in 1990 at the age of 19, he started hanging out in a Kreuzberg punk bar where, from 1993, he played cassettes of "Yugo-rock, new wave, punk, ska" in exchange for beer and spliffs to an audience largely comprised of a Balkan diaspora. These nights were, he explains, "initially a way for us ex-Yugos to exorcise war traumas".

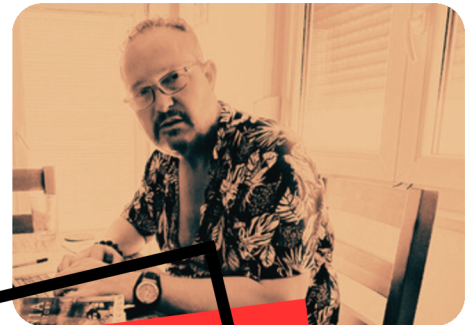
When the release of Bosnian born director Emir Kusturica's acclaimed 1995 film *Underground* alerted the wider world to "Gypsy music" (a term used throughout) and traditional Balkan brass bands, Šoko began to incorporate these sounds into his sets and, by 2000 – to his surprise – he was hosting wildly successful parties attended by hundreds of Bosnians, Serbs and Croats revelling in ironic nostalgia, as well as hip Berliners getting off on the sweaty dancefloor energy. Šoko coined the term Balkan Beats for the phenomenon and came to personify it as its popularity spread around the world, snagging him high-profile DJ gigs as far afield as the US and Japan.

Šoko goes into quite a lot of detail about his struggles with fame, his alcoholism, cocaine abuse and sexual misadventures, all revealed with rueful relish. His tone is direct and unforgiving, describing himself as "a drunk bastard" and "a Bosnian chav" – and enjoyment of his memoir will depend, to some extent, on how his gleefully blunt language sits

with the reader. Detailing his "rascal lifestyle", he admits, "I wasn't politically correct, sexually correct", which, while candid, invites problematic questions that aren't answered. Describing "Gypsy kids" as "half naked, running through the streets, covered in dirt and stealing something to eat", prompts the rhetorical flourish, "They say I am a racist...am I a xenophobic and sexist bastard? I think not. You be the judge."

Even Rigney, who elsewhere provides interesting and informative location reports on, for example, pre-Soviet Odessa as "a kind of New Orleans of the Black Sea", gets sucked into some questionable sub-Bukowski routines. Why would he describe he and his buddies as prowling "the dimly lit [Berlin streets] throwing our empty Becks beer bottles at the gaudily dressed street walkers"? I know a few actual punks who would have something to say about that kind of behaviour.

Daniel Spicer



gleefully blunt!
The Wire

