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In Search of 'Authentic' Yugoslav Rock: The Life and Afterlife of Bijelo Dugme

Abstract: In this article I address the ways in which rock band Bijelo Dugme (White Button) has become one of the symbols of the former Yugoslavia, by analyzing its activities and reception, both in the Yugoslav and the post-Yugoslav periods. Starting from 1974, when its first album was released, Bijelo Dugme gained high popularity and drew the attraction of the public due to its specific sound and image. Being between the East and the West, Yugoslavia's popular music scene was constantly focused on searching for a kind of music that would epitomize the 'authentic' Yugoslav music. The folk-influenced hard rock sound (so-called shepherd rock) was recognized as such a feature and it soon became one of the symbols of Yugoslav culture itself, making Sarajevo one of its epicenters. I here argue that the band appears to be a Yugoslav symbol since (1) its active years coincide precisely with the period in Yugoslavia that was marked with relevant changes, beginning with its 1974 constitution and ending with its disintegration; (2) it is regarded as a feature representing one of the most important successes of the country's popular music industry; and (3) it has had a specific 'afterlife' that sheds light on the ways culture in the Yugoslav era is perceived currently.

Keywords: Yugoslav rock, Bijelo Dugme, Yugoslavia, music politics, cultural politics, politics of remembrance

The rock band Bijelo Dugme (White Button), based in Sarajevo and active from 1974 to 1989, is considered to have been one of the most popular bands in socialist Yugoslavia, as well as one of its most important cultural products. Even after the group's disbanding in 1989 and the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, the popularity of the group continued to grow. In 2005, one of the most popular members of the group, Goran Bregović, reunited the band in a new post-Yugoslav project – giving concerts throughout the territory of the former Yugoslavia. In this article, I argue that the band can be read as a Yugoslav symbol since (1) its active years coincide precisely with a symptomatic period filled with changes in Yugoslav society, beginning with its 1974 constitution and ending with its disintegration; (2) it was recognised as one of the most important successes of the country's popular music industry; and (3) it has had

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a specific 'afterlife' that sheds light on the ways the culture in the Yugoslav era has been perceived.¹

Bijelo Dugme against the background of Yugoslav history

Founded in the aftermath of the World War II, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia encompassed six republics (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia) and two so-called autonomous provinces (Vojvodina and Kosovo). The crucial event in Yugoslav history after the war was its split with the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites in 1948, when the Communist Information Bureau expelled Yugoslavia from its ranks and withdrew all economic and technical aid after Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito refused to submit to Soviet political domination. Soon afterwards, the ruling Yugoslav party abandoned a Soviet-style cultural politics that had condemned popular music as a cultural, political and social threat from the West, and in so doing opened Yugoslavia to Western cultural influences, as it sought economic and political support from the West.² While Yugoslavia was perceived as a solid, modern and progressive country in the 1950s and the 1960s, the state became more and more decentralized in the 1970s, leading to serious economic and political problems in the following decade. The 1974 constitution, in which the aforementioned autonomous provinces within Serbian borders were defined and by which the Yugoslav republics gained more freedom, marked the progression towards decentralization and the beginning of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In the 1980s, after Tito's death, a severe economic crisis shattered the socialist system in Yugoslavia and nationalist tendencies became evident. Political tensions escalated and eventually led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia during the wars between 1991 and 1995.

The history of socialist Yugoslavia includes several relevant years that marked its existence and especially its dissolution. Two years are commonly singled out: 1974, the year of the constitution that set the course for the eventual demise of the Yugoslav regime, and 1989, the climax of the economic and political problems in Yugoslavia and the beginning of the dissolution of the country.³ Since Bijelo Dugme began its active career in 1974 and ended it in 1989, histories of the group have often entailed

¹ My work is grounded in discourses in the sociology of music, cultural memory studies and sociology of emotions, as well as in post-socialist studies. I address the issue of intersections between reconstructing past musical practices and the ways they have been remembered and reproduced in post-Yugoslav cultural politics. See, for instance, Ana Hofman, *Glasba, Politika, Afekt. Novo življenje partizanskih pesmi v Sloveniji* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2015); Ana Petrov, "The Songs We Love to Sing and the History We Like to Remember: Tereza Kesovija's Comeback in Serbia," *Southeastern Europe* 39 (2015): 192-214; Ana Petrov, *Jugoslovenska muzika bez Jugoslavije. Koncerti kao mesta sećanja* (Beograd: FMK, 2016).

² Dean Vuletic, "Generation Number One: Politics and Popular Music in Yugoslavia in the 1950s," *Nationalities Papers* 36 (2008): 861-62.

³ For more on the changes that marked the entire period of socialist Yugoslavia, see, for instance, Branislav Dimitrijević, *Potrošeni socijalizam. Kultura, konzumerizam i društvena imaginacija u Jugoslaviji (1950-1974)* (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2016).

commenting upon the history of the country with regard to those significant years. The group has regularly been linked to Yugoslavia, its political strategies, its tragic consequences, and the many nostalgic memories associated with it.⁴ Bijelo Dugme gained the status of a legendary group almost immediately after it was founded, becoming a representative first of a Yugoslav subculture, and then as a symbol of the entire country. It somewhat reflected the political context, and, at the same time, shaped the politics of Yugoslav popular culture. The band has garnered much interest not only because it brought certain novelties to the pop-rock scene, but also because its activities coincided with what was arguably the most intriguing period in Yugoslav history, the peak of Yugoslav cultural production, and dissolution and afterlife of Yugoslavia, which enabled the group to gain even more importance than it might have had in different circumstances.

Yugoslav music politics: Bijelo Dugme as the 'authentic' Yugoslav product

The demand and search for a kind of music that would be recognised as the 'typical' Yugoslav sound characterized the entire Yugoslav era. Yugoslav music typically changed in accordance with tendencies of the Western music industry. In the 1950s, Yugoslav popular music was characterized by imitations and adaptations of Western popular musical genres (such as Italian *canzone*, French *chanson* and German *Schlager*); in the 1960s rock and roll dominated; in the 1970s disco influenced many pop musicians' styles and repertoire, while the 1980s brought new wave currents.

To understand the positioning of certain genres in the history of Yugoslav popular music, it is important to keep in mind specific social contexts that shaped the cultural politics of the country. The development of Yugoslav popular music was not conditioned solely by international cultural trends, but also by domestic and foreign policies pursued by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Through its cultural, economic and foreign policies, the Party sought to define Yugoslavia's position in international relations during the Cold War, develop a sense of Yugoslav identity among its multinational citizenry, and rebuild and modernise the country after World War II. It was the Yugoslav communists' position in international relations that was decisive for the development of Yugoslav popular music starting from the 1950s and marking more or less the entire Yugoslav era. After the split with the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia was more open to the West than the other socialist countries, which was known as the process of 'Westernisation' and 'Americanisation'.⁵ Popular music developed thanks to an infrastructure consisting of radio programmes, festivals, record companies and

⁴ My research included the analysis of all sorts of media discourses that have been produced about the group Bijelo Dugme (such as press, fan pages, books, and documentaries).

⁵ Radina Vučetić, "Rokenrol na Zapadu Istoka. Slučaj *Džuboks*," *Godišnjak za društvenu istoriju* 13 (2006): 71-88; Radina Vučetić, *Koka-kola socijalizam* (Beograd: Službeni Glasnik, 2012).

entertainment magazines that were established in the late 1950s and launched the careers of Yugoslav popular music artists who served as domestic alternatives to the Western ones.⁶ The economic growth and expansion of cultural industries in the late 1950s provided the musicians with a framework through which their output became increasingly professionalized.⁷ The Yugoslav popular music scene was characterised, on the one hand, by styles of composition and performance that were recognised as 'typical', 'expected' or even 'appropriate' for Yugoslavia, and, on the other hand, by music labelled as being under 'foreign', 'Western' and sometimes 'inappropriate' influence. During the 1950s and the 1960s, Yugoslav music politics entailed divergent strategies and, accordingly, different musical genres and visual styles, depending on current trends in the international pop and rock industry.

By the end of the 1960s, however, the set goal of finding the music that would be recognised as typical and authentic for Yugoslavia was yet to be accomplished. Pop and rock and roll had been developed for a few decades when the demand for new solutions became apparent. By the beginning of 1970, the entire Yugoslav music market was divided between pop, rock and roll and folk music industries, including divergent centres, institutions and recording companies accordingly.⁸ The problem was recognised in the fact that Yugoslav music could only be "blindly mimicking" the American and British rock scene during the 1950s and the 1960s,⁹ which was evident from music festivals and competitions called 'Gitarijade' (guitariads) where bands were expected to compete by performing imitations of American and English hits.¹⁰

Bijelo Dugme was a fruit of the tendency of finding the Yugoslav popular music, but it appeared only after Yugoslav music went through the aforementioned period of imitation of existing genres. The group appeared just at the time Yugoslav popular culture and music needed something new, original, and both local and in accordance with

⁶ Within the institutions founded in the 1950s, several important festivals represented the gist of Yugoslav music politics: *Zagreb* (founded in 1953), *Opatija* (1958), *Melodije Jadrana Split* ("Adriatic Melodies Split") in 1960, *Beogradsko proleće* ("Belgrade Spring") in 1961, and *Vaš šlager sezone* ("Your Schlager of the Season") in Sarajevo in 1967, all of them labelled as Yugoslav popular music festivals and modelled after San Remo festival. Vuletic, "Generation Number One," 861–80. Ana Perinić, "Galebovi umiru pjevajući: stereotipi dalmatinske zabavne ljubavne pjesme," in *Split i drugi. Kulturnoantropološki i kulturnoistorijski prilozi*, ed. Ines Prica and Tea Škorić (Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, biblioteka Nova etnografija and Hrvatsko etnološko društvo, 2007), 81–118. Local popular music of the time was usually referred to as *zabavna muzika* (music for fun, 'entertainment' or 'light' music). Jazz, pop and, by the end of the 1950s, rock and roll, were the styles of popular music that were being listened to in Yugoslavia and around the world.

⁷ Dean Vuletic: "The Making of a Yugoslav Popular Music Industry," *Popular Music History* 6 (2011): 277.

⁸ Yugoslavia's record companies were established as state-owned but market-oriented enterprises, leading to the development of the market commonly recognised as "the strongest popular music market in Eastern Europe". Ljerka Vidić Rasmussen, "The Southern Wind of Change: Style and the Politics of Identity in Pre-War Yugoslavia," in *Retuning Culture: Musical Changes in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Mark Slobin (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 101. The major companies were Jugoton (Zagreb), PGP RTB (Belgrade) and then Diskoton (Sarajevo).

⁹ Gregor Tomc, "We Will Rock YU: Popular Music in the Second Yugoslavia," in *Impossible Histories. Historical Avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia*, ed. Dubravka Đurić and Miško Šuvaković 1918–1991 (London: MIT Press, 2003), 447.

¹⁰ Most of the future members of Bijelo Dugme started their careers in such bands.

worldwide trends. Being perceived as a modern Yugoslav group, a typical but also provocative Yugoslav product, Bijelo Dugme managed to be incorporated into the aforementioned Yugoslav cultural politics. Even though it was controversial (mainly due to its unusual sound combinations, but also because of the performances and appearance of the band as well as the modern designs of the album covers), sometimes critical and subversive (which was characteristic of its 1980s political engagement), it was a musical phenomenon that was in accordance with the expectations of the Yugoslav scene at the time. The novelty that the group brought covered the following areas: the change of genre and style in Yugoslav music, the group's great popularity and political engagement.

Genre, popularity, and critique

Yugoslav pop and especially rock (commonly referred to as 'Yugo-rock') was generally regarded as an urban phenomenon,¹¹ whose major centres in the 1970s and 1980s were Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Sarajevo, the latter being the city that had been neglected in the first phases of pop music development in Yugoslavia. Hailing from Sarajevo, Bijelo Dugme was perceived as something refreshing for the Yugoslav pop rock music scene: it was a mixture of divergent genres, it did not replicate any Western or local model and it also drew attention to a new region, the Bosnian music scene. It "drew unabashedly on ethnic melodies and succeeded, in the process, in giving a 'Yugoslav' stamp to rock music."¹² The folk-influenced hard rock sound was recognised as epitomising the 'authentic' Yugoslavia's in-between position. The album "If I Were a White Button" (*Kad bi bio bijelo dugme*) from 1974 contained hard rock songs with folk melodies, which was described as "shepherd rock" by the journalist Dražen Vrdoljak.¹³ The combination of folk-influenced tunes and hard rock sound, combined with the musicians' Western-like rock outfits and performances, made the band a unique feature in Yugoslav culture. Furthermore, shepherd rock soon became a symbol of Yugoslav culture itself, since it became synonymous with a combination of Serbian, Croatian and Bosniak tradition. The Sarajevo scene thus epitomized the core values of the ideology of Yugoslavism,¹⁴ its sound being the unusual rock-folk genre.¹⁵

¹¹ Martin Pogačar, "Yu-Rock in the 1980s: Between Urban and Rural," *Nationalities Papers* 36 (2008): 816-33.

¹² Sabrina P. Ramet, *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to Insurrection in Kosovo* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 96.

¹³ Petar Janjatović, *Ex Yu rok enciklopedija 1960-2006* (Beograd: Geopoetika, 2007), 32.

¹⁴ Ideals upon which Yugoslav society rested were the ideology of *bratstvo i jedinstvo* (brotherhood and unity), the cult of labour and the legacy of the Partisan struggle, which were connected to the idea of creating a 'new man', a young person who creates, propagates and embodies the ideas of the new socialist state in their daily life. Ivana Dobrivojević, "Između ideologije i pop culture. Život omladine u FNRJ 1945-1955," *Istorija 20. veka* 1 (2010): 119-32.

¹⁵ It is interesting to mention that another specific Yugoslav scene at that time was in Ljubljana, which was totally opposite to the Sarajevo scene. The Ljubljana scene was considered to be the most Westernized part, "most at odds with the multinational empire". Tomc, "We Will Rock YU," 447.

At the same time, however, the genre was controversial, since it introduced the folk element that was perceived as never having been fused with rock music, even though that was not completely true.¹⁶ Furthermore, the great success and high popularity the group gained was sometimes considered to be opposed to subversive values usually expected from rock music, at least in the Yugoslav area. Rock music was generally perceived as critical of the system. Furthermore, in Yugoslavia, this kind of music was labelled as a Western product, thus being typical for the capitalist system and possibly problematic for the socialist one. However, the unique mix of sounds, as well as the combination of the image of rock stars with the promotion of socialist values, made this group adequate for Yugoslav socialist society. Having been perceived as a genre reserved for 'peasants', folk music was embedded in the Western musical tendencies of the group, which was the combination that proved to be successful.¹⁷ At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the Yugoslav rock scene saw the emergence of a new wave bands, closely associated with the Yugoslav punk rock scene. Bregović was influenced by the new scene, especially by the works of Croatian bands Azra and Prljavo Kazalište. Still, the recognisable combination of folk and rock remained the trademark of the band.¹⁸

It has often been argued that Bijelo Dugme was the Yugoslav equivalent of the Beatles and Elvis Presley, in terms of its popularity, the reactions of the audience, and the change it made in Yugoslav popular culture.¹⁹ Starting from 1974, when its first album was released, Bijelo Dugme gained instant popularity and drew the attention of the media,²⁰ and its debut album brought them nationwide popularity.²¹ Bijelo

¹⁶ It should be noted that the actual combination of folk and rock was not historically new. As Jelena Jovanović shows, there are precursors of Bijelo Dugme within rock-folk orientation – for example, the work of Nikola Borota Radovan. See: Jelena Jovanović, "Folklorni motivi u ranim kompozicijama Nikole Borote Radovana," *Muzikologija* 16 (2014): 173–92. Still, even though there were similar tendencies happening simultaneously with the work of Bijelo Dugme, it was Bijelo Dugme that was labelled as the group that brought the aforementioned fusion, and as such epitomized the ideology of Yugoslavism.

¹⁷ See further Hrvoje Markulj, ed., *Bijelo dugme 1974–1988*. (Zagreb: Croatia records, 2014), 94–98; Petar Luković, *Bolja prošlost. Prizori iz muzičkog života Jugoslavije 1940–1989*. (Beograd: Mladost, 1989), 305.

¹⁸ In accordance with the tenure of various lead singers of the band and its stylistic orientation, Bijelo Dugme's history has been often constructed in the following phases: the beginnings in the 1960s (the preparation for the band); the Željko Bebek years (1974–1984); the Mladen Vojičić Tifa years (1984–1986); the Alen Islamović years and the end of the band (1986–1989) (see Ivan Ivačković, *Kako smo propevali. Jugoslavija i njena muzika* / Beograd: Laguna, 2015/). Furthermore, the year of the co-called reunion in 2005 is also regularly incorporated in the historical reconstructions of the activities of this group. Regarding the genre profiles, the band's history can be divided into shepherd rock, new wave and new partisans phases. Dušan Vesić, *Šta bi dao da si na mom mjestu* (Zagreb: Ljevak, 2014).

¹⁹ Siniša Škarica, "Galopirajuća senzacija," in *Bijelo dugme 1974–1988*, ed. Hrvoje Markulj (Zagreb: Croatia records, 2014), 11–16.

²⁰ The group was officially formed in 1974, although the guitarist Goran Bregović, vocalist Željko Bebek, drummer Ipe Ivandić, keyboardist Vlado Pravdić and bass guitarist Zoran Redžić, were previously active under the name Jutro (Morning).

²¹ Bijelo Dugme was also internationally popular, but this was the case not solely for this band. In fact, Yugoslav pop stars began touring in communist-ruled countries, especially the Soviet Union, in the early 1960s. These were initially few day visits but later turned to month-long tours. Such tours were organised in Poland, Bulgaria

Dugme was also characterized by its high quality and recording standards, since the band recorded some of its albums in Abbey Road Studios in London (made famous by the *Beatles* and numerous other British stars), produced by Neil Harrison, the first one being "What Would You Do to Be in My Place" (*Šta bi dao da si na mom mjestu*), as early as 1975. The London recording sessions were arranged by the request of the group members to Jugoton, their recording company, since they asked for high quality production that could not be found in Yugoslavia. Later, this piece of information was used to point out the important and exceptional novelties the group brought to the Yugoslav market.²²

The first few years were marked by immediate success of the first single, which was followed by the tremendous breakthrough of the new genre, as well as scandals. As any other rock band, Bijelo Dugme was soon to have a typical rock career, including scandals, drugs, great popularity as well as crises, feuds between group members, over-enthusiastic hysterical audiences, and a number of other controversies. At its very start, a scandal broke when the band's first single recordings were offered to the Sarajevo-based record label Diskoton. The music director of Diskoton, Slobodan Vujović, refused them, stating that Bijelo Dugme would have to wait for at least six months for the single to be released. This is widely considered to be the greatest business mistake in the history of Yugoslav record industry, since the band was offered a five-year contract with Zagreb-based Jugoton, the leading pop music record company in Yugoslavia. Bijelo Dugme's first single sold 30,000 copies. This scandal brought massive press coverage and increased record sales.²³

The band's third single, which sold about 100,000 copies, brought the group its first gold record, after which the widespread popularity of the group became labelled as *Dugmemania*. Along with its popularity, the group experienced concomitant criticism, both of which continued throughout its entire career. One of the most important rock journals in Yugoslavia, "Jukebox" (*Džuboks*), mostly ignored the "sensation", as the success of the group was labelled, and only later accepted the shepherd rock genre as legitimate.²⁴ It was also assumed that official criticism was perplexed because of the mixture of urban rock image and rural folk sound, since that combination had been

and Romania, although it was not always the same performers who gained popularity in these countries. The Soviet Union favoured Yugoslav pop, Poland new wave, while Bulgaria and Romania preferred folk or pop-folk stars. Ana Petrov, "A Window towards the West: Yugoslav Concert Tours in the Soviet Union," in *Serbian Music: Yugoslav Contexts*, ed. Melita Milin and Jim Samson (Belgrade: Institute of Musicology of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2014), 127-42.

²² Dubravko Majnarić, "Sjećanje na diskografsku produkciju grupe," in *Bijelo dugme 1974-1988*, ed. Hrvoje Markulj (Zagreb: Croatia records, 2014), 179-80.

²³ Vesić, *Šta bi dao da si na mom mjestu*, 46.

²⁴ Škarica, "Galopirajuća senzacija," 25. One of the first texts on Bijelo Dugme was in fact written in *Džuboks* as early as 1974. It was enthusiastic about the potential of the group. Ognjen Tvrtković, the author of the article, claimed that the group was promising and that with further improvement it could reach the top of Yugoslav music. Ognjen Tvrtković, "Predstavljamo vam pop grupu *Bijelo dugme*," *Džuboks* 1 (1974): 8-11.

previously considered unimaginable.²⁵ In addition to the sound, the group's visual image also drew attention and enhanced the group's appeal. While their sound was characteristic by the genre mixture, their visual image was in accordance with could be expected from proper Western rock stars. The band had its first big performance at the 1974 BOOM festival in Ljubljana, where the members appeared in their glam rock outfits, which brought them new media attention. Later, in the 1980s, in accordance with their shift towards new wave, the band changed their hard rock style: the members cut their hair short, and Željko Bebek shaved his trademark moustache.

It did not take long before the band experienced some difficulties, such as varied reception by the critics and the audience, as well as certain technical problems in some of the performances. The band wanted to organise some sort of spectacle to help revive their decreased popularity in 1977, and thus decided to hold a free open-air concert at Belgrade's Hajdučka česma (the location in one of the Belgrade green areas) in August of that year. Between 70,000 and 100,000 spectators attended the concert, which was the largest number of spectators a rock concert in Yugoslavia had seen by that time. Despite the fact that the concert was secured by only twelve police officers, there were no large incidents. It soon became one of the iconic events in the history of Yugoslav rock, since it was immediately regarded as the confirmation of the specificity of the band's position in Yugoslav musical culture. As it has been claimed, the group managed to perform successfully despite the lack of adequate conditions for a proper musical performance and the lack of security for the overcrowded event.²⁶ The concert was regarded as "therapeutic" and "magic", both for the group and the audience.²⁷

The band's fourth studio album, recorded in Belgrade in 1979 and produced by Neil Harrison, brought on another feature of the group – scandals and censorship. The original cover, featuring female leg kicking male's genital area, was rejected by Jugoton and described as vulgar. Furthermore, certain verses were labelled as unacceptable. The verse "what the fuck is wrong with me" (*koji mi je moj*) was excluded from the song "It's so Stupid to Forget her Number" (*Ala je glupo zaboravit njen broj*), and the verse "Christ was bastard and misery" (*a Hrist je bio kopile i jad*) from the song "My Dear, Everything will Be Covered by Rosemary, Snow and Reed" (*Sve će to, mila moja, prekriti ruzmarin, snjegovi i šaš*) was replaced with "he was bastard and misery" (*on je bio kopile i jad*). In September of the same year, the band organised a concert under the name *Rock spektakl 79* on JNA Stadium in Belgrade, another concert that was to become a historical event due to the fact that more than 70,000 people attended.

²⁵ Škarica, "Galopirajuća senzacija," 37.

²⁶ Ibid, 83; Vesić, *Šta bi dao da si na mom mjestu*, 135.

²⁷ Luković, *Bolja prošlost*, 312.

Political stands and statements

In accordance with the position of Yugoslavia in Cold war politics, music practices in the country were often judged through the prism of belonging to one or the other side. When in June 1976 the band members went to the voluntary youth labour action *Kozara 76*,²⁸ it was understood as Bregović's response to the claims that the band's members were too West-oriented.²⁹ Since the glamour and the success of the group were associated with capitalist values, it was assumed that this move was done as a means to "calm the nerves of the socialist leaders".³⁰ In that way, the group was actually positioned, just like Yugoslavia, between the East and the West, presenting both the trends that were in accordance with rock tendencies worldwide, but still staying within the expected cultural frames of socialist politics.³¹ Furthermore, Yugoslavism was promoted by the group and often clearly declared by its members. The leader and songwriter of the group Goran Bregović expressed his own view on the specific Yugoslav character of the music in abundance. In the interview with Sabrina Petra Ramet, he pointed out that:

Our [the band's] big advantage is that we are really Yugoslav. There is a Yugoslav character to our music. But by the same virtue it is a little bit too primitive for the outside world. It is natural for Yugoslavia. Our music is as Western as Yugoslavia is – which means not too Western, because this is still the Balkans, and in some ways we are still very far away from Europe. So although you can call us a rock 'n' roll band, we are popular in a way that a country Western band would be in the United States. You can hear our songs in pubs, for instance. Folk singers even sing my songs.³²

²⁸ Voluntary youth labour actions were one of the most important mechanisms in the production of socialist Yugoslav territory, as well as one of the most prominent phenomena in Yugoslav socialist society overall. In the period between 1942, when the first labour action was organised during the war, and 1990, when the last one took place, over two million young Yugoslavs were involved in practices ranging from huge national actions to more local initiatives. In addition to their elementary purpose of building and repairing devastated infrastructure, the labour actions efficiently promoted unification, by bringing the young from different parts of Yugoslavia to work on the same goal of rebuilding a country that was united again. The leisure aspect became in time a central component of youth experience and an object of consideration by the planners of these voluntary labour activities, who sought to attract young people while upholding core Yugoslav communist principles. As a result, up to the 1980s labour actions became increasingly recreational in nature and can be interpreted as a unique kind of Yugoslav tourism and a place where Yugoslav popular culture was developed and promoted, which often included concerts, film projections, as well as active engagement of pop stars in the actions. Dragan Popović, "Youth Labor Action (Omladinska radna akcija, ORA) as Ideological Holiday-Making," in *Yugoslavia's Sunny Side: A History of Tourism in Socialism (1950s–1980s)*, ed. Hannes Grandits and Karin Taylor (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), 279–303; Srđan Atanasovski and Ana Petrov, "Carnal Encounters and Producing Socialist Yugoslavia: Voluntary Youth Labour Actions on the Newsreel Screen," *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 6 (2015), 21–32.

²⁹ Petar Janjatović, *Ex Yu rok enciklopedija 1960–2006* (Beograd: Geopoetika, 2007), 32.

³⁰ Ivan Ivačković, *Kako smo propevali. Jugoslavija i njena muzika* (Beograd: Laguna, 2015), 137.

³¹ Zvonimir Krstulović, *Bijelo dugme: doživjeti stotu* (Zagreb: Profil, 2005).

³² Sabrina P. Ramet, "Goran Bregović: Whoever Doesn't Hear This Song Will Hear a Storm," interview with

As stated, this kind of music was interpreted as 'Yugoslav', which meant the music of the Yugoslav nations.³³ Bregović's discourse should be positioned in relation with the rising nationalisms among its dominant ethnic groups as well as some ethnic minorities. Even in the late 1980s, when nationalism in Yugoslavia escalated and when promoting Yugoslavism could be provocative and even "dangerous", as it was sometimes claimed,³⁴ Bregović remained a declared Yugoslav, pointing out that "the idea of Yugoslavism is not only desirable, but necessary". In an interview with Petar Luković, Bregović posed a question what would happen with those people who were simply Yugoslavs, without national labels, stressing that this fact represents the gist of the need for Yugoslavism in this specific society.³⁵ In his opinion, dividing according to nationality was 'primitive' and impossible in Yugoslav society, since there were people who identified, as he pointed out, "neither as Serbs, Croats, Slovenes nor Albanians"³⁶.

In 1980, Bijelo Dugme released new wave influenced album "Live to be One Hundred Years Old" (*Doživjeti stotu*), and two years later the album "Lullaby for Radmila M." (*Uspavanka za Radmilu M.*), which featured diverse sound, illustrating various phases in the band's career. The album *Lullaby for Radmila M.* from 1983 featured a few groundbreaking moves in the history of Yugoslav pop rock scene. The release of the album was followed by the release of the video cassette under the same name, which featured videos for all the songs from the album, being the first project of the kind in the Yugoslav history. Furthermore, the video for the song "Ladies' Choice" (*Ovaj ples dame biraju*) is marked as the first gay-themed video in Yugoslavia. The video brings a story of a group of men drinking, talking, the two of them looking at each other while their legs discretely touch under the table.³⁷ The fact that it was a video featuring exclusively men was unusual enough, since most of the videos of the time included a heterosexual story and presented a good-looking woman on whom the song and the video was focused. In this video, it was Željko Bebek, the singer of the group, who flirts with another man. However, even though this video was controversial and has often been listed as the first gay themed videos in Yugoslav history, it can also be regarded as just a provocation and experiment meant to draw the attention of the audience and supposedly prove how subversive rock music could be.³⁸

Sabrina P. Ramet, in *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994), 134.

³³ The rock performed by Bijelo Dugme was just one of the kinds of rock that existed Yugoslavia, another ones being, for instance, progressive rock, punk rock, art rock and others. Tomc, "We Will Rock YU," 448.

³⁴ Luković, *Bolja prošlost*, 312.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ The video is available on the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JcqB__1jffw, accessed December 10, 2015.

³⁸ Miodrag Kapetanović, "A što ćemo ljubav kriti: Jugoslovensko muzičko naslijeđe i postjugoslovenski kvir," in *Među nama. Neispričane priče gej i lezbejskih života*, ed. Jelisaveta Blagojević and Olga Dimitrijević (Beograd: Hartefakt, 2014), 243-44.

Another unique feature of the album was the “Kosovo Song” (*Kosovska*) in Albanian, which was commented upon by the group members as a ‘logical choice’ for the Yugoslav integral culture that had always included the presence of Albanians.³⁹ Recorded after the situation in Kosovo deteriorated, the song had an obvious political statement, referring to the integralism of Yugoslav cultural policy. However, it was simply a love song, which did not refer to the political situation in any direct way; it did not even contain a story about a love between the conflicted sides. The crucial political message was made through the fact that it was sung in Albanian, nothing else was considered to be needed for the statement to be made.⁴⁰ Even though the group was clearly promoting Yugoslavism, this did not necessarily entail the support for the Yugoslav communist regime. In fact, the mentioned songs, joined with other symptomatic moves (such as hoisting black and red colours in their concerts and satirizing the similarity between Nazism and communism in the decade when nationalism escalated in the country) provoked Bregović to comment that his Albanian song was anticommunist.⁴¹

After the period marked by a few historically significant moments, (the first video cassette, the first gay themed video, and the first song in Albanian performed by Yugoslav musicians), the final years of the group reflected the final years of Yugoslavia, since the group’s actions were clearly politically engaged. In the period from the late 1970s to the late 1980s rock music in Yugoslavia had an important purpose of providing a popular-cultural outlet for the unique forms of socio-cultural critique that engaged with the realities and problems of Yugoslav society. There were actually three related tendencies that embodied the new rock spirit in Yugoslavia: new wave, new primitives, and new partisans. All of them used rock music to critique the country’s politics and especially the issues of socialism as the ideal that was obviously collapsing at the time. As observed by Mišina, all these tendencies had the goal to help eliminate the disconnection between the ideal and the reality of socialist Yugoslavia. The new partisans represented the most radical expression of this kind of music and it entailed the groups Bijelo Dugme, Plavi Orkestar, and Merlin. The new partisans’ socio-cultural engagement, animated by advocacy of Yugoslavism, was a counter logic to the nationalist dissolution of a distinctly Yugoslav fabric of a socialist community in crisis. Thus, the movement’s revolutionary spirit was a mechanism of socio-cultural resistance to the de-Yugoslavization of Yugoslav society. Its ultimate objective was to make the case that the only way into the future rested on reanimation of the Partisan revolutionary past as the only viable socio-cultural foundation of the Yugoslav socialist community.⁴²

³⁹ Dušan Vesić “Bijelo dugme: mit koji raste,” in *Bijelo dugme 1974–1988*, ed. Hrvoje Markulj (Zagreb: Croatia records, 2014), 119–33.

⁴⁰ The video is available on the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKQO0WJo8Xs>, accessed December 19, 2015.

⁴¹ Ramet, “Goran Bregović: Whoever Doesn’t Hear This Song Will Hear a Storm,” 135.

⁴² Dalibor Mišina, “Spit and Sing, My Yugoslavia: New Partisans, Social Critique and Bosnian Poetics of the Patriotic,” *Nationalities Papers* 38 (2010), 265–89.

The 1984 album titled "Bijelo Dugme" featured Uroš Predić's painting *Kosovka djevojka* (Kosovo Maiden), a folk-oriented pop rock sound, as well as Yugoslav anthem *Hej, Sloveni*. It influenced a great number of bands from Sarajevo, labelled as new partisans, which also marked the following Bijelo Dugme's album "Spit and Sing, my Yugoslavia" (*Pljuni i zapjevaj, moja Jugoslavijo*) from 1986, and the final one "Ćiribiribela" from 1988. The latter was recorded during the final years of the political crisis in Yugoslavia, and it was marked by Bregović's (who was a declared Yugoslav) pacifist efforts: the album cover featured Edward Hicks's painting *Noah's Ark* on the cover, the song "Our Beautiful" (*Lijepa naša*) featured the national anthem of Croatia "Our Beautiful Homeland" (*Lijepa naša domovino*) combined with the Serbian traditional World War I song "There, Far Away" (*Tamo daleko*). The album's most popular and controversial hit from the album was "Đurđevdan", based on traditional Romani song *Ederlezi* and featuring Fejat Sejdić Trumpet Orchestra.⁴³ In 1990, the compilation album "After all these Years" (*Nakon svih ovih godina*), which featured recordings made between 1984 and 1989, was released. At some of the final performances during 1988 and 1989, group members noticed the heated nationalist atmosphere among the audience; they realized that the group would not exist anymore, similar to the country that had started to disintegrate.⁴⁴ In addition to the aforementioned new partisan ideology promoted with these albums, the group's activity was also claimed to be typically postmodernist, regarding the stylistic playing with genres, multilayered meanings of the musical, visual and textual choices. These procedures were in fact more connected to Goran Bregović himself. It has often been claimed that he is the most important postmodernist in the Balkans, which referred to his recognition of the political situation and the politics of the market at the time.⁴⁵ The following procedures were usually singled out as Bregović's trademarks in the final phase of Bijelo Dugme and especially in his later solo career: he combined old and new musics (such as in the case of the mentioned combination of a Serbian and a Croatian song), church music or folk music and rock and roll, and later undergoing symphonic and operatic phases.⁴⁶

⁴³ The original idea for the video was to feature iconography inspired by the Serbian Army in World War I. They should have worn uniforms and old weapons, but Islamović thought the idea was too pro-war, so refused to wear a uniform. Eventually, the band and the director reached an agreement: everyone, except Islamović, wore Serbian traditional costumes. However, after the video was recorded, the Radio-Television Belgrade editors themselves decided not to broadcast it, fearing it might remind of the Chetnik movement. The comments by the group members are available on the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2W8q0TC-U>, accessed December 12, 2015.

⁴⁴ For example, during certain concerts in Croatia, the audience booed and protested when the band performed their pro-Yugoslav songs. Also, as pointed out by the group members, the new national flags (instead of the Yugoslav one) started to appear during their performances. Vesić, *Šta bi dao da si na mom mjestu*, 291.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 307–308.

⁴⁶ This was commented in the documentary available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXEbBngH83Y>, accessed January 10, 2016.

(Re)imagining Yugoslavia through its music: Bijelo Dugme as a Yugoslav memory

In the post-Yugoslav phase the group's importance was made possible due to certain mechanisms. Firstly, it was made discursively, due to a huge media interest in multifarious aspects of the band's activities that prompted the production of numerous texts, books, and documentaries about the group.⁴⁷

Regarding documentaries, in 1994, Radio Television Serbia produced a multi-part documentary about the band entitled "After All These Years" (*Nakon svih ovih godina*); in 2010, Igor Stoimenov directed a documentary about the band, entitled simply *Bijelo dugme*. There were also numerous TV shows that included segments on the group, usually as part of the concert advertisements. The first mentioned documentary is especially symptomatic regarding the characteristics of the so-called mythology of the group (as it is stressed in the film). It includes statements by well-known Yugoslav public figures, such as music journalists and directors, as well as famous actors and musicians. The film opens with a statement by Srđan Karanović, a director: "And then Bijelo Dugme came". After a few bars of music, the documentary continues with a commentary by Neda Arnerić, a Serbian actor, who simply says: "Ah, ah, that was the right thing", gesticulating so that it appeared as if she was too emotionally connected to that time to articulate her own memories. After it, writer Duško Kovačević stated that "Bijelo Dugme is more than music", marking the whole tone of the film as being about a phenomenon that greatly changed the musical scene. The gist of the film can be found in Saša Lošić's (a famous musician from the Sarajevo scene) commentary that "Bijelo Dugme is a mythological thing", and especially in the introductory words of the narrator of the film:

This is a story about the guys that were more popular even than the marshal himself [the marshal Josip Broz Tito], the guys that shook the whole country, and then they became a part of the history, together with that country.⁴⁸

Having in mind that post-Yugoslav space has undergone the process that can be named "de-Yugoslavisation", meaning that the term "Yugoslavia" has been disappearing from public discourses ("Western Balkans" and the 'region' being used instead),⁴⁹ it is indicative to notice that Bijelo Dugme has been often labelled and somewhat

⁴⁷ The group has always been suitable topic for the books, since this tendency is not unique for the post-Yugoslav period; even in the late 1970s and in 1980s the group was written about. See, for instance, Duško Pavlović, *Bijelo dugme* (Gornji Milanovac: Džuboks, 1980).

⁴⁸ This part of the documentary is available on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WkOo_jtjXA, accessed January 3, 2016.

⁴⁹ Tanja Petrović, *Yuropa. Jugoslovensko nasleđe i politike budućnosti u postjugoslovenskim društvima* (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2012).

promoted (nowadays) as a symbol of Yugoslav times and a great Yugoslav group, since it is regularly stressed how great the band (and sometimes also the whole country) was, and how Yugoslav pop culture scene was highly developed. A telling example is the biography of the group by Dušan Vesić that in its title contains the label “the greatest Yugoslav group” and that promotes the discourse on the exceptional achievements of the group. The most illustrative example of the process of the reproduction of the group’s importance for [post]Yugoslav culture is the luxurious priced edition (Bijelo Dugme box set deluxe) released in 2014 by Croatia records (the record label and successor to famed Croatian and Yugoslav record label Jugoton), containing all the group’s albums, on CD and LP, plus a documentary, a book and numerous original documents (including contracts) of the group, as well as a calendar featuring album cover art.

The group’s afterlife is also realized through occasional performances by what could be referred to as the post-Yugoslav incarnation of the group. Namely, in addition to his own performances with his Orchestra for weddings and funerals, Bregović has also gathered together some of the members in various configurations of the former group. The improvised band has continued to give concerts under the name Bijelo Dugme within the territory of the former Yugoslavia, with big comeback concerts occurring in 2005. Bregović, who during the 1990s became one of the Balkans’ most internationally known composers, stated that he did not plan to reunite the band. However, in 2005, the group was reunited with Bregović on guitar, Željko Bebek, Mladen Vojičić and Alen Islamović on vocals, Zoran Redžić on bass guitar, Milić Vukašinić and Đidi Jankelić on drums and Vlado Pravdić and Laza Ristovski on keyboards. The reunion drew media attention in all former Yugoslav republics. However, it did not mean that the band continued to work – since then, the group has existed only in those few concerts and in media discourses. The band held only three concerts: in Sarajevo at Koševo stadium, in Zagreb at Maksimir stadium, and in Belgrade at the Belgrade Hipodrome. The Belgrade concert attracted more than 200,000 fans, but drew criticism for poor sound quality. However, that did not hamper positive and nostalgic reactions of the audience. The concert in fact has become a symbol of the reunion and reconciliation of the people in the territory of the former country.⁵⁰ Keeping in mind the political context, the supposedly simple enjoyment in the concerts in fact brings to the engagement of the production of multifarious emotional reactions concerning the sentimental remembrance of the past, such as a nostalgic narrative according to which the music has been a continuation of the ‘perfect past’ in Yugoslavia. The live album *Turneja 2005: Sarajevo, Zagreb, Beograd* (“2005 Tour – Sarajevo, Zagreb, Belgrade”) recorded on the tour was released. During 2014 and 2015, Bregović celebrated 40 years since the formation of the band and the release of their first album with a series of concerts with his Weddings and Funerals Orchestra, featuring Islamović as vocalist. The events are commonly announced as the concerts of Bijelo Dugme, even though very few performers and general features of the band remain.

⁵⁰ Iva Pauker, “Reconciliation and Popular Culture: A Promising Development in Former Yugoslavia?” *Local-Global: Identity, Security, Community* 2 (2006): 72–81.

From this perspective, it can be argued that the importance of the group nowadays has also been made emotionally among its fans that come from different parts of the former country and reunite at its concerts. It should be kept in mind that, after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, many musicians from the former country started giving concerts in the new post-Yugoslav spaces, provoking intensive emotional and nostalgic reactions of the event participants.⁵¹ Thus, the music's potential to trigger memories on the entire country and past times is no exception, but, in the case of a group that is considered to be legendary and revolutionary in the Yugoslav society (that now practically does not exist except for occasional concerts), these concerts' spaces seem to be very specific channels for reconnecting the collectives. One of the symptomatic features in the post-Yugoslav period is naming the tours organised in the 2000s after a song "After All These Years" (*Nakon svih ovih godina*), a romantic love song which has seemingly now become a symbol of the love towards the former country, and especially its music. Performing the songs from the Yugoslav era, these concerts appear to be platforms for recycling old cultural products, giving them new meanings in the post-Yugoslav context.

Conclusion

It seems that Bijelo Dugme still has certain potential. Due to its specific musical and visual profile, the unique moments in the history when they appeared and disbanded, the group has continuously been reproduced as one of the symbols of Yugoslavia, both in the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav periods. In addition to the entire production of nostalgia through books and documentaries, the concerts that are occasionally organised seem to be just a part of the whole process of post-Yugoslav *Dugmemania*, the process of (re)producing the products and values from the former country. Because of the continuous interest in the group by the institutions and media, as well the ways the audience reacts to its music after Yugoslavia, the phenomenon of Bijelo Dugme appears to be a permanent feature in [post]Yugoslav space.

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⁵¹ Petrov, "The Songs We Love to Sing and the History We Like to Remember," 192–214.

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