Between Rock and a Hard Place

Amid widespread political apathy, the music of rap band Belgrade Syndicate strikes a chord

By Richard Byrne/ Belgrade (*Time* magazine online, October 18, 2002)

During Slobodan Milosevic’s bloody reign in Yugoslavia, rock musicians were among his most vocal opponents. Artists such as Rambo Amadeus, Partibrejkers and Darkwood Dub agitated for peace and served as a bulwark against the kitschy “turbofolk” music that celebrated Serbia’s nationalism and its gangsters. But two years after Serbian voters turned out in record numbers at the polls, and in Belgrade’s streets, to remove Milosevic from power, Serbia’s music scene has eschewed politics in favor of Western Europe’s clubbing culture.

Serbia’s recent presidential elections have brought politics back into that nation’s music once again. But this time, the fractious sparring and stymied reforms of the coalition that ousted Milosevic serve as the targets of Serbian rap group Belgrade Syndicate’s inventive and sharply-worded rap song called “Govedina” (“Beef”). The music for the song is a kissing cousin of Tupac Shakur and Dr. Dre’s 1996 hit “California Love,” but its words are a snapshot of Serbia at a historic crossroads.

Belgrade Syndicate’s Bosko Ciricovic says that the impetus behind the song was an American political cultural artifact: the Wendy’s fast food chain’s “Where’s the Beef?” ads seized upon by 1984 Democratic presidential nominee Walter Mondale to beat back primary challenger Gary Hart. “It’s a rap from the point of view of a guy who only reads tabloid newspapers and watches TV,” says Ciricovic, “and then starts to speak his mind.”

What’s on the speaker’s mind in “Govedina” is startling blend of political corruption, wounded national pride, homophobia and suspicion of Western influences. Public reaction to the song’s verbal fireworks has been fierce, including a ban on the song by some TV and radio stations during the electoral run-up and accusations of xenophobia. “Govedina” has caused almost as much of a stir as the two desultory ballots that failed to conjure a successor to Serbian president and indicted war criminal Milan Milutinovic.

Both rounds of voting to replace Milutinovic – whose term ends on December 29 – were marked by low turnout and other woes, including a shockingly strong performance by hardline nationalist and former paramilitary Vojislav Seselj. Endorsed by Milosevic from his jail cell in The Hague where he is now on trial for war crimes, Seselj garnered 23 percent of the national vote and a third place finish in the first round of voting on September 29.

Yet it is the warring reformist camps that squared off in a run-off election that are the main fodder for the Serbian rap hit’s scornful attack. The battle between pro-Western reforms advocated by Yugoslav Deputy Prime Minister Miroljub Labus and the slower paced reforms and mild nationalism favored by Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica has been raging for over a year, splitting the strong coalition that ended Milosevic’s rule.

It failed to galvanize voters, however. When less than 50% of them voted in the second round of elections on October 13, the ballot was nullified under Serbia’s election laws, which date back to Milosevic’s regime.

“Govedina” attacks many Serbian politicians, but it takes a particularly nasty and dim view of Western influence here – including gay rights, the depiction of the Bosnian war and the work of NGOs. Coupled with Belgrade Syndicate’s penchant for chanting slogans such as “Drink domestic beer!” from the stage and its overtly celebrations of Serbian culture, some critics argue that such sentiments tar the band as xenophobic throwbacks to the Milosevic years.

In an interview with the weekly *Vreme*, rock critic Dragan Kremer accused the group of pushing a right wing agenda akin to fascism. “I am not denying that there are really good and important songs which are politically explicit,” Kremer told *Vreme*, “but it’s more of an exception, something symbolic in comparison to the number of those [songs] that used the so-called political or generally a social engagement as an excuse.”

The band flatly rejects this accusation. “We are not xenophobic,” says Ciricovic. He says that the explicitly political barbs leveled in “Govedina” have been misunderstood, offering opposition rocker Rambo Amadeus' legendary ability to use songs written from the point of view of ignorant fools to skewer Milosevic as a guide.

“Rambo is a legend here,” says Ciricovic. “We like his way of dealing with politics. He’s even better at it. People can't even understand that he’s making fun of them.” He adds that the band even released the song under a different name – Dzukacki Sindikat (“Stray Dog Syndicate”) – to underscore that point.

Belgrade Syndicate colleague Dorde Jovanovic, who made a stark video of words bouncing against a white screen for “Govedina,” concurs with Ciricovic. “We're not using facts in the song,” he says. “We sank to the level [of the people that the band is lampooning].”

As bad a signal as Serbian voters' apathy might be sending to the world, the debate over “Govedina” is a sign of health. Not only have the country’s polemics gained in openness and sophistication since Milosevic’s fall, but Serbian musicians are beginning to rejoin it. Many in Serbia’s music industry are happy to see it. Studio B Television’s VJ Tijana Todorovic says that she played the Belgrade Syndicate video as soon as she got it.

“The political editor called me and said that I shouldn’t play it,” she says. “But I played it again anyway.”