

# “Throwing Stones at the System”: Rock Music in Serbia during the 1990s

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Milosevic was brought down by rock and roll, without a doubt. Because rock is also *OTPOR* [the movement *Resistance*], and the fist [visual symbol of *OTPOR*], and our empty wallets, and running through the tear-gas, and Dinkic as a governor of the National Bank [Mladjan Dinkic is a young economist, oppositionary intellectual and a musician] and a smile that conquered the fear.<sup>1</sup>

During the 1990s rock music in Serbia metamorphosed from urban entertainment to underground opposition and a weapon of resistance against the Slobodan Milosevic regime. The analysis of several rock songs that critically addressed political discourse, key political events, figures, and social injustices in 1990s Serbia will reveal the variety of ways in which metaphors and symbols in music functioned as a powerful political critique. In using this strategy, it is not my intention to provide an encyclopedic and chronological overview of the musical scene in Serbia in the 1990s, nor do I wish to overemphasize the significance that rock music had during those turbulent times. The purpose of this article is to provide examples which will illuminate the role of music as “a kind of cognitive praxis” and a “collective learning process” during times of political unrest.<sup>2</sup>

What exactly did rock songs in Serbia oppose and how did they function as a “cognitive praxis”? In order to answer these two questions, I will outline briefly the political and social situation in Serbia during the 1990s and then discuss the concept of cognitive praxis in social movements as proposed by the sociologists Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1991).

The complexities of Serbian politics during the 1990s are well documented.<sup>3</sup> From Serbia’s involvement in the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, to the staggering economic crisis, to the regime’s manipulations of the media, to the burgeoning of crime and the public creation of crime elites, to

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<sup>1</sup> Branko Rogosic, “Uvodnik” (“Editorial”), *Rock Express*, no. 25 (2000) <<http://www.rockexpress.org>> (Accessed June 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For a more detailed analysis of various music genres and the musical scene in Serbia during the 1990s, see also Brana Mijatovic, *Music and Politics in Serbia (1989-2000)* (Ph.D. diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Sonia Biserko, ed., *Yugoslavia: Collapse, War, Crimes* (Belgrade: Center for Anti-War Action—Association of Independent Intellectuals “Belgrade Circle,” 1993); Srbobran Brankovic, *Serbia at War with Itself: Political Choice in Serbia 1990–1994*, trans. Mary Thompson-Popovic and Mira Poznanovic (Beograd: Sociological Society of Serbia, 1995); Nebojsa Popov and Drinka Gojkovic, eds., *The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1996 [2000]). Tim Judah, *The Serbs* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997); Eric Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1999); Robert Thomas, *The Politics of Serbia in the 1990s* (Columbia University Press, 1999); Velimir Curguz Kazimir, ed. *The Last Decade: Citizens in the Struggle for Democracy and An Open Society 1991–2001*. Group of Authors (Belgrade: Media Center, 2001); and many others.

the international economic and cultural sanctions, and the NATO bombing—the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought an unprecedented chaos in the lives of ordinary citizens in Serbia.

The first part of the 1990s was a period when the ruling party seemed undefeatable, when demonstrations, anti-war protests and cultural actions for peace brought no change, and all alternatives to the regime's politics seemed to be closed off. It was a time of military draft, hyperinflation, burgeoning crime, political purges in the media and the universities, and a series of failed political actions by the opposition political parties. Today many social critics refer to this period (1992–1995) as the darkest years of Serbia.

During this period, characterized by the psychological impact of wars, loss of friends, and decreasing means and spaces for socializing, along with the disillusionment with the political alternatives presented by the opposition, and a preoccupation with everyday survival, many ordinary citizens experienced a feeling of being completely helpless, which significantly impacted cultural production. Individual sensibilities of Serbian rock musicians accounted for a diversity of responses to the political situation, ranging from direct provocation of the regime to personal silence, like an array of human responses to any tragedy. Therefore, some musicians found that if they sang at all, they should be addressing the reality of the situation they lived in by challenging the political rhetoric of the times and arousing people's indignation through their songs. These musicians included Rambo Amadeus, Direktori, Dza ili Bu, Elektricni Orgazam in Rimtutituki, EKV in Rimtutituki, Block Out, and Partibrejkers in the early 1990s. Others, including *Bajaga, Partibrejkers* in mid-1990s, could not bring themselves to produce songs during a time when wars were going on nearby.<sup>4</sup> Yet others such as *Darkwood Dub, EKV, Deca Losih Muzicara, Eyesburn* in the late 1990s, commented on the social and political situation, but in an oblique and highly metaphoric way. A few others—e.g., *Tony Montano, Viktorija, Bora Corba*—sided with the nationalist rhetoric.

While the opening quote by an influential Serbian rock critic (written after Milosevic's defeat in the year 2000) enthusiastically expressed the confidence in the power that rock music had during the 1990s, this power was not that obvious to many rock and roll musicians during those times. Srdjan Gojkovic Gile, the lead singer and the guitarist of the influential Serbian rock band *Elektricni Orgazam*, was not optimistic about the significance of rock in former Yugoslavia. He stated in 1996:

Our songs didn't reduce the number of bombs [that fell in Croatia and Bosnia], but we simply wanted to say to people what we thought about everything that was happening. Rock can never be a threat to the regime. Even The Beatles, who had a planetary significance, could not have

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<sup>4</sup> Zoran Kostic Cane, the front man of the *Partibrejkers* later commented on this period:

After that [concerts with *Rimtutituki* in spring of 1992] we did not appear in public anymore. It was the time of some shame within me. I felt that it was unpopular to be popular . . . And my life wasn't that great, either, in order to be able to shine a light in the general darkness [he got sick and underwent several surgeries]. An understanding dawned on me that everything collapsed and I got disgusted with everything. It was meaningless to broadcast your existence, since you couldn't do anything. The darkness was thick. . . . There was such pressure of madness, one couldn't breathe. My soul was empty and my heart cold. At one point I was surrounded with so many questions and there were no answers. Ljubisa Stavic, "Partibrejker: Intervju sa Zoranom Kosticem Canetom: Bez Trika I Foliranja," *NIN* 2436, Belgrade, September 5, 1997 <<http://www.nin.co.yu/arhiva/2436/3.html>> (Accessed December 2002).

influenced politics.<sup>5</sup>

At that time, an influential music critic Petar Janjatovic agreed with this statement, saying "Rock was absolutely never a real force here. Simply, we are a poor, agrarian country and what can rock represent here?"<sup>6</sup>

However, rock represented a strong, if at times uneven, voice of the people opposing the civil wars and the politics of the Serbian government, even though the struggle for such messages to be heard required a great effort. Belgrade media has been systematically purged since Slobodan Milosevic became President of Serbia in 1989, effectively eliminating a number of possibilities for voicing oppositional perspectives, and assuring the domination of Milosevic's views in influencing public opinion.<sup>7</sup>

Further, a rapid deterioration of social conditions presented logistical problems in sustaining a rock band. Since rock had already begun to challenge the domination of the ruling party, it suddenly found itself being displaced from the center of cultural life to its margins.<sup>8</sup> This effectively meant no space in the media, no concerts and no recording contracts.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, a musical genre called turbo-folk, (which, for the most part, supported the regime through the propagation of specific moral and ethical values) overtook public space through the militant promotion in state-run and state-affiliated media to the exclusion of all other genres.<sup>10</sup>

These circumstances had profound consequences for the future cultural and political situation in Serbia. According to Gordy,

the destruction of the rock and roll market met two goals of the regime in the period of nationalist mobilization: It helped to demoralize and isolate members of the young generations of urbanites who were more inclined than any other group to resist the regime's rhetoric and plans,

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<sup>5</sup> Gile as quoted in Radovan Kupres, "Srpski rezim i srpski rok: od presije do kolaboracije" ("The Serbian Regime and The Serbian Rock: From Oppression to Collaboration"), *Nasa borba* (23 May 1996) <<http://www.yuope.com/people/sen/prezentacije/alt.beograd/arhiva1/0393.html>> (Accessed February 2003). In another interview, three years later, he emphasized the role of rock songs as a means for transmitting opinions on politics and civil wars that were different from the official ideologies of all involved former Yugoslav republics: "I don't think that music can change the world, stop the war. But we wanted to say what we thought about what was going on in the country. We also wanted it to be heard in other republics of the former Yugoslavia, and there was no other means of communication" Milan Cunkovic, "Intervju: Ne volim seljacke bendove: Gile iz ElORg," 1999. <[http://www.yumusicweb.co.yu/html/interview\\_meseca\\_januar\\_99.htm](http://www.yumusicweb.co.yu/html/interview_meseca_januar_99.htm)> (Accessed May 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Kupres, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Some of the journalists who were fired from state controlled media organizations formed opposition magazines and radio stations like *Vreme* and Radio B92, which had a significant role in creating and sustaining social movements which finally toppled the regime in the 2000.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of the music scene in Serbia during Milosevic's period see Misa Djurkovic, *Diktatura, Nacija, Globalizacija* (Beograd: Institut za Evropske Studije, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia*.

<sup>10</sup> For further information on and analysis of turbo-folk see Ivana Kronja, *Smrtonosni sjaj: masovna psihologija i estetika turbo-folka* (The Fatal Glow: Mass Psychology and Aesthetics of Turbo-Folk Subculture) (Beograd: Tehnokratia, 2001); Goran Tarlac, "Warmongering Turbo/Neo Folk: New Heroes, New Singers," in *Antologija Turbo Folka: Pesme iz Stomaka Naroda*, ed. Goran Tarlac and Vladimir Djuric Djura, Belgrade: SKC, 2001), 61-96; and Mijatovic, "Music and Politics in Serbia (1989-2000)."

and it weakened a popular channel of cultural expression, which was largely inclined and willing to stand in the way.<sup>11</sup>

In the words of one Belgrader who saw the destruction of the rock and roll scene in the 1990s as an enormous cultural loss for younger generations, whose cultural experiences were limited to television and radio under Milosevic, “a generation growing up without rock and roll grows up without the kind of breadth and cultural support seen as vital if they are to ‘think for themselves.’”<sup>12</sup> This view testifies that rock and roll and the discourses created around it were perceived as crucial for stimulating intellectual inquiry and fostering independent thinking, necessary for a development of a socially conscious individual.<sup>13</sup> And it is a socially conscious individual who can critically assess a political situation and develop new perspectives leading to constructive social change.

In their work on social movements, sociologists Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison discuss the concept of cognitive praxis as crucial for creating social change.<sup>14</sup> They describe this concept variously as socially conditioned “content of the consciousness” which is transformed in social movements; as “communicative interaction” where the “knowledge production” is “a form of social action”; as a process through which a society can develop new perspectives; and conclude that “social movement *is* its cognitive praxis.”<sup>15</sup> By this they mean that all the symbolic and expressive actions of a social movement are brought into existence because of the creative role of consciousness and cognition. However, this does not happen randomly. They write:

Social movements seldom emerge spontaneously; instead they require long periods of preparation both at the individual, group, and societal level. No social movement emerges until there is a political opportunity available, a context of social problem as well as a context of communication, opening up the potential for problem articulation and knowledge dissemination. Not until the theme has been articulated, not until the tensions have been formulated in a new conceptual space can a social movement come into being.<sup>16</sup>

And it is in this respect that music in Serbia has served as a cognitive praxis that contributed to the knowledge production which led to the organization of the student resistance movement *Otpor!* in 1998 and the change of political system in Serbia in the year 2000.<sup>17</sup> However, my goal here is not to write about a social movement, but rather to present a few songs that were crucial in that period of preparation, in articulating the problem and disseminating the ideas of resistance. In the same sense that “cognitive praxis does not appear all at once, but emerges over time,” the individual

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<sup>11</sup> Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia*, 127.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>13</sup> While this is only one quote, this view has been echoed through numerous conversations I’ve held and personal interviews I’ve done for my dissertation, as well as several rock songs themselves (for example “The Hypnotized Crowd” by Partibrejkers, “Peace, Brother, Peace” by Rimtutituki, etc).

<sup>14</sup> Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*. (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991). Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*.

<sup>15</sup> Eyerman and Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*, 4, 48, 5, 48, and 54 respectively.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>17</sup> For information on student resistance movement *Otpor!* see Ackerman and DuVall 2001 (<http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org/films/bdd/story/otpor/>); Chiclet 2001 ([http://www.unesco.org/courier/2001\\_03/uk/droits.htm](http://www.unesco.org/courier/2001_03/uk/droits.htm)); Partos n.d. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/749469.stm>).

songs I will present here did not have an immediate, but a cumulative effect in creating a kind of consciousness where resistance went beyond social critique to social change.<sup>18</sup>

The period of preparation mentioned above can also be understood through a concept that is increasingly used in literature on social movements: the concept of framing.<sup>19</sup> In relation to social movements, framing has been discussed as a process which organizes experience and guides action; influences interpretations of reality through creation of meaning by selectively focusing people's attention to particular issues; acts as an innovative antidote to ideology; and as a process which can aid in "achieving a common definition of a social problem and a common prescription of solving it."<sup>20</sup> Three types of frames—diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational—serve to analyze the cause or nature of a problem, propose a solution, and to "call to arms," i.e., motivate people for action.<sup>21</sup> Viewed from this perspective, then, the songs offering social critique are the ones having the diagnostic frame. Those proposing some sort of solution would have the prognostic frame. Those issuing a call for rebellion would have the motivational frame. Of course, some songs may combine several frames.

The songs presented in this article are using all of the frames in various combinations. "Karamba Karambita" (1992) by Rambo Amadeus employs diagnostic and prognostic frames: after the collage-like elaboration of government machinations and manipulations as well as the gullibility of the people, the singer concludes with an advice. "Sistem" ("System," 1997) by Darkwood Dub uses a motivational, "call to arms" frame in its first-person mantra-like repetitions of expressions of revolt against the mechanism of power; "Zanimljiva Geografija" ("An Interesting Geography," 1996) by Dza ili Bu applies an ironic diagnostic challenge to the official media rhetoric regarding the war; "Sejn" ("Shane," 1998) by Eyesburn is a motivational call for open rebellion—"get out and fight"—Inspired by a movie about a cowboy.

While all of these artists were extremely important during the various parts of the 1990s for their critical stance towards the official government actions and media representations of those actions, I wish to emphasize that this selection by no means exhausts the list of songs (and artists) which (who) contested the forces of oppression and exploitation of those times. I have chosen these songs because of my personal affinity towards the wealth of symbolic meanings and networks of

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<sup>18</sup> Eyerman and Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*, 57.

<sup>19</sup> Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 611-639.

<sup>20</sup> David A. Snow et al., "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 464; Peer C. Fiss and Paul M. Hirsch, "The Discourse of Globalization: Framing and Sensemaking of an Emerging Concept," *American Sociological Review* 70, no.1 (2005): 29-52; Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements," 612; and Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, eds., *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, 1-26 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). For a detailed analysis of the concept of framing in sociology see Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements" and Hank Johnston and John A. Noakes, *Frames of Protest: Social Movements and the Framing Perspective* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*, 1-26.

interconnectedness presented both in the music and the lyrics to serve as illustrations of the imaginative and transformative power of music in times of crisis.<sup>22</sup>

The most openly provocative voice of rock resistance during the first part of the 1990s belonged to the musician Rambo Amadeus. Antonije Pusic adopted the stage name Rambo Amadeus for purposes of personifying an idiot-savant peasant with a broad satiric license. Combining elements of rock, hip-hop, funk, and newly-composed folk music he portrayed various phenomena of everyday life in Serbia in an often ironical, and sometimes even obscene way, and voiced his “vitriolic” opposition to the regime.<sup>23</sup> He gained notoriety as an unpredictable voice of the people opposing the wars by creating an incident that was broadcast live on national television. During the concert called “Belgrade Rock Winner” in 1992 he interrupted the performance of the vocalist Bebi Dol, took the microphone from her hand and said: “While we here play music, bombs are falling on Dubrovnik, and Sarajevo! I don’t want to entertain the electorate!” This was followed with a curse.<sup>24</sup> At around the same time he composed a biting critique of the regime and its actions in his song “*Karamba Karambita*”:<sup>25</sup>

### Audio Example 1: *Karamba Karambita*

Accessible at: <http://www.music.ucsb.edu/projects/musicandpolitics/m/mijatovic-m.html>

Artist: Rambo Amadeus

Year of release: 1992

My tears are making stalactites,

Why is our Tito gone?<sup>26</sup>

Oh hundred thunders, by stag’s antlers, by all the beavers of Ontario, karamba karambita (goodness gracious), I swear on my great grandfather shaman and the drums of Darkwood, was it better during comrade Tito?

They hid behind the bait of “the nation”

They sank sharp metal fishhooks in our butts

They herded us into underground sheepfolds

And now they are turning us into unison choirs:

“Four legs good, two legs bad”

“Four legs good, two legs bad”

With stolen money they drive Mercedes and Porsche.

They put the worst brownmosers on TV

they offer us hypocrisy as a life philosophy

<sup>22</sup> I have written elsewhere (see Mijatovic 2004) about the songs by pop singer Djordje Balasevic, which were a key contribution to the creation of cognitive praxis of the student resistance movement *Otpor!* Otherwise, they would be particularly interesting examples to illustrate the claims made in this article.

<sup>23</sup> Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia*, 117.

<sup>24</sup> Cited according to *BalkanMedia* on-line article from 06.12.2001 <http://www.balkanmedia.com/m2/doc/273-1.shtml> According to other accounts, he mentioned Sarajevo, as well.

<sup>25</sup> Album *KPGS* (1992)

<sup>26</sup> Josip Broz Tito was the president of Yugoslavia from 1945 till his death in 1980.

To the "heavenly people" they gave earthly problems  
For robbery they invented subtle systems  
The President gives permission to the voters (sound of cows mooing)  
Look, he is driving on the oil field  
Just before the elections there's a new trickery  
the naive retirees get small change.

Refrain

Sampling

The same record but different side  
The conspiracy of the CIA and Vatican<sup>27</sup>  
They took again our savings  
And in return they gave us expert economic analyses  
The educated people forced out of the country  
In to their place the underworld crawled up  
The honest man can only cry  
Or buy a rope to hang himself  
As a consolation we are offered:  
Lottery, betting, horoscope, hypnosis<sup>28</sup>  
The long lines in front of  
the private [pyramid scheme] banks of Jezda and Dafina  
If the country is a boat  
We know who the captain is  
The closer we are to a shipwreck  
The happier he is.  
Deeply convinced  
He steers the boat  
While he is bullshitting,  
The oarsmen eat it all up.

"But suddenly he stopped, flinched"

You can only turn the TV off  
Rest your brain and stay away from the fools  
First they make you go to war  
And make an invalid out of you  
And then they don't even say thank you  
Turn off the TV, don't you see it's poisoning you  
They make a decent man swear  
But they will, like Hitler, Ceausescu,  
fall from their positions with racket and noise.

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<sup>27</sup> Here the author refers to the numerous conspiracy theories that proliferated during the early 1990s. The CIA and Vatican were some of the most often cited as being involved in plotting the destruction of Yugoslavia.

<sup>28</sup> During the early 1990s the shows featuring lottery, hypnosis, horoscopes, began sprouting up everywhere. In some of these shows the "seers" would "predict" president Milosevic's success in various political situations.

In this song, Rambo contrasts the past, marked by the communist rule of Josip Broz Tito, laconically summarizing 45 years in a few words, music quotes, and sound effects, with the present -- beginning of the 1990s, through an extensive and encyclopedic enumeration of the ills that had befallen Serbian society. He talks about the wars, the extreme nationalistic propaganda, the media brainwashing, economic pyramid schemes, the rhetoric of “the chosen people,” the proliferation of conspiracy theories, the regime-sponsored rise of organized crime, and so on.

The opening of the song (“My tears are making stalactites/Why is our Tito gone?”) is a parody of the famous quasi-folk communist paean (a hymn of praise) to Josip Broz Tito. In that song, known as “Sa Ovcara I Kablara,” (“From the mountains of Ovar and Kablar”) a shepherdess--standing in for “the people”—proclaims her love to the charismatic leader.<sup>29</sup>

Rambo Amadeus’ parody consists of hugely exaggerating the strong emotions for Tito to an extent that makes them questionable and (or) laughable: tears making stalactites as a metaphor for sorrow. The style of singing in this segment—a female duo performing *a capella* in a technique known as “na bas”—is supposed to suggest the often repeated notion that president Tito was adored by the “common people” and “rural folk.”

The bird-song effects, by its cliché associations with nature and peace, are supposed to evoke sentiments of an idyllic pastoral atmosphere, but actually serve to parody and mock the “authenticity” of the rural character of “the people.”

This opening is separated from the rest of the song by the quasi techno-break, ending with a single bell-like sound which announces the start of something different: a thoroughly “modern” sound of drums, electric bass, electric guitar, and saxophone and the rapping-reciting raspy voice of the male singer, Rambo Amadeus. The melody that begins this segment and is carried throughout the refrain on the guitar and saxophone adds another layer of meaning: “Oh hundred thunders, by stag’s antlers/by all the beavers of Ontario, karamba karambita [goodness gracious]/I swear on my great grandfather shaman and the drums of Darkwood/was it better during comrade Tito?” It is a world-famous Argentine tango from the 1920s, “Jalousie” (Jealousy), whose dance melody references nostalgic longing for some unspecified time of the past.<sup>30</sup>

The numerous sound effects that characterize this song act as arrows of irony pointed at people and phenomena abounding in Serbia at the time. For instance, the applause that occurs at specific places in the song is intended to signify and represent mass meetings of support for Milosevic at the outset of his rule, and, in general, the adoration of the political leaders; the sampled sound effects of cows “mooring” follows the mention of voters, to, obviously, indicate a herd

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<sup>29</sup> While this song was popular only with the lyrics referencing Josip Broz Tito and the partisans between 1945 and the late 1980s, there are other, older versions of the song, which reference the political events of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Please see [www.sabotrubaca.com/history.html](http://www.sabotrubaca.com/history.html) for additional information. However, for the people of Rambo’s generation this song provides an immediate association with Tito, since it was enormously popular at various patriotic festivities, both those that were televised, as well as the smaller, elementary-school-sponsored events, with performances of the school choirs.

<sup>30</sup> In a personal interview, Rambo Amadeus revealed that the choice of this song was supposed to reference the fact that the leaders of Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia were actually jealous of each other and the power that each wielded, as well as the power of Josip Broz Tito, and wanted to emulate him and that it was this that led to wars.

mentality, i.e., those who unthinkingly follow their leader.<sup>31</sup> The “four legs good, two legs bad” is a famous quote from George Orwell’s “Animal Farm,” an allegorical novel about totalitarianism and brainwashing.

The repetitive riffs in the electric guitar, based on a rhythmic repetition of the initial tone, connect the verses of the song. These verses diagnose the problematic aspects of social life.

The second appearance of the refrain is followed by what sounds like a random search for reception on the radio, which is suddenly overlaid with an excerpt from another very popular paean to Tito—“Druze Tito, mi ti se kunemo” (“Comrade Tito, we swear to you”)—sung by the female duo *a capella* again, this time in an dissonant two-part harmony.<sup>32</sup>

The third reference to Josip Broz Tito is presented immediately after the last line of the third verse (“while he bullshits, the oarsmen eat it all up”). The sample this time involves an obscure line “But suddenly he stopped, flinched,” from one of the best-known literary works about Tito, a poem called “Titov Naprijed” by the Croatian poet Vladimir Nazor (1876-1949). This poem was a required reading and recited on many occasions in many elementary school programs throughout the former Yugoslavia. Here it is presented as a segment from a symphonic, oratorio-like performance of the work.

The last verse (“You can only turn the TV off”) is the busiest in the musical sense and the one that suggests a way out of the situation: to isolate yourself from the television media reporting. As mentioned earlier, this short segment serves as a prognostic frame, proposing one solution for media poisoning. But this is not the point of the song.

It is the words of the refrain that provide the axis for the construction of the song’s meaning and a mockingly serious invitation: to examine our relationship with the past and the present. “Karamba karambita” are the words of the immensely popular comic book “Zagor” from the 1970s. Originally Italian, this comic book was translated to Serbian and widely distributed throughout Yugoslavia during the 1970s, a period of high economic and cultural prosperity.



Figure 1. Picture of Zagor.

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<sup>31</sup> Something that Rambo Amadeus critiqued again later in what became one of his most popular songs, “Cobane, vrati se” (“Shepherd, come back”).

<sup>32</sup> The lyrics of the original song are “Comrade Tito, we swear to you that we will not stray from your path.” Rambo here included only the first part.

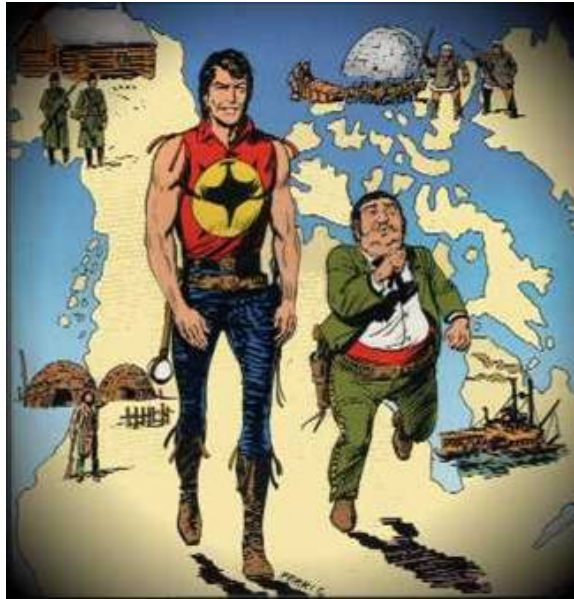


Figure 2. Zagor and Chico.

Zagor was a protector of the weak and the oppressed, and possessed superhuman strength as well as excellent wilderness survival skills. He lived in the (fictional) Darkwood forest, somewhere between the Great Lakes in America and Canada, sometime between 1820-1840. Zagor was often accompanied by his friend (and comic relief) Chico, whose frequent use of the words “*Karamba, Karambita*” (meaning “goodness gracious”) inspired the title for Rambo's song. The rest of the words come from the characters who appeared in two other widely popular comics of the time, *Blek Stena* (Blake the Stone) and *Komandant Mark* (Commander Mark): an Indian shaman, a hunter, a gold digger, and a captain.

The ironic contrast between the colorful but, by today's standards, extremely naive phrases used to express one's outrage, and the seriousness of the social problems enumerated, is intended to foreground several aspects of the song's critique: First, how realistic was the vision of society “during Tito's time,” if it can be so instantly evoked by the imaginary world of the comic book. Second, how powerful are people today, if the means for expressing their outrage is the language of comic book heroes? Third, *are* people nostalgic for those times, *what* are they nostalgic for and *should* they be nostalgic? Critical theorist Linda Hutcheon asks:

Was the postmodern recalling of the past an example of a . . . nostalgic escape to an idealized, simpler era of “real” community values? . . . Or is it both ironic *and* nostalgic? It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia's power . . . This is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire.<sup>33</sup>

Not only is the past of this song contrasted with the present as imagined and idealized, but it is doubly so, as it is evoked through the imagery of a comic book, where between the archetypal

<sup>33</sup> Linda Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,” 1998.  
<<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html>> (Accessed May 2008).

forces of good and evil good always wins. Further, it alludes to childhood and early adulthood, when optimism and self-confidence abound, but also to the time when, economically and culturally, Yugoslavia was at the height of prosperity. Thus the question "Was it better during Tito's time," at once both ironic and nostalgic, is never answered. While serving as a powerful framing device for the critique of the present, this question, taken from the proverbial man on the street, in the context of this song and its multi-layered musical and textual clues has no simple answer. Rather, the listener is invited to connect the dots and reflect upon the ways in which the present arose from the past. Rambo Amadeus remains a unique musician whose resistance to the regime, the hypocrisy, and the value system of those in power continues to be enthusiastically embraced by audiences in all of the republics of former Yugoslavia.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to Rambo Amadeus's "Karamba Karambita," the song "Sistem" ("System") by the band Darkwood Dub<sup>35</sup> focuses the listener's attention upon just one word, which stands for everything that is wrong with society. The word "system" stands for political system, as well as for the new system of values, which was introduced through the criminalization of society. This song played an important role in the three-month long citizens' and students' rallies of the winter 1996/1997, prompted by Milosevic's nullifying the election results in which the democratic coalition *Zajedno (Together)* won the majority. The excessive and diversified noise-making as a trade-mark of the 1996/1997 Protest, introduced as the manifestation of earlier years, functioned in several ways.<sup>36</sup> It served as a means for drowning out the regime propaganda, as a call for "awakening," as a method of mutual recognition for similarly-minded individuals, and as a substitute for other forms of expression. One student protester stated:

Because of the political and cultural heterogeneity of the protesters, the whistle is strategically significant for it is not ideologically binding. We can all agree to express protest by blowing a whistle, but it would be difficult to find slogans that everybody would be comfortable with.<sup>37</sup>

However, the lyrics of the Darkwood Dub song "System" provided exactly this kind of slogan: the lyrics for the entire song consist of three phrases "I'm throwing stones at the system! I'm hitting right at the center! The damned mechanism!" interspersed with shouts "system" ("*Bacam kamenje na sistem Pogodak pravo u centar. Prokleti mehanizam*"). Thus, the protesters could join in, even just shouting the word "system" along with the music to express the entire reason for and the meaning of the protest.

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<sup>34</sup> For more on him and his music see Mijatovic, "Music and Politics in Serbia (1989-2000), as well as <http://www.ramboamadeus.com> and check out his profile on [myspace.com](http://myspace.com)

<sup>35</sup> Album *Trainspotting* 1997. The song "System" has already been a part of their concert repertoire in 1996.

<sup>36</sup> Most notably during protest action *The Last Chance* (Prosic-Dvornic 1998 [http://condor.depaul.edu/~rrotenbe/aecer/aecer16\\_1.html](http://condor.depaul.edu/~rrotenbe/aecer/aecer16_1.html)), where every mention of Milosevic's name resulted in "a prolonged jingling and clattering with keys or whatever suitable gadget [bells of all sizes, alarm clocks, etc]."

<sup>37</sup> Jankovic, as quoted in Mirjana Prosic-Dvornic, "The Topsy Turvy Days Were There Again: Student and Civil Protest in Belgrade and Serbia, 1996/1997," *Newsletter of the East European Anthropology Group* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1998). <[http://condor.depaul.edu/~rrotenbe/aecer/aecer16\\_1.html](http://condor.depaul.edu/~rrotenbe/aecer/aecer16_1.html)> (Accessed January 2003).

**Audio Example 2: Sistem**

Accessible at: <http://www.music.ucsb.edu/projects/musicandpolitics/m/mijatovic-m.html>

English Title: System

Artist: Darkwood Dub

Year of release: 1997

Hailed by many as the most original and the most important band in Serbian rock of the 1990s, Darkwood Dub was one of the rare bands to achieve true continuity and presence on the Serbian rock scene during the last decade. They experimented with stretching the limits of repetitiveness and an almost hypnotic sound, mixing electro, drum'n'bass, noise, kraut rock and ambient styles with minimalist, often highly metaphoric lyrics, all of which is obvious in the song "System."<sup>38</sup> The song's overall dynamism and intensity, despite the repetitiveness, is achieved through the repetition of the phrases at a higher pitch (transposition), as well as by switching the purely instrumental sections and with the sections including vocals. The vocals are integrated in the overall song texture, and in that sense their most important role is to accentuate the word "system."

The band *Dza ili Bu* (*This or That*, translated by Janjatovic as *Take it or Leave It*) was one of the few bands to tour Serbia during the height of economic depression and war draft in the first part of the 1990s. Their topics, officially considered taboo, or addressed very obliquely in the songs of other bands, ranged from friends who are leaving and coming back in coffins ("*Drugovi*" - "Friends"), to the apathy of the people who should be opposing the regime ("*Zemlja nojeva*" - "The Country of Ostriches"). The songs of *Dza ili Bu* also addressed drastic increase in drug abuse in the years under Milosevic ("*Vecna Lovista*," a metaphor for Heaven) and the lifestyle of the criminal elite ("Radio Teheran"), and offered a view on how to overcome the oppression ("*Ustani i kreni*" - "Get Up and Go").

Their song "*Zanimljiva geografija*" ("An Interesting Geography")<sup>39</sup> represents an extremely powerful critique of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and the political rhetoric in advocating them. It revels in the ironic play with words "*sloboda*" (freedom), "*osloboditi*" (to liberate) and Milosevic's first name, "*Slobodan*" (literally, "the free one" as well as "to be free"). During the wars in Croatia and Bosnia one of the phrases used incessantly in the state-run media was that a certain area or town was "liberated." Although this was actually more often than not a euphemism for "destroyed" or "occupied" (under the control of the former Yugoslav army), within a media discourse of the wars in Serbia, the political and strategic reasons for such "liberation" were often emphasized in a way that implied the unquestioned right to do so. Picking up on this, the song gives a list of places in the world and "reasons" they should be "liberated" Milosevic-style, and by doing so criticizes normalization and acceptance of such discourse and belief in its rationale.

The singer is shouting out "the reasons" why the specific countries should be "liberated" like a speaker on a pro-Milosevic political rally, and the choir in the role of a "people" responds in a flat monotone, "liberate for us" (the following is just the beginning of the song and the refrain):

<sup>38</sup> The music of Darkwood Dub has been also termed *ambient punk* and *acoustic drum and techno*.

<sup>39</sup> Album *Strasni Sud* (1995).

### Audio Example 3: Zanimljiva Geografija

Accessible at: <http://www.music.ucsb.edu/projects/musicandpolitics/m/mijatovic-m.html>

English Title: An Interesting Geography

Artist: Dza ili Bu

Year of release: 1996

Croatia because of the sea, liberate for us,  
The Norway because of Thor, liberate for us  
Brazil because of the carnival, liberate for us  
The Panama because of the canal, liberate for us

Liberate, Slobodo (Milosevic's nick name among his supporters)  
Liberate half of the world  
Liberate, Slobodo  
Anyone who bothers us.

To further ridicule such an idea, the list goes on to include Germany, Morocco, Kuwait, Switzerland, France, India, Hawaii, and Bulgaria, pairing them with similarly ridiculous "reasons."

The song begins with a two-bar solo electric guitar introduction, which presents the main melodic idea that repeats throughout the verses of the song, thus purposefully accentuating the monotony of the call and response litany between the speaker and the people. The instrumental introduction also includes the sound of rattles, which appear during the response part of the call and response, to the words "*oslobodi nam*" ("liberate for us") and even more prominently in the refrain with various types of whistles. As well-known symbols of anti-Milosevic sentiments from its usage in many protests, their appearance as the response to the words of the refrain "*Oslobodi, Slobodo*" ("Liberate, Slobodo") serves the purpose to not only invert the meaning of those words but also to remind the listeners of the protests in order not to let apathy and complacency overtake them.

The music of *Eyesburn* (whose name, according to band members, refers to the media propaganda of Serbian television which "burned our eyes and our brain") initially a hard-core band formed in 1994, changed its sound in the late 1990s to a mix of heavy-metal and Seattle grunge sound with a dominating reggae aesthetic. Their songs speak about the reality of the situation in "*Više me neće prevariti*" ("They Will Not Trick Me Again"), "*Gospodari rata*" ("Masters of the war"), "*Upozorenje*" ("A Warning"), and "War control," and include the cover of Bob Marley's "Exodus." One of their most successful songs is the remake of the song "*Sejti*" ("Shane"), originally by the Croatian band *Haustor*, popular throughout the former Yugoslavia during the 1980s.<sup>40</sup> In *Haustor's* version, "*Sejti*" is a song evoking the mood of the American Westerns, and specifically a 1953 Western called "Shane," which won an Oscar for Best Cinematography in 1954.

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<sup>40</sup> Compilation album *Various Artists: Korak Napred Dva Koraka Nazad* (B92) 1999.



Figure 3. Movie Poster for *Shane* (1953).

The song is about a man imagining himself as a lonely cowboy Shane, complete with a cigarette and a pair of golden spurs on his boots.<sup>41</sup> *Eyesburn's* 1999 version takes the following verse of *Haustor's* song and makes it the core of their song:

#### Audio Example 4: Sejn

Accessible at: <http://www.music.ucsb.edu/projects/musicandpolitics/m/mijatovic-m.html>

English Title: Shane

Artist: Eyesburn

Year of release: 1999

Get out and fight  
There is no place in this town for one of us  
Get out and fight  
The street is empty  
But they are watching us from the windows  
Get out and fight  
I'll take your life  
And if you stay—I'll take your honor.

*Eyesburn* changed the last line to “*They* will take your life and if you stay—your honor” and made this song a call for Serbian citizens to rally and fight for their rights, or the government will

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<sup>41</sup> The opening verse of Haustor's *Shane*: “My whole life I've been dreaming that I'm going up the river, on a tugboat carrying salt, and that I have an old, never forgotten love, a thin long cigarette, and a pair of golden spurs on my boots, [I've been dreaming] that I was Shane.”

take their lives and their honor. This particular message was accentuated by both the lyrics and music. In terms of the lyrics, it is the repetition of the initial line "get out and fight" and the Jamaican English references to a beast in a jungle and resistance that serve to affirm the message for individual action. In terms of music, it is the combination of amplified guitars and brass instruments in the hardcore instrumental sections, with reggae rhythm and a style of lyrics that reinforces the idea of rebellion.<sup>42</sup>

The framing ability of these songs consisted in their offering interpretations of reality that contrasted with the official, government-sponsored versions, and/or their motivational impact. At the same time, they represented the cognitive praxis preceding the formation of the student resistance movement *Otpor!* One of the *Otpor!* ("Resistance!") activists said: "I grew up with these bands. They helped me become aware and take the stand I have today."<sup>43</sup> Another added: "If someone sings 'I'm throwing stones at the system,' that is the same as what we do."<sup>44</sup> This shows that the impetus for the dramatic political action in Serbia that happened on October 5, 2000 was created gradually, and that the continuous efforts of various rock bands significantly contributed to the creation of conditions that allowed the possibility for such action.<sup>45</sup>

The styles of punk, rap, hardcore, and reggae, were adopted and internalized in Serbia for their resonance with the values they articulated and perhaps even more for those they critiqued. They formed ties of understanding with oppressed peoples worldwide and shared a common struggle against injustice. By challenging the regime-sponsored discourses prevalent in the media in their songs, and by being an integral and important part of the demonstrations against the wars and the regime, rock musicians in Serbia helped form and spread awareness of the necessity for political action. Such an impact relied on the fact that rock musicians promoted ideas of a better society and not a specific oppositional party. Even when in time it became obvious that the creation of a better society was only possible through a change of regime, the campaigns in which rock and roll musicians participated were campaigns for the transformation of the voters' social and political consciousness. By presenting a united front in the 1999 and 2000 campaigns of the independent media, and by not aligning themselves with a particular political party, Belgrade rock and roll bands provided a common ground of identification for a wide strata of the Serbian population. That common ground was suffering years of oppression, destruction, isolation and the need for a better life.

An important message that this music got across was that people themselves were responsible for the change and they did not need to rely exclusively on the politicians in the opposition. This

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<sup>42</sup> The relationship between the image of a solitary American cowboy as presented in the Westerns, a Croatian song, and a quest for political justice in Serbia as expressed through song, has had a visual counterpart in Poland during the 1980s. The film *High Noon* was extremely influential for the 1980s Polish freedom movement Solidarity. Please see <http://oregonstate.edu/freedomonthefence/history.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Nebojsa Grujicic, "R'n'r i protesti: Kamenje na sistem" ("R'n'R and Protests: Stones at the System"). *Vreme* 464, no. 27 (November 1999) <[http://www.vreme.com/arhiva\\_html/464/14.html](http://www.vreme.com/arhiva_html/464/14.html)> (Accessed December 2002). Please see more on *Otpor!* at [http://www.unesco.org/courier/2001\\_03/uk/droits.htm](http://www.unesco.org/courier/2001_03/uk/droits.htm), <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otpor>, in the movie "Bringing Down a Dictator," Mijatovic 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/20001126mag-serbia.html>; Bunce 2006, Ivan Marovic.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Toppling of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic through democratic elections. For a brief recap of events of that day, please see <http://www.beograd.org.yu/cms/view.php?id=201275>

required a great shift in self-understanding in Serbia, since during the 1990s, and even before, many felt that they were helpless under the circumstances that politicians imposed on them. This was true in as much as political action was and is a result of a variety of political decisions made by those directly involved in the sphere of politics and government, and in many cases is non-negotiable. However, at this time in history in Serbia, ordinary people needed to regain the belief that they did have the power to influence events and change their circumstances for the better. Along with an opportune political moment and the activities of the political opposition and non-governmental organizations, the end of the rule of a oppressive regime was due in a significant part to the accumulation of cultural meanings produced in and through the rock music of the 1990s.

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## Abstract

During the 1990s rock music in Serbia metamorphosed from urban entertainment to the underground opposition and a weapon of resistance to the Slobodan Milosevic regime. This article will provide an analysis of several rock songs ("Karamba Karambita" by Rambo Amadeus, "Sistem" by Darkwood Dub, "Zanimljiva Geografija" by Dza ili Bu, and "Sejn" by Eyesburn) that critically addressed political discourse, key political events, figures, and social injustices in 1990s Serbia to reveal the variety of ways in which the use of metaphors and symbols in music functioned as a powerful political critique. The purpose of this article is to provide examples which will illuminate the role of music as "a kind of cognitive praxis" and a "collective learning process" (Eyerman and Jamison 1998) during times of political unrest.