



Photo: Anna Lenneby

ONE SPLAV, MANY SPLAVOVI

It is the kind of night when you feel like you are surrounded by your best friends, even though you hardly know anyone at the place. Everyone is good-looking, smart and happy, and you get pathetic and say that you wish this was the whole world. Just a good band, cold beer and the rhythm of the Danube making the boat move now and then. Luckily, you have a cynic Serb next to you, a Saša, who says that maybe it wouldn't be so bad to let in a few other kinds of people in that world. Right, that's true. And you think about all the good reasons to hate Serbia, that nationalist, militant, chauvinist, homophobic state which so stubbornly refuses to take responsibility and ask for forgiveness. But on this night in July there is only room for those other emotions, and you love Serbia for all of these good-looking, smart and happy ones, for Rebel Star, the band that plays all our favourite songs until they are soaking wet with sweat and then the singer Milan sings a few more. About the world being there for us, just us. And then the fantastic dj, a woman, yeah!, who plays the Pixies' "Where is my mind???" and life can't be more relevant. That's what it feels like. And Deki swirls around and creates the expression Dekikipedia when he gets the seventh question about who has been playing in which Serbian band. And you have this warm feeling in your stomach that you can get from really good music, that melts you, makes you soft and strong at the same time, makes you believe that everything is possible. And you leave even though you don't want to, because you have a mission tonight.

A cab and five euro later you get out at the Danube again, but this time upstream, before it swallows Sava. We are at Hotel Jugoslavija, the hotel hosting the war lord Arkan in the nineties and therefore bombed by Nato in 1999, now the landmark for everyone wanting to join the floating party inferno with boats that are clubs and that are called one splav, many splavovi and this is where the turbofolk, folk music in turbo speed, was born and grew up in the nineties.

Jelena Višnjić has forwarded instructions by sms: "Well, anyone along the quay; Prestige, Otard, Brave Heart, there's live music at all of them. Go to Prestige, there's not that many kids there, or to Blej-voč". Blej-voč is pronounced Blaywatch and the name is a combination of the similar title of a TV series and the Serbian slang for hanging out with your friends without actually doing anything – blejati.

Four strong men guard the entrance and let you into a tunnel with white plastic around it and round windows on the sides. At the end of the tunnel four beautiful hostesses are waiting with guest lists. On stage are a beautiful man and a beautiful woman, both holding microphones. Behind them there's a guy playing base and one on keyboard.

But long before you notice them your eyes are caught by the three shining women dancing on pedestals. Golden

or glittery bikinis, legs shining from oil, stilettos, long hair. The music isn't easy to dance to, it's not at all the speedy rhythm we were expecting, no techno beats to folk music, rather quite winy and slow. Is this turbo folk on its death bed? There's a serious male domination here, several groups of fit men who are much more interested in each other than in the golden women. At the intro of each song they shout out loud from happiness and have to hug each other. Call it homo erotic or brotherhood of man, it doesn't matter. Maybe it is something in the monotonous music with the simple lyrics about heart ache and suffering that brings out those emotions? The scene seems to confirm that the nation begins and ends with the brotherhood while the women are mere decoration.

The crowd gets most excited when the Roma folk song "Djurdjevdan" is played at the end. The song got famous outside former Yugoslavia through Emir Kusturica's film Time of the Gypsies. But the response on the dance floor at Blej-voč is nothing compared to the ecstatic hysteria when the mega star of the turbo folk and the widow of Arkan, Ceca, performed the same song at an outdoor concert in Belgrade in 2006. "Allsång på Skansen" [popular Swedish sing along program] can go hide when 100 000 teenage Serbs sing the entire Djurdjevdan. We were there secretly, Jelena and I. Ceca is politically dirty, to say the least.

Jelena is the fastest talking person I know. She is also quick to laugh and conclusions, she drinks beer fast and smokes fast. She is a drama queen. She loves to dance and she is proud of her eclectic lifestyle. She loves to mix.

– I have a wide spectrum, first a Nick Cave concert and then to a kafana where they play traditional starigradski music. I love to order music and to pay for it and to flirt with the musicians.

She also loves rakija made from quince, dunja, and Nikšičko beer because it's from Montenegro. She is not afraid to speak her mind, and she defended us well when our secret about the concert – of course – leaked out.

– I felt a quiet contempt from the women's movement after the Ceca concert. But a few weeks after the concert I was with Women in Black to commemorate the genocide in Srebrenica and not many of the leading feminists were there, but I was there. Turbo folk is a sociological phenomena that I have chosen to study, it shouldn't decrease my feminist credentials. I think that the women's movement has to go out from the closed spaces, has to go out on the splavovi and explore. Ceca is a cultural phenomena and, I have to admit, she describes my female blues in a good way.

Jelena holds those extremes. She hates the kind of politics that Ceca symbolises, but the music speaks to her. More than anything else is she tired of the narrow space that the women's movement and feminism offers in Serbia. So no wonder she fell in love with my friend Krista from Riga who came to visit; an independent, self-supporting

and smart feminist who loves to go shoe-shopping and who gave Jelena manicure while she explained why you always must have a bottle of champagne in the fridge.

– I have contributed with a new image of what feminists are, what they look like. It is important to me, Krista was important to me, with her high heels and sex and the city feminism. I want to show that it is possible to drink cocktails and dance all night and then get up in the morning and go by bus for six hours to Novi Pazar in solidarity with the civil society there, or talk about the women's movement in Serbia at a seminar. I want to change the image of feminists as only dykes and traitors.

She pushes borders almost literally when she goes out to clubs in her "This is what a feminist looks like" t-shirt. And for her childhood friends and family it's not always easy to understand what her Belgrade life is about.

– I have a very strong energy when it comes to defending my lifestyle, and my ideology, and I defend it well. But probably my grandmother isn't too happy about the fact that I am 32 and single with no kids. Maybe I will think that I did everything wrong when I am 60, but now when I am 32 I think I do everything right! I enjoy my choices even if Serbian society doesn't agree with them.



Christina Wassholm lives in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, since 2004. With unique insight in Belgrade civil society, she writes about young forefront figures among resistance fighters and alternative cultural activists of Serbia, those who refuse to be silenced by nationalists and macho mafia, those who take punches and are being spit upon on the streets for demanding extradition of war criminals, and those who risk their lives to organise queer clubs with police protection every night during the Eurovision Song Contest week.

Below you find an extract that takes us from rock'n'roll on the Danube to the sex-and-the-city feminist and Women in Black activist Jelena, via the war lord of the nineties Arkan and his glamorous widow Ceca, the mega star of turbo folk, the Serbian vulgo-pop genre.

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Jelena and Deki - and some ten other persons who fight, live, love and smoke - non-stop. About how to remind about the genocide in Srebrenica in a country that rather forgets and denies. The 90ies of Arkan and Ceca and their Charles and Diana wedding, the memories from wars, sanctions and turbo folk mafia. About traitors, dykes and feminists. The night life that never stops. And everything else there wasn't any room for in this short, short extract, but that makes Belgrade the capital of Europe.

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