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A statue of King Tomislav in City Park, Zagreb

Cultures collide in Croatia's bustling capital, ensuring kaleidoscopic musical possibilities, as Jon Bousfield discovers

Of all the states to emerge from the former Yugoslavia, Croatia, perhaps undeservedly, has the least well-known musical profile. However, as you might expect from a country that straddles the Balkan, Mediterranean and Central European worlds, the country can rustle up a lot in the way of regional folk tradition. And whilst national musical styles are still relatively unknown, the Croatian capital is fast becoming the region's undisputed musical centre.

A Habsburg-era city liberally sprinkled with pavement cafés – and a citizenry for whom the two-hour coffee break occupies a sacrosanct position in everyday life – Zagreb initially appears far too laid back to support an energetic live music scene. However it has far more gig venues than any of its neighbouring national capitals. When the likes of Cesaria Evora, Mariza, Rokia Traoré or Femi Kuti are putting together a tour schedule, Zagreb is a place that always fits easily onto the list.

It's Zagreb's proximity to the rumbustious heartlands of Balkan music that makes the monthly concert schedules such fascinating reading. The locals have a close knowledge of Balkan music and don't half know how to party when they hear it. And if you want to see Ema Redžepova, Mostar Sevdah Reunion, Kočani Orkestar and Boban Marković performing to an almost-but-not-quite hometown audience, then Zagreb is as good a place as any to experience it.

And even if you don't hit town at the right time to see any gigs, you can at least go prospecting for Balkan musical gold in the city's second-hand record stores. Zagreb was a major centre of the former-

Yugoslav record industry in the 70s and 80s, and much of the vinyl from this fertile period has washed up in the local collectors' shops. Gypsy stars Redžepova and Šaban Bajramović recorded some of their best material for the Zagreb-based Jugoton record label, and their singles and albums can still be uncovered through dedicated rummaging.

Zagreb's reputation as a rocking and reeling city goes back a long way. During the 80s this was the heartland of Yugoslavia's new wave, producing a stable of local acts who started with punk before moving outwards to embrace reggae, electronica and ethnic sounds. Most of the principal actors from this period – eclectic songsmith Darko Rundek being the most prominent example – are now living elsewhere and doing other things, but the legacy of new wave experimentation goes a long way to explaining the city's musical personality today.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the cultish, enthusiast-run live venues such as KSET and Studentski Centar, which not only provide local alternative rock and roots music acts with a proving ground, but also bring in the best off-the-wall foreign bands, offering a home-from-home for non-mainstream acts. Zagreb now also boasts a brand new stadium in the shape of Arena, which can pack in 15,000 people for music concerts.

Not surprisingly, the local roots-music acts that have made most waves over recent years belong to the same genre-bending ethos. Prime among the bands that perform regularly in Zagreb is Kries, who bring computer-programmed beats and stomping rock rhythms to bear on archaic, ritualistic songs that are no longer performed by the sanitised folklore societies. Another live act with devoted local support is Afion (Opium), whose infectious trans-Balkan mix of traditional Croatian-to-Macedonian source material gets forced through an idiosyncratic blender of cool jazz and pastoral hippy-rock. Also performing regularly in the clubs are Dunja Knebl and Lidija Bajuk, both delivering the plaintive narrative songs of eastern Croatia with folksy acoustic-guitar backing. Seekers of bizarre Croatian hybrids should look no further than self-styled 'ethno-doom' merchants SOM, whose intense guitar-fuzz renditions of sentimental village ditties have the makings of a whole new genre.



A view over the upper town



Okkervil River performing at KSET

VENUES

The clubbing and gig-going season in Zagreb runs from mid-September to mid-June. During the summer, concert venues close down and clubs migrate to the coast.

Aquarius

Occupying a pavilion on the shores of Lake Jarun, six kilometres south-west of the centre, Aquarius is where the big names of world music usually play when they're in Zagreb. It is also a cult venue on the club scene. **Ulica Matije Ljubeka b.b., +385 (0)1 364 0231, www.aquarius.hr**

FESTIVALS

Zedno Uho (Thirsty Ear)

With up to 40 acts playing over a three-week period, Thirsty Ear adds up to what is probably the most sustained and uplifting programme of leftfield music in Europe. Recent editions have attracted alt-country acts like Willard Grant Conspiracy and Calexico, alongside post-punk veterans Pere Ubu and Gang of Four. Organised by Studentski Centar (see above), although events may take place in various venues. April-May. **www.sczg.hr**

INmusic Festival

Taking place on the shores of Lake Jarun, this is the city's biggest outdoor event, although with a capacity of 25,000, it's still an enjoyably intimate event by European summer festival standards. 2008 saw Tinariwen and Amadou & Mariam co-headlining, with rock-fest regulars The



Mexico's Grupo Magisterial de Danza playing at Medunarodna Smotra Folklor

Boogaloo

A former cinema on the south side of the centre, Boogaloo is a popular venue. **Ulica Grada Vukovara 68, www.boogaloo.hr**

KSET

Student club and cult live venue, the small and intimate KSET hosts gigs most nights of the week, with alternative rock, jazz and world music predominating. **Ulica Unska 3, www.kset.org**

Studentski Centar (Student Centre)

This collection of buildings belonging to the students' union contains several venues and boasts the most varied programme of live music in the city. **Savska Cesta 25, www.sczg.hr**

Tvornica Kulture (The Culture Factory)

A dark, impersonal gig venue that struggles to live up to its name, it nevertheless attracts a healthy smattering of rock and world music acts. **Ulica Subiceva 2, +385 (0)1 777 8673, www.tvornica-kulture.hr**



Seun Kuti soaks up INmusic Festival

Prodigy and Nick Cave's Bad Seeds. Early June. **www.inmusicfestival.com**

Medunarodna Smotra Folklor (International Folklore Festival)

If you want to see folklore societies performing traditional songs and dances in full costume, then this is the event to aim for. There's a handful of guest ensembles

from around the world, but the festival's main focus is Croatia and its Balkan neighbours. Mid-July. **www.msf.hr**

Nebo

World music festival taking place over a long weekend, with a 50-50 mix of international and local acts. October. **www.nebofestzagreb.com**

No Jazz

Short for 'not only jazz', No Jazz explores the uncharted boundary regions of alternative rock, folk, and jazz, with a fortnight of concerts at the Studentski Centar. November. **www.sczg.hr**

FESTIVALS OUTSIDE ZAGREB

Ethnoambient Salona

Traditional folklore meets roots fusion in a Roman amphitheatre just outside Split. Co-founded by Zagreb-based electro-folksters, Kries, who always headline one of the two evenings. July. **www.ethnoambient.net**

Competition

WIN A TRIP TO ZAGREB!



We have a weekend in the Croatian capital to give away, courtesy of Zagreb Tourist Board, including flights, two nights accommodation in a city centre hotel and a Zagreb card*

To enter, simply answer the following question: **Which former king has a statue in Zagreb's City Park?**

Terms & conditions: the tickets are for two people travelling together and must be used over any weekend (Friday to Sunday) by December 31 2009. Flights are for London-Zagreb-London in economy class and always subject to availability. The tickets are non-transferable and have no cash value. Travel must originate in the UK. Accommodation in twin/double room with breakfast in a city centre hotel. This prize is non-negotiable, non-refundable and does not include insurance or transfers in the UK. Reservations for the flights must be made at least 14 days before departure. *Zagreb card gives you free public transport and other discounts. See p5 for *Songlines* competition rules and address. Closing date April 3 2009

www.zagreb-touristinfo.hr



RECORD SHOPS

Karma Music Shop

World music, Balkan folklore and former-Yugoslav new wave in a well laid-out shop with obliging staff. Two kilometres south-west of the centre in the Tresnjevka district, but always worth the trip. **Podgorska 3, +385 (0)1 363 3685, www.karmavinil.com**

Roxy

Cupboard-sized shop chock-full of CDs and vinyl reflecting all epochs of Croatian and Yugoslav musical history. If you can't see what you want on the shelves, the owner may well rustle up something interesting from the back-room storepile. **Savska cesta 34, www.cdshop-roxy.com**

LISTINGS

Events and Performances, a monthly booklet available from Zagreb's tourist information office on the main square (**Trg Bana Jelačića 11**), covers everything from opera to indie rock. The **www.muzika.hr** website carries concert listings in Croatian (click on 'koncerti' and the rest is easy to follow).