

BalkanBeats Book - Synopsis

Bijelo Dugme in Vienna: A short introductory chapter about going to see legendary Yugo rockers, Bijelo Dugme - a kind of Yugoslavian Rolling Stones - play a reunion concert in Vienna. Ex-Yugos from all over gather to witness the spirit of ex-Yugoslavia raised from the dead for one ecstatic and memorable evening.

Kurzstrecke - A Short Ride: There are two types of taxi drivers in Berlin; those lurking in wait and those hunting - Robert Šoko was a night hunter. Šoko looks back on his days as a young buck cab driver in the newly reunited city of Berlin. He falls in love with a leggy street-walker. After getting an astounding 80 DM tip, he knows just what to do. He races to the "Strich" - the sex-work stroll - where he finds his beloved and invites her to come for a ride. However, real life fails to live up to Šoko's erotic imaginings in an embarrassing anti-climax in a dead-end street.

Bosnia Made Me: Robert Šoko recounts growing up in a culture of violence in blue-collar, rough-and-tumble Zenica, Central Bosnia, with a father who used to beat him on occasion and even once knocked out two of his front teeth. In a town known, more than anything, for its huge steel mill and very probably the toughest prison in ex-Yugoslavia, Robert Šoko dodges the local mangupi (thugs) and šanari (thieves) through his friendship with a Muslim classmate. Together, Šoko (a Croat) and Ekrem discover the contradictory pleasures of Oriental folk music and punk-rock. During his compulsory year of military service Šoko gradually starts to see the shapes in that old movie come into focus," as the nationalists begin to emerge from the woodwork and Yugoslavia tilts towards civil war. Additionally, a whole variety of well-known Bosnian musicians talk about the vibrant pre-war rock scene in Sarajevo and how a group of Monty Python-esque satirists in a weird way foretold the ethnic divisions to come.

Taxi Confessional: Robert Šoko knew early on that he had to leave Bosnia for a place "where you could earn better money, drive better cars and meet Chinese and Africans on the street." As luck would have it, he ended up in Berlin, where Šoko promptly meets and marries a German woman, opening up a new sexual world for someone who grew up in the stifling climate of a Muslim town where he claims to have been "as sexually enlightened as a caveman." A couple years later, Šoko starts working as a Berlin cab driver, gaining intimate knowledge of the "beautiful bitch", as he calls Berlin. Šoko talks about his sometimes racy adventures on the Berlin asphalt in the 90s, during which he becomes "tattooed" by the

streets of Berlin. Šoko looks on with growing horror as war breaks out back home, forcing his Serbian mother to flee to Belgrade and sister to flee to Berlin. People who will eventually play a role in Šoko's life recount their harrowing Bosnian war-time adventures and misadventures.

Queen of Fairy Tales: Robert Šoko never intended to cheat on his German wife, but while visiting his mother in Belgrade one day in the early nineties, he falls in love with a beautiful, almond-eyed Bosnian femme fatale from Šoko's home town of Zenica. "Tatjana represented everything - my mother, my sister, my lost friends, my youth. She was going to be my big love. I felt it." Tatjana casts a spell over Šoko, inciting him to throw all precaution to the wind as he smuggles her to Berlin with the help of the Croatian passport of his sister Daniela, who is otherwise preoccupied with pursuing chemical kicks in Berlin's techno underground. Robert and Tatjana help shape Berlin's heady nightlife as Šoko's DJ career begins to take off, and the two Bosnian love birds spin their immigrant dreams all night long, until one day Tatjana falls for a half-German- half-Croat circus clown. Tatjana ditches Šoko, but not before revealing to him the true meaning of her Russian name.

Arcanoa: With the arrival of Šoko's seventeen-year-old sister Daniela in Berlin, and through her extensive social network of ex-Yugo war refugees, Robert, lured by the promise of drug deals, enters into the world of Arcanoa, a dark, beer-sodden Kreuzberg punk bar, where amidst ax-wielding medieval-garbed German habitués, Robert and fellow ex-Yugo refugees form a home-away-from-home. Šoko prevails upon the proprietress to allow him to DJ Yugo punk and new wave for fifty D-marks a gig and free beer, thus launching the first parties that will eventually snowball into his globe-spanning Balkan Beats events.

Bella Ciao: As the war grinds to a miserable halt, some wallow in pain while others frantically go from party to party, simply happy to enjoy life and savor the experience of being alive. A new music is called for - different from the introspective angst-ridden Yugo new wave Robert, Daniela, Tatjana and their cohorts used to revel in. With his fine nose for the Zeitgeist, Robert Šoko appropriates the music of Emir Kusturica and Goran Bregović - explosive Gypsy brass. Šoko throws several tracks into the dancing crowd and is electrified by the result, having hit, he feels, on some primal urge. Others recount similar experiences, as they witness the pandemonium resulting from Gypsy brass being played on western club dancefloors. Could this be the dawning of a "new punk"?

Oxymoron: It is the dawn of the new millennium as Šoko and his cohorts stage their first-ever party where the club-goers are not ex-Yugos, but rather curious Germans, charmed by the no-holds-barred, slivovitz-drenched ex-Yugo way of partying. However, others in the scene smell money and tiffs arise as to who originated the label "Balkan Beats". After a short-lived stint at a "*schicki-micki*" Berlin night spot, a New York nightlife impresario calls Robert to his new club in the bowels of Berlin's old Jewish quarter.

Disko Partizani: Setting the tone for Robert Šoko's first half-way commercially viable Balkan Beats parties, players and actors weigh in on East European parties at the turn of the millennium - from Russendisko to Bucovina Club, Datscha Dance and Nikolai Marakov's celebrated new year's eve cockroach races (a Russian émigré amusement, popularized by the writer Michail Bulgakow, in post-revolution Constantinople, and raised from the dead by Marakov in Berlin). Robert Šoko describes the gross misbehavior he incites at the Mudd Club - a reincarnation of Steve Masses celebrated NYC celebrity haunt of the eighties. We meet various colorful celebrity habitués, including the late, great actor Birol Ünel, whose crazy drunken antics keep patrons on their toes. Photographer Miron Zownir remembers his time with the Turkish-German actor whose bad behavior once dashed prospects of a role as James Bond villain. Balkan pop star Shantel knocks on the door. When Šoko tells him the scene may be too underground for the suave Frankfurt producer, he replies, "I am not made of cotton candy."

Hir Ai Kam Hir Ai Go: "And the word spread round. It spread like wildfire. People were looking for something new. And we did it." More from the Mudd Club, as a global scene begins to emerge and Balkan Beats becomes the "in" thing. We meet Kultur Shock, a Bosnian-Bulgarian ethno-punk outfit from Seattle, who were championed by Nirvana and Jello Biafra of Dead Kennedys. The band makes their unfortunately timed US debut a week after September 11. "Basically, people thought they were Arabic," recalls Faith No More bass guitarist Billy Gould, who signed the band to his KoolArrow label, and recalls receiving hate mail and promo CDs to US radio stations returned broken in half.

Shantel's Balkanizacija Sound: Description of a sold-out Berlin gig by one of the scene's leading lights, Stefan Hantel, aka Shantel. Robert Rigney meets singer and DJ for an interview at the Hilton Hotel in Berlin at two in the morning, during which the slightly eccentric Balkan pop star shows up wearing his trade-mark fur hat, giving him the look of some exotic Romanian bear tamer gone astray on the European dance floor. Shantel sketches out his ambitious plans of a Balkan

pop that is a "new rock'n'roll", telling where he finds the colorful cast of Gypsies and gadjos who enliven his stage. Balkan Beats is just taking off then and the sky's the limit.

"It's not a Playground; It's the Balkans": in 2007 Spin magazine labels "Gypsy Punk" - as the Balkan Beats wave is being called in the US - "Scene of the Year". Borat has appeared in cinemas, Madonna is dancing like a Cossack and Johnny Depp declares Taraf de Haïdouks to be his favorite band, flying them over to play in his Viper Lounge in Hollywood. Additionally, Madonna has come out with her film, *Filth and Wisdom*, showcasing the acting talents of Eugene Hütz, a Ukrainian "Gypsy" refugee who comes to America in the eighties and at a Russian wedding in Vermont assembles a cast of characters who form the foundation for Gogol Bordello, in Hütz's words, "an orchestra of fuckin' immigrants who are jamming in A minor". We also meet Balkan Beat Box, a New York-Tel Aviv act who, along with Hütz, claim to have pioneered the Balkan sound. They make their appearance at Manhattan's legendary Bulgarian Mehanata Bar ("get fucked, get a bottle of vodka"). At the same time that this Balkan rock'n'roll circus is going on in New York, less media-savvy but no less talented, Roma musicians are making their rounds in the New York Balkan weddings circuit, inspiring a more genuine and low-key New York Balkan scene beyond the hype. It is against this backdrop that Robert Šoko makes his first trip to America, playing in Brooklyn and Hollywood on crutches, with foot in cast, after kicking the speakers at the Mudd Club in a fit of rage after finding out his wife is cheating on him.

A Night in Berlin: Robert Šoko gets chucked out of the Mudd Club in Berlin. His problems start to accumulate as he has a tiff with his record label, Eastblok, who try to muscle in on his dancefloor. At this time, he entered into a cooperation with Piranha Records, headed by Christoph Borkowsky Akbar, a man who once married an Afghan princess, sold drugs and weapons in a previous life. The Balkan Beats hype shows no signs of slowing down. At the same time, Robert Soko - beset by personal and professional problems - has to ask himself, "How much longer"? as the whole Balkan circus shows signs of having achieved saturation point. In fact, it is just the beginning.

The King of Balkan Bling: A little intermezzo in the form of a funny interview with Balkan star, Magnifico in the offices of Piranha Records, before which the Slovene singer polishes off a bottle of Jack Daniels whisky presented to him by a previous interviewer. Magnifico speaks on such subjects as anti-Gypsy racism in his home country of Slovenia, homophobia, turbo-folk and how Balkan music is like pizza - you can put on it

anything you want: tuna fish, mushrooms or pineapple, if you so wish; anything goes with Balkan.

A Chassid in Amsterdam: Before the Balkan Beats wave hits, already in the years prior to the fall of Communism, unbeknownst to each other, a disparate group of Russian and Ukrainian emigrants have gathered in Amsterdam as Perestroika starts to open Western eyes to the East. It is Glasnost time, and taking advantage of the vogue for all things Russian, a group of likeminded East Europeans hit the streets playing Slavic chansons "pathologically disfigured". Gradually the musicians coalesce, forming the Amsterdam Klezmer Band, a rambunctious Balkan-klezmer outfit, whose music soon starts to be played from the beaches of Australia to the bars of Rio.

DJ Misery: Robert Šoko has a theory: To be a successful artist you have to have suffered. Chief among Robert Šoko's sorrows is that his beloved Tatjana, who he smuggled from Belgrade into Germany, has left him for another guy. Rather than taking it like a man, Šoko gets drunk, does a few lines of cocaine, and together with a friend, destroys the car of the guy who is having an affair with his wife. Šoko goes off the deep end, and for three or four years - at the height of his fame as Balkan Beats DJ - he travels the world engaging in gross misbehavior, reveling in his broken heart, from Oaxaca to Osaka, having threesomes, getting busted for drugs in Mexico, causing drunken havoc on a ship in the Baltic, smashing slivovitz glasses in his apartment. The usual Balkan mayhem. "Would things have turned out differently had I been more sensible?" Šoko asks himself. "Of course, they would have, but I truly doubt whether I would have been any better a DJ. I would definitely have saved some money, but perhaps my good behavior would have stifled my creativity. Pain was the source of my power."

Gadjo DJ: The magic, manic years at Lido, a big Berlin venue and party central at the peak of the Balkan hype, where on a good night Robert Šoko would be putting five or six thousand euros in his pocket. Šoko takes stock of all the - largely Roma - acts and artists who came to play at his parties, sharing anecdotes and insider gossip, talking about the tricks of his trade, the various professors and academics who interviewed him, his substance abuse, his biggest hits, thoughts on Roma stereotypes. Some unusual fans of Robert Šoko share their experiences and impressions of Balkan Beats. Roma musicians themselves come to voice.

"A Good Musician is Stealing Everywhere": A profile of Fanfare Ciocarlia, billed as the fastest Gypsy brass band in the world. Musicians recount playing the Gypsy weddings circuit in a Romanian backwater and the band's fairytale discovery by two Romanophile music producers from Leipzig, who bring the band

to Germany, Europe and the world. A rags-to-riches success story.

Dogs Bark...: Whereas Berlin is a city of DJs, Paris was a hotbed for Balkan bands. Robert Šoko recounts playing at the legendary "Divan Du Monde" near the Moulin Rouge, famous as the "opium salon" in the 19th century and host to Mata Hari, Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, and Pink Floyd. Robert Šoko's Algerian partner talks about how she met Šoko at a Balkan Beats party in Paris, where Šoko had the gumption and balls to play a famous Arabic track by Rachid Taha at a time when Arabic music was a no-go in France. HannaH and Robert embark on a road-trip to Bosnia during which they discover various Bosnian-Arabic commonalities.

Take me to the Bridge: Gradually Balkan Beats loses its wind. A kind of Balkan malaise sets in, as acts and artists in the Balkans fail to come up with new original tracks. It is 2015. Whereas up until now the Balkans had become famous for wars and then Gypsy party music, the Balkans now becomes famous for the "Balkan Route", a long, footsore migration path leading from Turkey, through Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and into Hungary and the West, traveled by scores of Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans fleeing war at home. A Palestinian refugee from Gaza and ambitious Berlin "party wizard" recounts his arrival in Berlin and attempts at breaking into the Berlin nightlife, via Balkan Beats, which he aims to blend with high-octane Arabic party music. Around this time Sergei Kreso makes a documentary about Robert Šoko and his attempts to revive his flagging parties by infusing it with fresh blood from the Middle East.

Remembering Istanbul: Istanbul is also the Balkans. While the Balkan Beats hype is gathering force, Istanbul is busy reinventing itself as a soon-to-be cultural capital of Europe. Robert Rigney picks up on the new vibe as well. The deeper he gets into the Balkans the more he begins to feel the magnetic pull of Istanbul. As of Belgrade, everything starts to tilt towards the Bosphorus. The food, the music, the language, the mannerisms, all began to assume a Turkish touch. Robert realizes that if ever he was to unwind the knotty thread of the Balkans in his mind, he would have to seek its beginning (or end) in Istanbul. In 2012 he moved to Istanbul, settling in a notorious Istanbul slum quarter, from which he embarked on frantic forays into Istanbul music and club scenes, meeting and interviewing scores of acts and artists. In the end Istanbul's bright young things experience crushing defeat as Erdogan cracks down mercilessly on the Gezi park protests in 2013. The 2016 failed putsch and Erdogan's heavy handed reprisals finally put the nail in the coffin of Istanbul's famous and doomed Taksim scene. The chapter is drenched in nostalgia for an Istanbul that almost was.

Mad in Japan: While the Balkan Beats hype appears to be on the wane in Europe, the trend catches on in Japan, as Robert travels to Tokyo and hooks up with a Japanese fashionista punk and a French Japanophile Balkan fan, founding "Balkan Beats Japan", stirring up gross misbehavior and ridiculous cultural misunderstanding in Tokyo Clubs. Artists from the Balkans and artists dealing with the Balkans share anecdotes about Japanese *culture shock* as Balkan Beats becomes lost in translation.

Remembering Džej: An obituary of one of Serbia's greatest Gypsy singers who burnt the candle at both ends. Marko J Kon, a Belgrade music producer, talks about the Balkan pendant to the West's "Club 27". While America and Britain's doomed rock'n'roll youth suffer from "too much too soon", in the Balkans it's a case of "too much too late". Džej - a kind of sprightly Serbian Gypsy James Brown - is a case in point.

Pedal to the Metal: Robert Šoko draws conclusions from thirty years as Balkan Beats DJ. "I never wanted to be on center stage like Bregović. I'm not really crazy about that. I think the life of a famous performer is quite a heavy one. Success is such a fucking burden. It eats you alive. You are permanently in fight-mode against the world. You are often jealous, and continuously on alert. Is someone stealing something from me? Is he better than me? Pa! Fuck, man. It's fucking poison all of this shit. To some extent I am happy that I didn't get too deep into this snake-pit. I just happened to have walked the tightrope and kept from falling off."