

Goran Bregović sporting one of his trademark dapper suits



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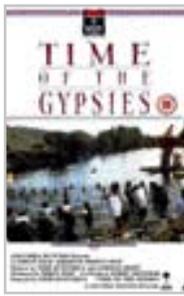
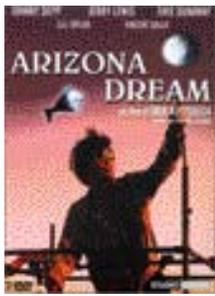
Goran Bregović

Lemez Lovas highlights the true cultural achievements of Goran Bregović, a musician whose zealous reworking of his own catalogue has allowed him to become a brand in his own right

If the European Union were to commission a musician to compose a new anthem, odds are that they would call Yugoslav Goran Bregović. One of the most instantly recognisable and successful composers in Europe in the last 20 years, his signature sound has mesmerised rapturous audiences in opera houses and town squares from Warsaw to Istanbul and Marseille. From strolling French accordion lines to blasting Balkan trumpets, and lush Viennese strings to spine-tingling Bulgarian harmonies – his sound is an unmistakable celebration of Europe: of its traditions, influences and diversity. If it all sounds too good to be true – like a Brussels-sponsored infomercial – Bregović is certainly not without his detractors. But love him or hate him, one thing is certain: ever since this native Bosnian guitarist and composer scored his soundtrack to Emir Kusturica's prize-winning 1988 film, *Dom Za Vešanje* (Time of the Gypsies), presenting Roma Gypsy songs from his native Yugoslavia in a more obviously commercial, accessible way – he has been impossible to ignore.

Bregović was born in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, in 1950 to mixed Serb-Croat parents. Thrown out of music school where he was studying violin – for “laziness and lack of talent” – he was soon playing bass semi-professionally with local band Kodeksi, who first played folk music for tourists on the Adriatic coast, and then progressive rock inspired by Cream and Led Zeppelin. This early experience playing ethnic music and rock was to prove the foundation of his later career. When Kodeksi disbanded, Bregović founded Bijelo Dugme (White Button) with singer Željko Bebek. By August 1974, Bijelo Dugme were on the way to becoming the biggest Yugoslav rock band of all time, and Bregović, as the band's composer, the country's most prolific songwriter. Nicknamed the Yugoslav Beatles, ‘Dugmemania’ swept the nation, and the band were soon emulating their heroes, recording and mixing their albums in London's Air Studios and Abbey Road.

Bregović's love of folk music, provocateur tendencies and canny eye for a marketing opportunity were an integral part of the band's success, coming together most notoriously in 1983's ‘Kosovska’ (Kosovan) – sung in Albanian, a radical gesture even then. But in the early 80s, Yugoslavia was rocking out to a ska and two-tone influenced New Wave, and not even Bregović's savvy and the band's subsequent reinvention could stop the inevitable slide. By the late 80s, ethnic nationalism was sweeping the country, and the pan-Yugoslav cultural identity that the band represented for many of its fans was dead. The tour to promote the band's last album



Ćiribiribela in 1988 was, he says, "sickening. The lights come on and the hall is full of Serbian flags. The next day we play in Croatia, and again, you can see Croatian flags. Our trucks were daubed in 'Serbia über alles' graffiti, and the same in Croatia. I couldn't wait for it to end." As Yugoslavia broke up in 1989, so did Bijelo Dugme.

As his rock'n'roll career was ending, a second career as a film composer was just taking off, and his partnership with fellow Sarajevo film director Kusturica was to propel him into the global spotlight for good. Their first collaboration, 1988's *Dom Za Vešanje* (Time of the Gypsies), was an instant success. The combination of the director's magical realism and the composer's dramatic arrangements of soaring Roma Gypsy songs like 'Ederlezi' (previously a hit for his band Bijelo Dugme under its Serbian title 'Djurdjevdan') won Kusturica the coveted Palme d'Or for Best Director at Cannes. For their next film together, 1993's *Arizona Dream*, the pair were fast becoming the darlings of the indie cinema scene, with Johnny Depp in the lead role and Iggy Pop as the special vocalist for three songs on the soundtrack. Their commercial breakthrough, and the film that has defined Bregović's international career since, was their 1995 collaboration, *Underground*. With a fanfare of alcohol, black humour and crashing snare drums, the film was a runaway success. Its ecstatic, Bregović-enhanced Roma brass soundtrack taught Europe two epic new drinking anthems – 'Kalashnikov' and 'Mesečina' (Moonlight) – catapulting both trumpet legends Boban Marković and Slobodan Salijević and the whole Balkan Gypsy sound into the world music limelight.

Now re-established as a global, stadium-filling act, Bregović continues to tour with his multinational Wedding and Funeral Band,



Bregović performing live with his Wedding and Funeral Band

who perform hits from his soundtracks as he oversees proceedings, centre-stage in his crisp white suit. Everything is perfect, except for the occasional catcall of discontent – during his time with Bijelo Dugme, he was accused of "forgetting" to credit traditional songs or others' claims to authorship: allegations that became louder as his career progressed and his relationship with Gypsy music developed under Kusturica. Certainly one of his most famous songs, 'Mesečina,' does bear an uncanny resemblance to 'Djeli Mara' by the late, great Serbian Roma singer Šaban Bajramović, and controversy over disputed music rights on the soundtrack was rumoured to be partly responsible for his split with Kusturica after *Underground*.

To his many fans, this is snide criticism that obscures the main point: that Bregović is traditional culture, his songs as deeply embedded in Yugoslav culture as Lennon and McCartney's in Britain. Every teenager knows his melodies and lyrics, and the Roma brass bands that he did so much to popularise have long since been repaying the compliment, performing his soundtrack themes as a core part of their repertoire.

But the criticism shared by fans and critics alike is the most pointed: that Bregović today is more corporate brand than legitimate artist, re-recording his hit songs over and over again to maximise exposure in different markets. He has recorded very similar sounding versions of many of his hit songs in local languages with Polish singer Kayah, Turk Sezen Aksu and Greek George Dalaras, to name just a few. His latest album, *Alkohol*, is a crazy Balkan blast, but there are too many rehashes of old hits in new arrangements. Has he lost his creative mojo, or will he be able to reinvent himself and get us all drinking and dancing again like never before in the process? Genius composer or cynical marketer – whatever you believe, only a fool would write-off the man who has done more to wake Europe up to the traditional musical riches in its own backyard than any composer since Béla Bartók. ●

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BEST... ...ALBUMS



Bijelo Dugme, *Bitanga i Princeza* (Jugoton, 1979)

It is often forgotten that Bregović is a brilliant songwriter. On this album, 'Sve će to, o mila moja prekriti ružmarin, snjegovi i šaš', a sad love song that evokes St Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*, is Bijelo Dugme at their epic, tear-jerking best. The compilation *Bijelo Dugme* (Musicrama/Koch, 2000) is a good starting point for beginners and fans alike. It features this song amongst many other hits and is widely available on CD.



La Reine Margot OST (Mercury, 1994)

Bregović proved to be the perfect musical companion to this rich, bloody costume drama: lush choral music, Dalmation evensong and a beautiful, sobbing lead melody from Ofra Haza, the late, great Israeli singer with the spectacularly pure, resonant voice.



Underground OST (PolyGram, 1995)

This is the platinum-selling album that got Europe dancing and screaming to the wild Balkan trumpet beat, but there is more to it than this delirious mayhem. The tango 'Ausencia' brings out the very best in the wonderful Cape Verdean singer Cesaria Evora. It's an all-round powerhouse of a record that still sounds fresh.



Alkohol (Blue Wrasse, 2009)

Kicking off with a scream of 'Alkohol!', this is a high-energy romp fuelled by fire-water and Guča-festival-style brass which he'll probably be touring for some time. A Top of the World review in #59.

...AVOIDED



Thessaloniki – Yannena with Two Canvas Shoes (EMI, 1999)

This album with Greek singer George Dalaras includes the worst Kusturica-era rehash of all: 'Me Leni Popi', which destroys the classic Roma anthem 'Čaje Šukarije' with a cheap techno kick drum and grating child's voice on top. Unforgivable.

LIKE BREGOVIĆ? THEN TRY... ODGROBADOGROBA

(Gravehopping) (2005)

Many film soundtracks copy Bregović in their use of Balkan brass to throw a wild party, but few get the dark humour that lies beneath. The soundtrack of Slovenian director Jan Cvitkovič's fabulously wry tale about a hopeless funeral speaker does that and much more.

