

## (COM)PASSIONATELY POLITICAL: MUSIC OF DJORDJE BALASEVIĆ

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Until very recently, politics has been regarded as pertaining to the domain of reason, as opposed to emotion, and the domain of public, as opposed to private life. The very term politics was usually defined as the *science* of political government—involving political principles, methods and strategies—thus strongly connoting the cognitive, as opposed to the emotional behavior. However, such binary oppositions—private and public, emotions and reason—are increasingly seen as having blurred boundaries, which sheds a new light on previously isolated phenomena. Today researchers in humanities are coming to accept the idea that “emotions are important in all phases of political action, by all types of political actors, across a variety of institutional arenas.” (Goodwin et al. 2001:16) This kind of a paradigm shift is particularly valuable when exploring the relationship between music and politics. Instead of trying to describe the cultural work music does as if it is affecting only the cognitive, “rational” side of our being, we could begin to talk about the way emotions and cognitions interact in our experience of music. And, in turn, how such experience of music can shape our ideas and actions in the world we live in. Especially in times of political and social crisis, it is interesting to observe how, through music, political issues can transcend their relation to principles, methods and strategy—essentially, issues of power—and become inquiries into what it means to be human.

One of the powerful examples of the ways such cultural work can be done through music is the work of singer/songwriter Djordje Balasević. His songs, sold-out series of concerts, and performances throughout the 1990s delivered a powerful critique of war and the regime-imposed societal problems, representing a direct challenge to the official ideology. They exposed the regime’s rhetoric regarding war, nationalism, oppression, and destruction of the country in ways that ranged from nostalgic and reflective to piercingly ironic. His concerts have been described as “public purgatories,” (Janjatović 2001:22), serving as a place where the “normal people” congregated amid the madhouse of surreal everyday life.

And yet, few of his fans would call his songs “political.” Instead of providing generalized political messages and invoking standard patriotic images of flags, brave warriors, or glorious nation, he approached political issues in the same way he approached any other topic he

sang about: from a personal perspective, through poetic metaphors and emphatic understanding. The psychological impact of his songs went far beyond what political slogans could have achieved. I will argue that the reason his songs resonated so deeply with, and inspired political action for, so many people in former Yugoslavia, regardless of their nationality, lies in providing a space for collectively expressing deeply felt emotions through dealing with political issues from a thoughtful, engaged and a (com)passionate personal perspective.

Djordje Balasević appeared on the former Yugoslav pop music scene in the late 1970s and instantly became a hit maker. His popularity grew quickly and in 1979 he had eight successive sold-out concerts in the concert hall *Dorn Sindikata* in Belgrade, and concerts in cities and towns all over the former Yugoslavia (Janjatović 2001:23). It was then that he established a tradition of giving long monologues on current topics at his concerts. During the 1980s he kept composing, creating a series of hit songs with each new album and performing extensively. Beginning with the four concerts in fall of 1982 Balasević began a tradition of performing annually in the then-largest concert space in Belgrade, the *Sava Centar* concert hall (3678 seats). Janjatović states that it was primarily because of his audience, whose number increased each year, that a series of New Year’s concerts in this venue lasted for two decades and resulted in over one hundred Belgrade performances (Janjatović 2001:23). This was unparalleled for any singer in the former Yugoslavia. Balasević’s enormous popularity throughout the former Yugoslavia during the 1980s and among people of widely different social status and musical taste—from housewives, students, and factory workers, to university professors—ensured a certain kind of widespread respectability and likeability that not many singers/songwriters could claim. Furthermore, he is probably the only singer/songwriter in Yugoslavia who had poems written *about* him, by such prominent cultural figures from former Yugoslavia as Ismet Sarajlić (Bosnia) and Rade Serbedžija (Croatia).

Describing his style, Balasević stressed the importance of narrative: “each song has a story, a point, a plot. So, if you hear the third verse, you are interested to hear what happened in the first verse. It is not [just about] a refrain that repeats incessantly” (Stanić 2002 [http://www.v.blic.co.yu/20112002\\_blicnews/index.htm](http://www.v.blic.co.yu/20112002_blicnews/index.htm)). His unique blend

of “the charm and wit of the people from Vojvodina [the autonomous province of Serbia, bordering with Hungary]...with melancholy and nostalgic stories of the good old times and characters that are no longer” (Simić 1999:90), ensured that during the 1980s he became a household name. It was the narrative quality of the songs, their unique topics, and a range of music styles he employed—from chanson, rock, pop, blues, reggae, Hungarian cardasz, etc.—that distinguished his music from the mainstream pop in Yugoslavia.

Of his enormously large opus, space permits me to concentrate only on four examples that would illustrate the variety of ways in which songs of Djordje Balasević were “(com)passionately political.” I will examine the songs in which he broached the topics previously few had the courage to address this openly: actions of the regime [most prominently in songs “*Sloboda-ne*” (1992), “*Lege’da o Gedi Gluperdi*” (1998)]; the collective responsibility [in “*Krivi smo mi*” (1993)]; and the war [in “*Čovek sa mesecom u očima*” (1993)].

The regime of Slobodan Milošević, which came to power in Serbia after the break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1989, was one of the key entities responsible for the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and for suppressing the true oppositional political forces within Serbia. It engineered fraudulent elections through which Milošević remained in power for repeated terms, it continuously attempted to destroy independent media, and it used military forces against civilians in peaceful demonstrations against the regime. This regime brought poverty, one of the highest rates of hyper-inflation in world history (approximately 120,000 percent by the end of December 1993, for an annual level in the quadrillions), [1] and years of economic sanctions and cultural isolation from the rest of the international community to millions of Serbian people. The sanctions also reduced opportunities for legitimate functioning of the economy, thus opening up a space for the “gray economy” and illegal activities which escalated into organized crime with the tacit support of the government. Most ordinary citizens felt defeated and powerless. It was within such social climate that Balasević’s work as musician, storyteller and entertainer became an important part of cultural resistance.

#### “Slobodane, Freedom-no” (“*Slobodane, Sloboda-ne!*”)

During the 1992 demonstrations against Milošević’s politics at the Belgrade Terazije square, Balasević’s song “*Sloboda-ne*” (recorded in 1992) was broadcast from large speakers, summarizing all the important points of the demonstrations. The song “*Sloboda-ne*” plays with the richness of associations based on the fact that the name “Slobòdan,” when accentuated differently (slòbòdan)

means ‘to be free.’ Thus the song’s title and the refrain both utilize this to ironically point to the contrast between the actions of the person whose name is Slobodan Milošević with what his name means. Further, when it is accentuated as “Slobòdane,” you are addressing a person. But when it is accentuated with a slight break before the last syllable—“*sloboda-ne*”— it means that there is no freedom, but can also be taken to mean a “no” to Slobodan Milošević. In its first appearance, the word “Slobodane” is a direct address to Milošević, while the immediate second repetition is a repetition with a difference: through the use of rhythm and accentuation it changes to “Freedom-no.” This strategy also builds up on the popularity and the widespread use of songs that in the past directly addressed the former Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito. However, here, a supposed address to a loved president quickly turns to a sharp critique, all contained in just one word:

Excerpts from the song:

#### “Sloboda-ne”

[...]  
Gledam skupštinu ii’ šta je to već  
Bife “Proleće” u Petrovac na Mlavi.  
Ej, gledam one tužne kese  
Di baš meni da se dese  
Da mi takve glave delaju o glavi?

[...]  
A TV Dnevnik, ko kormilo,  
okreću spodobe vrlo podobne  
Sve će se, kažu, srediti  
Istina će pobediti

[...]  
Uz TV Dnevnik je sve više gnevni  
a sve manje Vernika *Dnevnika*  
“Istina će pobediti,”  
Znam, tek ćeš se ondak jediti

Slobodane!  
Sloboda-ne!  
Nemoj nas više braniti, brate  
Brigom ćeš nas sa’raniti

#### “Freedom-no”

[...]  
I watched the Parliament session or was it  
Bar “Proleće” in Petrovac na Mlavi\*  
I watched those sad losers  
Why did they happen to me

Why is it that such people are deciding my destiny?

[...]

And TV *Dnevnik*\* as a steering wheel  
The ghastly creatures are turning  
They say everything will be all right  
The truth will win.

[...]

There are more and more of those who are furious with  
Dnevnik  
And less and less *Dnevnik* believers  
“The truth will win”  
Yes, and then you’ll really be angry.

Slobodane!  
Freedom-no!  
Don’t protect us anymore  
Your concern will bury us all.

\*Reference to *kafana* (hick bar).

The first verse I cite describes the behavior of Serbian politicians in Parliament (whose sessions were broadcast on national television at that time), which increasingly began looking like the behavior of drunks in a hick bar, and a widespread shock and disgust of majority of people with such behavior of their political representatives. While asking “why are those people deciding *my* destiny?” Balasević is actually voicing the opinion of many, and thus providing an important point for identification for his audience. The second cited verse cited here exposes the main news TV program on the state television RTS, *Dnevnik*, which during the 1990s became a loudspeaker for Milosević. The metaphor of a steering wheel goes along with the metaphor of the sinking ship from a verse not mentioned here. One of the often repeated sentences was “the truth will win,” implying that all actions of the regime, however they looked like now, are actually righteous and it is only a matter of time when that is recognized by everyone. The third verse speaks about the rising dissatisfaction with the news program, i.e., with rising anger against the regime, and if the slogan “the truth will win” really comes true, then the one who will be angry about it will actually be Slobodan Milosević. But it is the refrain, which begins with “Slobodane,” that powerfully plays with Milosević’s name. While in its first appearance it is a call to Milosević, in its second appearance it becomes a mockery: “Freedom? No!”

Musically, the song underlines these critiques by a masterful use of irony in combining stylistic references to French chanson love song in interplay with Serbian genre of newly-composed folk music. This particular stylistic and genre combination plays upon well-understood cul-

tural meanings: the vocal melodic structure reminiscent of a French chanson love song as an indication that the irony is taking place (the incongruity of the romantic mood that the melody evokes and the words that critique the social and political situation); and the Serbian newly-composed folk music melodic style, orchestration, ornamentation, rhythm, and harmonization, as an indication of what and who the target is. (The musicians of the Serbian newly-composed folk music genre were at that time very vocal in their support of Milosević; thus the whole genre became identified with the Milosević regime and his supporters.) The sound of the accordion acts as a signifier of both the French chanson and the newly-composed folk music (henceforth NCFM), and switching between those two styles is indicated by particular rhythmic and melodic gestures.

The effect that is achieved by such combination is both comical and illustrative of the lyrics so that it strengthens their impact. For instance, the first appearance of the NCFM musical codes coincides with the statement that links the parliament sessions with socializing in a hick bar. Knowing that the NCFM’s primary performance venues are just such bars, evokes a number of associations such as drunken atmosphere, shouting, breaking glasses, which adds an additional layer to imagining just what those Parliament sessions looked like. The ironic barb in the lyrics “Don’t protect us anymore, your concern is going to bury us all,” unmasks Milosević’s rhetoric that there is no war, and that he is only protecting the Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia.

The melodic, rhythmic and harmonic gestures indicating newly-composed folk music are the characteristic phrasing in the accordion, the bass line, the *sa-sa* rhythm, *hijaz* scale and the harmonic modulation up a half-step in the middle of the song. The singer also imitates a vocal style of NCFM singing near the end of song. In addition, the song features a clarinet solo recognizable as the NCFM style in its use of characteristic improvisational melodic turns.

Even though the tone with which Milosević is addressed and described in this 1992 song indicates that at this time he was perceived as a serious political figure and a force to be reckoned with, this song was the first to criticize Milosević, and to point to specific instances of the rhetoric manipulation. In 1992 such public criticism of Milosević represented an important step towards a budding public awareness of the regime’s media manipulations and the effects of the regime’s politics. The small but significant moment at a concert performance served to symbolically portray hope that the change of the political situation is possible. At some point during the clarinet solo in the style of NCFM, the singer turns to the clarinet player and interrupts his performance by shouting at him to stop. This act

was symbolic of the power to bring to an end, even if just within a concert situation, at least the soundtrack of the regime if not the regime's *film noir* and its director himself.

### "It Is Our Fault" ("Krivi smo mi")

In his constant re-examination and re-evaluation of the contemporary events and situations, Balasević was brutally honest even in regard to himself. In the song "Krivi smo mi" ("It Is Our Fault") (1993), he answered the question he posed in the song "Sloboda-ne" regarding the people who in the 1990s became the ruling elite: "Why did such losers happen to me, why is it that such people are deciding my destiny?" The song "It Is Our Fault" opens the question of the individual and the collective responsibility of the Serbian people for the state that contemporary politics was in and for what had happened. It addresses the position of all those who did not support those in power but did not stand in their way either. The fault, according to this song, rests with those who kept quiet and stepped aside, letting the "invasion of the primitives," as the lyrics of his song declare, happen.

### "Krivi smo mi"

Nisu krivi primitivci što su kupili mast  
korov nikne gdi god stigne  
ma svaka njima čast  
krivi smo mi

...

nemoj stari moj  
krivi smo mi što smo ih *pustili*

Ma šta su znali generali i brkati majori  
jedino da viču "pali" ali nisu najgori  
knivi smo mi

ni svi ti silni infantilni što su  
puške sanjali  
ne ne derane  
Krivi smo mi što smo se *sklanjali*

Putuj Evropo nemoj više čekati na nas  
na pitaj mnogo dospećeš i ti na rdjav glas  
putuj planeto, super smo se družili  
nama je lepo, taman kako smo zaslužili

Nisu krvici depresivci, lujke i psihopate  
što su rušili pa sada nama nude lopate

krivi smo mi  
nisu krivi sedativi  
što ih nisu sputali

sorry matori  
krivi smo mi koji smo *ćutali*

### "It Is Our Fault"

It is not the fault of the primitives  
The weed grows where it can  
Kudos to them  
It is our fault

...

My dear fellow,  
It is our fault that we let them

What do the generals and the majors know  
But to shout "fire"; they are not the worst  
It is our fault

Nor those all infantile people who  
dreamt about rifles  
No, no, my friend  
It is our fault, for stepping aside.

Farewell, Europe, don't wait for us anymore  
Don't ask too much or you may also get in trouble  
Farewell, planet/world, we had a great time together  
We are fine, just as we deserved

The fault is not with the depressives, lunatics and psychos  
who destroyed and are now offering us shovels

It is our fault  
It is not the fault of the sedatives  
For not restraining them  
Sorry, my friend  
It is the fault of us who remained silent.

This song became a hit in the concert season 1993/1994, during the time of highest inflation, poverty, and the rage of wars. Beyond Balasević's personal self-recrimination, it was a call to understand what happened and how it happened and what the part of ordinary people was in it. Thus in 1993 Balasević tackled a topic that resurfaced in the public discourse only years later, in the polemics regarding the issue of the collective guilt and collective responsibility for wars in the former Yugoslavia.

The issue of the collective responsibility is fraught with contradictions. The questions that were troubling those Serbians who addressed this issue involved the scope of the criminal, political, and moral responsibility. They asked: Does the responsibility lie both with those who voted for Milosević without an awareness of the political consequences his rule would bring (before the wars began) and with those who backed Milosević after his national-



ist propaganda? Is the responsibility shared among those who did the crimes and those who did not prevent the crimes? Two conflicting perspectives on this topic will illustrate the complexity of this subject. Sonja Biserko asked: "If we collectively take pride in the success of our basketball players, for which we have no individual credits, are we entitled to reject the feeling of guilt for our 'ethnic' crimes, in which we have not individually participated?" (Bogdanović, 2002 [http://www.helsinki.org.yu/confront\\_detail.php?lang=en&idnrc=693](http://www.helsinki.org.yu/confront_detail.php?lang=en&idnrc=693)).

The following is an illustration of a very personal dilemma of what the collective responsibility means for ordinary citizens who did resist the regime in various ways and were yet on many occasions critiqued for misjudgments and loss of momentum in their struggles. Gordana Radosević comments:

We who have stayed behind [i.e., who did not emigrate abroad], who remained here, did not have even a brief respite. So our occasionally wrong assessments and losses of momentum in the "continual struggle" are permitted. Perhaps we would like, for a change, to live normally to think about ordinary things, instead of racking our brain with thoughts like: Why we stayed here to carry the burden of history, did we not elect representatives in the state institutions and ministries to do that? (Bogdanović, 2002, [http://www.helsinki.org.yu/confront\\_detail.php?lang=en&idnrc=693](http://www.helsinki.org.yu/confront_detail.php?lang=en&idnrc=693))

While probably one of the most realistic views on that topic is offered by Srdja Popović, an *Otpor* activist, who differentiates between three kinds of responsibilities—criminal, moral and historic-political. For most people this question involves a combination of a deep rooted and often unconscious sense of guilt, shame and grief. And with this song, through including *himself* in it, by being open and honest with his own thoughts and feelings on the subject, Balasević opened up a space for reflecting on those emotions. Thus, while far from having a clear message on how one could have resisted the "invasion of the primitives," the song "It Is Our Fault" encourages re-thinking of personal engagement with political activism. Instead of relying on the state institutions and ministries one is encouraged to speak up and take a stand before it comes to the decisions of generals and majors.

The self-critique in this song is underlined with prominent electric guitar solos and standard rock drum patterns. The verses are accentuated by a rhythm pattern on the electric guitar and bass moving through the standard harmonic progression tonic-subdominant-dominant-tonic. However, the musical impact of the song lies in the vocal part. The main points of the song—it is *our* fault, and the reasons *why* all this is our fault—are musically accentuated in such way as to achieve the strongest impression. In its first appearance in each verse the "our" in "it is our fault"

("mi" in "*krivi smo mi*") not only falls on the first beat in the measure, which has the strongest accent, but is also left to ring in the air by being the only word in that measure. The reasons for "our fault," situated at the end of every verse ("It is our fault that we **let** them," "it is our fault for **stepping aside**," it is our fault for **being silent**;" in Serbian, *pustili, sklanjali, ćutali* have been accentuated and left to ring in the air in the same manner, thus ensuring that those will be the words that stayed with the listener.

#### "A Man with a Moon in His Eyes" ("Čovek sa mesecom u očima")

One of the perhaps most powerful anti-war songs written in Serbia is Balasević's "*Čovek sa mesecom u očima*" ("A Man With a Moon in His Eyes"), composed in 1993. It exposes the glamorization of war by extreme nationalists through the compelling narrative from the point of view of a person who went to war and came back. By broaching the topic of war from this perspective, Balasević achieves an extremely powerful effect. A man in his song speaks of the reality of war he personally experienced, and it is his memories that make the listeners evaluate what the war actually entails and what it takes away on the human level, in the material, spiritual and psychological spheres.

#### "Čovek sa mesecom u očima"

Sumoran i nem,  
jablan gromom razvaljen  
zagledan u čašu preduboku  
Bio mi je stran i na izgled normalan  
Al' tad mu spazih  
odraz meseca u oku.  
On me oslovi "Pa kako idu poslovi"  
"Ma idu," progundjah,  
"sve u vrazjeg vraga"  
Na to on planu naprasno  
Odmeri me sablasno  
"Nemate vi pojma braćo draga!"  
"Ne znaš ti šta znači  
Ubiti grad  
Ne znaš ti bauke  
kaljavih rovova  
Ne znaš ti šta znači  
spavati sad  
Kad sklopim oči  
ništa osim tih krovova  
"Kad sklopim oči nebom  
naidju mobe  
Zamirišu gostinjske sobe  
Nebom svadba odzvanja  
"Kad sklopim oči nebom promiču lica  
Zatreperi roj tamburica

Dunav sedef odranja  
 "Zverko ludila što si se probudila  
 Crni ti je princ poljubac dao  
 Al' neću se stideti što Boga neću videti  
 Jer to i nije Bog kojeg sam znao  
 "Ne znaš ti nema oslobođenih  
 Svaku mi tišinu granata prošara  
 Spašen je taj prvi pogodjeni  
 A svi su drugi večni taoci košmara  
 "Kad sklopim oči  
 nebom promiču ladje  
 Zvona, lavež, komsijske svadje,  
 Miris svežeg oranja  
 Ali kada svane  
 vetri s reke zacvile  
 Znam to tuže vodene vile  
 Dunav tamjan odranja

#### "A Man with a Moon in His Eyes"

Gloomy and silent,  
 Like a tree cracked by lightning  
 Peering deep into his glass  
 He was alien to me, but seemingly fine  
 But then I noticed  
 a reflection of the moon in his eyes.  
 He addressed me with "How is it going?"  
 "Oh, it's going," I mumbled  
 "All the way to hell"  
 To that he exploded  
 And gave me an eerie look  
 "You've no idea, my dear fellows!"  
 "You've no idea what it means  
 To slay a town  
 You don't know the demons  
 Of muddy trenches  
 You don't know what it's like  
 To try to sleep now  
 When I close my eyes  
 Nothing but those roofs  
 When I close my eyes I see farmers working together  
 I smell the flowers of the old guest rooms  
 Sounds of wedding echo across the sky  
 "When I close my eyes I see faces  
 A flock of guitars flutters  
 The Danube washes over Mother of Pearl.  
 "The beast of madness, why did you wake up  
 Kissed by a black prince  
 But I will not be ashamed that I won't see God  
 Since that is not the God I used to know.  
 "You don't know, but there are no "liberated"  
 Each of my silences is shattered by a grenade  
 The ones who fall are saved

And the rest are eternal hostages of nightmares  
 "When I close my eyes  
 Ships sail across the sky  
 The bells, the barking dogs, the neighbors' voices  
 The smell of freshly plowed fields  
 But when it dawns  
 The winds cry from the river  
 I know, this is the water fairies' keening  
 Danube washes the frankincense\* away.

\*frankincense is most commonly associated in the former Yugoslavia with the ceremonies of burial.

The narrative strategy of this song evolves from the short introduction of the dialogue between a man who went to war and the narrator who did not, to a monologue detailing the horrible elements that are part of war. The narrator lets the man speak in his own words and re-live his own memories. Particularly poignant is the contrast between memories of war and the memories of happier times. Through the remembrance of particular textures (mud) and sounds (bomb detonation), memories of war come alive in the details that unmask the nationalistic propaganda of "liberation" of the cities. Through the remembrance of particular smells ("of fresh plowed earth") and sounds ("bells, dog barks," sound of the orchestra playing), memories of ordinary life take on a quality of precious events. The song raises the awareness that it is precisely those pleasures of normal, everyday life that are destroyed for both those in the war zones and for those who live elsewhere but who went to war. The wordless singing of the female choir is at the end of the song revealed to be the "water fairies' keening" for this loss and all that had happened.

The dramatic tension usually ascribed to the workings of harmony is achieved in this song by the combination of a simple harmonic structure and the nuances of textural and dynamic layering. It is the dynamic and textural crescendo (addition of instruments and densification of texture), and not harmonic complexity that gradually intensifies as the story develops. At the start of the song, when the singer is relating their meeting, the vocals are accompanied only by soft sounds of the piano, the keyboard and the violins. When the man begins to relate his experiences from the war the acoustic guitar joins in, accentuating the intimacy of the encounter. As the recounting of the memories reaches the nostalgic remembrance of the times before the war, the dynamic and textural crescendo reaches its peak in the addition of the electric guitar, the drums and a choir. But it is the setting up of the climax of the refrain by the particular rhythm at the words "*when I close my eyes nothing except these rooftops*" and "*and all others are the eternal hostages of nightmares*" on the dominant chord that provides the heightening of the dramatic moment.

That it is the nostalgic references to the past that serve as the moment of highest emotional release in this song testifies to the productive significance of nostalgia. The term nostalgia was coined in the 17th century from Greek words for return and sorrow, in a medical thesis for purposes of explaining a medical condition felt by people in exile. This pathological meaning of the term endured for two centuries and carried mostly negative connotations, such as pining for irretrievable youth (Immanuel Kant), a separation of man from his ideal (Goethe), and pathological psychiatric diagnoses such as inadaptability and maternal deprivation (Vromen 1986:60). However, while today nostalgia is in many cases viewed as a non-productive activity of daydreaming, yearning for an irrecoverable past, I argue that nostalgia evoked through this and some other Balasević songs has a productive dimension.

Following Maurice Halbwachs' understanding of nostalgia as a "reconstruction of the past based on the point of view of the present and constituted with elements of the present" (Vromen 1986:61), I contend that the re-structuring of past experiences produces an emancipating and an empowering effect. The freedom of selective emphasizing of positive experiences from the past as that which is remembered when engaged in nostalgic process can generate an enlarged vision of the world. It can create "an entirely different vantage point which allows the discovery of aspects overlooked or missed in the haste of the moment and in the heat of the action," and can also allow for "fairer judgments of [situations or] persons in one's past" (Vromen 1986:62). The recall of the past, then, does not necessarily represent an obstacle to the necessities of present action, but can rather provide an impetus for it. "One discovers one's debt towards people, and one may regret not having recognized it at the time it was incurred," and be moved to action to correct this (Vromen 1986:62).

In the context of this song, the critique of the war is that much more powerful in that the description of the horrors of the war is contrasted with remembrance of the happiness of the times before. While on an intellectual level it is a reminder of everything that wars destroy, on the emotional level nostalgia here creates an opening for expressing grief. The cathartic cleansing that occurs while listening to this song releases the pent-up grief about the war, feelings that were not ordinarily expressed amid the chaotic circumstances of everyday life in former Yugoslavia.

#### "The Legend of Geda the Stupid" ("Lege'da o Gedi Gluperdi")

While the song *Sloboda-ne* in 1992 represented an important step in exposing the regime rhetorics and in a way also appealing to the president to stop the madness of wars

and destruction, the song "Legend of Geda the Stupid" performed for the first time in January of 1998, utilized allegory and humor to speak of the unspeakable—the nearness of Milosević's downfall. This song had an enormous social impact in changing the people's attitude towards the regime from fear to courage and it reached its peak of popularity in the months and weeks before the September 2000 elections which toppled the Milosević regime.

The story is supposedly about a man named Geda, who is mocked and critiqued by various members his family, who Balasević "performs" using different voices. The beginning of the song is similar to the Balasević's older very popular song about a successful gambler, "*Boža zvani Pub*" ("Boža The Jack"). However, in this version, Geda is portrayed as a loser who gambled his whole land away. Since the words for "land" and "country" are synonyms in Serbian, the first few sentences were enough for the audience to understand that the song was actually about Slobodan Milosević. All the humorous anecdotes about Geda, funny in and of themselves, have a deeper meaning since they refer to Milosević's actions, his rhetoric, and attitudes about and towards Serbia, the wars, and the church.

The lyrics are foregrounded and interpreted in the manner of a dramatic monologue with music accompaniment in the style of Harlem burlesque. However, while the subject matter of the lyrics is of primary importance, it is the rhythmic and alliterative effects and the harmony that provide an important fusion of elements that lead to this song's success. While only the refrain of this song is actually sung, the syncopated rhythm and the harmonic progression that underlie the entire performance, significantly contribute to the humorous effect achieved by the lyrics. Alliteration of "Gedo Gluperdo" (Geda the Stupid) intensifies this effect. The refrain is sung by a whole band which, along with the words "and everybody says" before the refrain, serves to encourage audience to join.

Excerpt from the song:

#### "Legenda o Gedi gluperdi"

Ovo je priča koju vrlo nerado pričam  
To je priča o antihristu jednom, i raspikući  
Gedi, takozvanom, što je silnu zemlju nasledio  
od pokojnog teče, i sve spisko  
Bilo je tih slučajova vec i ranije  
Da je neko zemlju potrošio i razbuco  
Al da je neko našu zemlju razbuco  
to još nismo doživljavali

Gedo, gluperdo  
svu si zemijo proćerdo

Sve si Spisko sram te bio  
Gedo, bekrijo

Jednom Geda (jedva) išo u crkvu  
Al' i tu se bruko grdno  
Jož, sramote i belaja, istero ga otac-Paja  
Jer je naglas podrigivo

**Gedo gluperdo**

Jednom zgodom Geda išo da pravi mostić  
Pa pričino palac daskom  
Siso ga, da smanji otok, i smišljio  
da mi bolje potok zatrpamo časkom  
Jednom davno Geda išo u bijoskop...  
Tužni ruski ratni film ga dirno, svojski  
Sav uplakan rece ženi:  
Eto vidiš, da je meni ratova i vojski!

**Gedo, gluperdo...**

Jednom tako Geda išo na zivce  
Jedio komšiluk redom  
I sad, ko je lud najposle?  
Da li Geda il' mi što se  
natežemo s Gedom?

**"The Legend of Geda the Stupid"**

This is a story I don't like to tell  
It is a story about an antichrist  
And a spendthrift  
Called Geda, who inherited huge  
Piece of land  
From a late uncle\* and lost everything.  
There were cases like this before  
That someone lost and ruined their land  
But that someone ruined *our* land  
We never experienced that

**Gedo, you stupid**  
**You gambled away the whole Land**  
**You lost everything...shame on you**  
**Gedo you drunkard**

Once Geda (reluctantly) went to church  
And even there behaved badly  
Oh, what a shame, Father Paja  
Threw him out  
Since he was burping loudly.

**Gedo, you stupid**

Once Geda was making a bridge And hurt his thumb with  
a two by four  
And while he was hurting, he contemplated  
that it would be better to actually drain the river

And long time ago Geda went to the movies  
A sad Russian war movie touched him deeply  
And all in tears he said to his wife:  
"See, if only I had wars and armies"\*\*\*

**Gedo, you stupid...**

Once Geda was irritating everyone  
Aggravated the whole  
Neighborhood  
But who is crazy here?

Is it Geda or us, who are playing a push-and-Pull with  
Geda?

\*The uncle is a reference to Josip Broz Tito, the late Communist president of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The avuncular relation is evoked since Milosević had belonged to the Communist party before 1989 when he formed the new party.

\*\*Balasević performs this line in an imitation of Milosević's characteristic voice.

From January 1998, when it was first performed at a concert, to October 5th 2000, when Milosević was finally ousted from power, this song was performed at numerous anti-regime demonstrations all over Serbia and it always evoked strong audience response and the feelings of empowerment. Thus, what was initially conceived as a joke in the end encouraged a life-changing attitude by transforming fear, through laughter, to courage:

Laughter has a dual function: it liberates from fear the one who produces it but causes" fear and humiliation" in those towards whom it is directed... Dead serious dictators, gazing toward eternity and surrounded by flunkies, cannot stand laughter... Laughter is punishment. Created to humiliate, it must make those it refers to feel uncomfortable (Bergson, as quoted in Corrigan 1971:202).

Laughing at the oppressor makes the oppressor more than uncomfortable, it weakens its legitimacy and dignity. In the context of Milosević's acts of repression in Serbia, laughter created by listening and participating in this song empowered people and reduced their fear of him. In revealing the incongruity of his supposed emotional reaction to the Russian movie as an inspiration for wars, Balasević pointed his ironic arrow at Milosević's rhetoric and his morals, but also at his outdated Communist ideals.



And in creating the beginning of the song in the mirror image of his older, non-political song, Balasević created a relatively safe place for its public performances, while at the same time providing almost conspiracy-like moments of recognition among those who disliked the regime. It replaced feelings of personal isolation with those of collective understanding, showing the people they were not alone and isolated, spreading the word that power was shifting, and that the end of the regime was near.

## Conclusion

Djordje Balasević is no longer only an entertainer. He is an institution and a code of recognition between people. In the sad times that are (hopefully) behind us, he was for many a symbol of resistance not only to an oppressive politics but primarily to a state of mind that could, simplified to the extreme, be called "intolerance" (Savić 2002 [http://www.balasevic.org/arhiva/stampa/05022002\\_com/](http://www.balasevic.org/arhiva/stampa/05022002_com/)).

Djordje Balasević is one of the rare authors on the domestic music scene who, on the one hand, created not just his personal style...but a true personal *genre*, and on the other hand, throughout the whole career grew and matured, magically managing to continually...educate his audience. Actually, he is probably the only one who did this continually (Pančić, 2000 <http://www.oaza.co.yu/muzika/djole/tekstovi/intervjui/vreme.htm>).

By addressing the contemporary political issues in an original, (com)passionate and personal manner, in these and many other songs created during the 1990s, Balasević produced cathartic effects by enabling his audience to experience deeply felt and yet often repressed emotions of grief, guilt, and shame. At the same time, his masterful use of irony and allegory succeeded in turning the fear of the dictator to courage, thus assisting in creating the right circumstances that led to political change.

## ENDNOTE

1 According to the U.S. Department of State report on Serbian economic policy and trade practices at [http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/economics/trade\\_reports/1993/Serbia\\_Montenegro.html](http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/economics/trade_reports/1993/Serbia_Montenegro.html)

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