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PAINTER FROM PICCADILLY: BRITISH–SERBIAN POP CULTURE/ROCK MUSIC ENCOUNTERS

Abstract

The iconic song title “Painter from Piccadilly” by the Serbian rock band *Smak* [*Endtime*] captures the symbolism of lasting British–Serbian pop culture encounters in the field of rock music. In this talk, based on personal experience and reflections, I will highlight the profound impact of such encounters on many generations in Serbia/ex-Yugoslavia, from the 1960s to the present day, from the groundbreaking *Džuboks* [*Jukebox*] magazine (the first rock’n’roll magazine in an Eastern European country), via the performance of *YU grupa* [*YU Group*] at the Marquee Club in London and the arrival of the legendary British *New Musical Express* magazine in Belgrade, to the indispensable appearance of British bands at the *Exit* music festival in Serbia (with *Exit 2019* headlined by *The Cure*). In particular, I will focus on the social significance of the *Deep Purple* 1975 and *The Prodigy* 1995 landmark concerts in Belgrade, with a view to the 21st century meeting points of British and Serbian pop culture.

Key words: pop culture, rock music, Britain, Serbia, ex-Yugoslavia

Pop culture, by its very name, expresses the definition of magnitude or mass, so Serbia was not able to resist one of the most massive sensations in the world – rock and roll. Rock and pop culture is a significant factor in Britain’s history, and one indication of that fact is the opening ceremony of the London Olympics in 2012. At that event, Del Boy from *Only Fools and Horses* and Roger Daltrey from *The Who* provided us with several minutes of eloquence worthy of Shakespeare. Remarkably, Del Boy has linked Serbs and Brits more than anyone else, so much so that even *The Guardian* published an article about that love (Clark 2010). There is also a pub in Belgrade that bears witness to it. Such special connections between Britain and Serbia have a long history and they are cemented by pop culture.

British music came to Serbia in several ways, even through pirates. Of course, not those one-handed pirate captains with an eye-patch from the clichéd tales and stories. The pirates who dispatched rock and pop music from the United Kingdom were the famous antennae of British Radio Caroline, a pirate radio station whose programmes were broadcast from international waters, from five different ships, from 1964 to the 1990s (Clark 2014). Okay, much larger portions of this, what was then

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new music, came from Radio Luxembourg's antenna, but in both of these cases, it was music made mainly in the British islands. The pioneers of Serbian rock and roll would wait for these songs from shaky radio waves and play them in Belgrade clubs.

It is not a myth that the first *Beatles*' record was brought to Belgrade by the well-known basketball player Radivoje Korać, and so the famous "bugs" spread across Serbia. The *Rolling Stones*, 'the *Beatles* archenemy', appeared on the cover page of *Džuboks [Jukebox]* (the first issue of the first edition) in 1966. *Jukebox* would change the lives of millions in Serbia,¹ and this magazine would maintain that spirited link with British music for many years to come. Now it seems unreal, but back then there were advertisements for the famous Reading Festival in *Jukebox*. Buses picked up those with tickets in front of St. Mark's Church in Belgrade. Just recently, while leafing through old *Jukebox* issues, I found an ad for the renowned company *Toma & co.* Toma Radulović was a very famous sound system and music equipment merchant at the time, as well as our countryman in London, located in Earls Court, at 13 Hogarth's Place. In these ads he also offered musicians from Serbia and Yugoslavia a several-day stopover in London if they decided to buy his musical equipment.

Ivan Mladenov Vanča, another noteworthy name from Belgrade, was also a rock and roll connection between London and Belgrade. He actually stitched those connections between Britain and Serbia from the late 1960s. He was a tailor who had a boutique in Kensington. Back then in his neighbourhood many records were sold by a young merchant called Richard Branson, now the owner of the great "Virgin" brand name. Another of his neighbours was the not yet famous Freddie Mercury, who distributed posters all over the neighbourhood for the upcoming concerts of the then unknown band *Queen*. While Serbs learned about rock and roll from the British, a tailor from Belgrade dressed rock and roll stars in the heart of London. This Belgrade-born tailor, Ivan Mladenov Vanča, sold his clothing to Ozzy Osbourne from *Black Sabbath*, and Jimmy Hendricks also bought boots in his boutique, just two days before his death.

In the winter of 1973, *YU grupa [YU Group]* from Belgrade played in the famous Marquee Club, and this was the first appearance of a Serbian band in London. For this historic opportunity, Vanča outfitted them with snakeskin suits. Legend has it that the sewing machine worked long after closing, more than 12 hours into the night when this Serbian band performed at the Marquee Club in London for the first time.

A prominent column titled "A Letter from London" was published in *Jukebox* for years. Saša Stojanović, a journalist who lived in the British capital, kept us up to date with the wildest periods of British music, in particular punk and new wave. We waited fervently every month for Stojanović to write about what had happened in the past four weeks – from the record releases in England to live concerts. He would

¹ The renewed publishing of *Džuboks [Jukebox]* in 1974 was featured among the *100 Events that Changed Serbia (100 događaja koji su promenili Srbiju)* in the special issue of the Serbian weekly magazine *Nedeljnik* in 2017.

recommend new albums and bands every month. He also interviewed some of the leading British musicians, including the *Rolling Stones*.

Studio B, the distinctive Belgrade radio station, played a major role in the musical education of many generations. Their record players played numerous records brought primarily from London, by many people of different professions, notably including the stewardesses and pilots of the Yugoslav airline company JAT. So it was a common occurrence for number one on the British charts to be identical to the single at the top of the famous “Discomer” on the waves of Studio B. Records were also spinning on the old Technics turntables of Belgrade’s discotheques, playing those hits that made the Brits and the Serbs dance at the same time.

The first major concert by a great foreign rock band took place in Belgrade on March 16, 1975. *Deep Purple* played at the “Pioneer Hall”, and 6th place on the set list was reserved for the legendary song “Smoke on the Water”. That song was a must-have at the time for all electric guitar students in the former Yugoslavia. It was the night of a tremendous thunderstorm because those sound boxes sent so many decibels – urban legend has it that some people were afraid that the Pioneer Hall would collapse.

This was the first of three momentous concerts by British bands in Belgrade, which were more than just the performances of big pop and rock stars. That *Deep Purple* concert goes back to the times that confirmed that socialism in Yugoslavia was something else.² Yugoslavia chose between East and West for the third time. Yugoslav socialism was so strong that concerts by British bands or American films shown each year during the FEST film festival proved only to enrich it. In Belgrade, at that time, there were also bands like *Jethro Tull*, and the FEST guests included Robert De Niro, Jack Nicholson, etc. The legendary British director Alfred Hitchcock also came to Belgrade, interested in a local murder story, described by Dušan Makavejev in a Serbian film. Hitchcock went out for dinner in Skadarlija with Serbian filmmakers headed by actress Milena Dravić.

The Pioneer Hall once again became the setting for an unprecedented connection between Britain and Serbia. In 1995, during the period when Serbia was in despair, burdened by international sanctions and poverty, in the wake of war-torn Yugoslavia – a world and existence that was known to us only from the MTV channel came to life. It was a concert by the British band *Prodigy* in Belgrade, where at that time the few foreigners to visit the capital came exclusively to hold political negotiations with Slobodan Milošević. The very beginning of the concert was symbolic because *The Prodigy*’s frontman, Keith Flint, came out on stage in a transparent rolling sphere. I do not know whether it was a coincidence or a planned symbolism. But generally, during those years Serbia was in a sphere, and *The Prodigy* managed to pierce it that night.

² See also Vučetić 2012.

In that sequence of two hours, they gave Belgrade a sense of the world, again. Twenty years after the *Deep Purple* concert in the same place, the circumstances had changed. *Deep Purple* was an indication that Serbia was part of the world. *The Prodigy* was the air of the world that only that one night entered Serbia, which was in the dark for years. These are two concerts and two geopolitical images.

Since that night, a permanent relationship has been formed between the British band *The Prodigy* and Serbia. During that time, the members of the band received the keys to Belgrade in the City Assembly. And they really had those keys: since then, the doors of Belgrade and Serbia will be forever open to *The Prodigy* because this band from Essex opened the garden of Serbia that night in 1995. That is why Serbs will experience this band as their own, and after the tragic death of Keith Flint in March 2019, Belgrade's daily newspapers were filled with sad goodbyes.

There is also a sad British music episode in Serbia, and that is Amy Winehouse's concert in Kalemegdan, in 2011, which was also her last. This concert was actually a farewell to the last great heroine of rock music, Amy Winehouse. That night nobody knew that in addition to so much history, the walls of Kalemegdan, would also witness the end of a great career.

Lemmy Kilmister did not give his last performance in Serbia, but his concert with *Motörhead* at the *Exit* music festival in 2015 was one of his last. This band played a big role in life here: the famous song "Ace of Spades" was the unofficial anthem of all Serbs who, during the 1990s sanctions, went to Budapest to attend *Motörhead* concerts. Lemmy dedicated this song to all of them.

When it comes to the now world-renowned *Exit* music festival in Serbia (which was founded in 2000, emerging from the 1990s student movement struggling for democracy), it is worth emphasizing that ever since its inception, the *Exit* festival has been marked by the indispensable appearance of British bands and musicians (with *Exit* 2019 headlined by *The Cure*). The festival's early years are still remembered by the landmark slogan provided by Roni Size – "Serbia, are you ready for the future?"³

As mentioned earlier, *YU Group* was the first Yugoslav band to play in London. And *Bijelo dugme* [*White Button*] was the first Yugoslav band to record an album in London. When they recorded the second time, a crew was sent to shoot a short documentary about it. The album was recorded at the Air Studios at Oxford Circus, near a cinema which just a few years earlier had presented, Dušan Makavejev's film "Mysteries of the Organism" with Milena Dravić, the actress who accomplished so much in her career and even managed to dine with Hitchcock in Skadarlija. In the documentary, the members of the *Bijelo dugme* band go through Carnaby Street and stop at the "Rock Dreams" store. In those years, dreams in Serbia were linked to London, especially dreams of rock musicians.

³ For more details, see Rosić (2017).

Drunk on music, so many Serbs went to London. And in the early eighties, Belgrade became so interesting that it attracted a team from *New Musical Express*, the most famous British rock music weekly magazine. Vivien Goldman, whom we knew from the pictures with Johnny Rotten, came to Belgrade with the idea of writing about the punk and new wave scene in Yugoslavia. They took a photo of me beside the Lenin statue at the Students' Cultural Centre (SKC). I was confused, and only later did I realize that it was interesting for journalists to target one punk rocker next to the leader of the October Revolution. She also talked to Srđan Šaper from the trademark new wave band *Idoli* [*Idols*], who later recorded an album in London, with Vivien singing the background vocals on one of the songs. That issue of *New Musical Express* came out with my picture next to Lenin. Below was an ad for the new single by the *Stranglers* "Golden Brown". They played it just last summer here in Kalemegdan.

There is also something else worth mentioning about the symbolism of those Serbs who sew in London. Back in the day Ivan Mladenov Vanča made leather jackets for *Black Sabbath*, and today a Serbian woman dresses famous English people. This is the fashion designer Roksanda Ilinčić, whose dresses are chosen by the Duchess of Cambridge Kate Middleton and many others.

After *Bijelo dugme*, the members of the Serbian band *Smak* [*Endtime*] from Kragujevac went to London and recorded the album "Black Lady". Prior to this they had made an album including the song "Painter from Piccadilly". Thus somehow Piccadilly became 'the point of recognition' for British-Serbian rock music encounters. So many Serbian bands, while in London, came to this square and took photos.

That is why, despite the crowds and the hordes of boring strangers, I still pass through Piccadilly today and take a photo. It is that symbolic point that I first recognized as London.

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