Reinventing Ceca

Serbia's turbofolk diva is making a comeback

By Richard Byrne / Belgrade (*Time* magazine online, June 24, 2002)

In smoky Belgrade rock clubs, 2002 is already looking like a summer of dub. Reggae music is playing everywhere as kids sip beers and share joints in the dim light. The booming reggae bass and slow tempo of dub is strictly *opusteno* (or “cool”) Belgrade.

There's another Belgrade as well. It's the Belgrade of Svetlana Velickovic Raznatovic – better known all over the Balkans as the turbofolk diva Ceca.

Ceca's three-hour concert at the Red Star Belgrade soccer stadium last week drew close to 80,000 fans. Her face is ubiquitous – on Serbian TV ads for coffee and on the magazine covers at every kiosk. Even *opusteno* Belgrade gabs about Ceca obsessively, in the way that one might talk about a plague of locusts.

Ceca's story is an uncanny mix of music, politics and crime in Serbia. A singer from a South Serbian village, Ceca quickly became a turbofolk icon. This musical genre -rooted in pop updates of traditional Serbian songs – quickly morphed into a shrill dance music. Its lyrics opted for shallow romantic sentiment or the vulgar celebration of Serbia's criminal class (and its consumer fetishes) during the years of President Slobodan Milosevic's rule.

Ceca moved from mere celebrity to superstar status in 1995, when she married the most notorious paramilitary leader and mafia boss of the Croatian and Bosnian wars, Zeljko Raznatovic – better known by his nickname, Arkan. Raznatovic was a criminal genius whose Tiger paramilitaries sowed terror, ethnic cleansing and death throughout the region. The International War Tribunal at The Hague indicted Arkan in 1999 – but he never made it to trial. He was gunned down in January 2000 in a Belgrade hotel. His murder left Ceca a widow – and a problematic cult figure.

Yet Ceca seems intent on reinventing herself, and freeing her career from its political baggage. In this effort, she is helped by her audience. Far from a gathering of the tribes of Serb nationalism, Ceca's concert at the Red Star Belgrade stadium on June 15 was an overwhelmingly youthful affair. Only one or two tables hawking buttons and key chains of indicted Bosnian Serb war criminals Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic were tucked in among the dozens of stands selling cold drinks and nuts.

Belgrade writer Predrag Dragosavac surveyed the thousands of Cecamaniacs as they filed into the concert. Upwards of 90 percent of them were under 18 years of age, not even ten years old when the wars in the Balkans started. "This is the generation that grew up with this music," Predrag said.

Darkness fell and Ceca finally appeared in a tacky, revealing gold dress. The stadium erupted. As entertainment, however, the spectacle was a shambles. Disorganized and under-rehearsed dancers cavorted around a bizarre stage that married a jungle motif to ancient Egypt hieroglyphics. For most of the show, Ceca stood rooted to one spot, ending almost every song with the rote recitation: “Thanks very much. The best thanks. We go on.” But the young Serbian kids pressed up against the security fence were lapping it all up, singing along lustily to three hours of her hits.

It was a scene that brought to mind Milan Kundera's novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, and its memorable section on music and politics. In discussing the sentimental pop of the Czech singer Karel Gott, Kundera insists that the collaboration between Gott and the oppressive Czechoslovak regime in the 1970s rendered the pop singer's work as “music without memory.”

Ceca's career is hopelessly entangled in the corruption, ethnic cleansing and soft totalitarianism of the Milosevic era. But the thousands of young people at the stadium that night were truly in the sway of music without such horrific memories.

In fact, it was one of the youngest people in attendance who managed to coax the nationalist politics from the concert. At the end of the show, Ceca brought her two young children from the marriage with Arkan – Veljko and Anastasija – to the stage. Anastasija whirled around in her own little world as Ceca sang. Veljko, on the other hand, played up to the crowd, throwing up the three-fingered Serb salute that became notorious during the Balkan wars with both of his tiny hands. A number of the young people in the crowd joined in.

It was one of the few memorable moments of an evening that seemed to be stripped entirely of memory – and the most chilling moment as well.