



ECHO MUSIC

BELGRADE WAS ONCE A PARTY TOWN THAT GOT BOMBED INTO SUBMISSION. NOW, THE CAPITAL OF SERBIA IS DANCING AGAIN. 80,000 OF THEM DANCED ON AN ISLAND IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DANUBE RIVER TO PROVE IT.

BY SARAH ALLELY

NO BOMBS OVER BELGRADE

Thurston Moore rolls about on the edge of the stage, frolicking sensually, making love to his guitar. Centre stage Kim Gordon – dressed in frock and heels – conjures up distorted bass harmonies, showing after decades of making music Sonic Youth still know how to rock.

But they almost didn't get to rock Belgrade. A four night festival of wide-ranging bands and DJs from around the world; on four stages; on an island in the middle of the Danube River in Serbia; costing only NZ\$50; is always going to be a gamble for organisers. Rain is rarely a Godsend for outdoor parties, but for the group behind Belgrade's Echo Music Festival, bad weather is a blessing in disguise.

On the fourth and final day a heavy down-pour washes out the reggae stage and turns the rest of the island into a mud bath. At the same time headliners, like legendary Detroit DJ Derrick May and Sonic Youth, are flying in from the US ready to play. Disaster is unfolding. The grand finale – where ticket sales should have soared – didn't happen.

So the night after the scheduled end of the

festival, organisers succumb to debt, pay Sonic Youth to extend their stay, and they rock. The headlining DJs play, and the masses dance. Debt is a small price to pay to lift Echo from a drowning festival to what DJ Carl Craig describes as a party "he had never experienced anything quite like before".

By the time the Detroit techno master Craig takes to the decks on the London Xpress stage, Great War Island is rammed with 80,000 partying Belgraders.

The only foot access to the island – out of bounds for the rest of the year – is via a temporary army platoon bridge, complete with armed soldiers keeping watch in boats. The musical stars enjoy arriving James Bond-style via speed-boat, accompanied by para-military personnel on jet-skis.

Yet strangely, Great War Island is reminiscent of Thailand. The reggae stage sits on white sand alongside the beach bar over-looking the Danube, while the green grass and trees back-dropping the other stages provide a serenity contrasting with the lights, tower-blocks and convenience of the Belgrade metropolis across

the bridge.

On the city side of the river, 20,000 other revelers are locked out and stamping their feet at the gates. Some turn their energy to dancing to the pounding music rippling across the Danube.

On the night Echo gets rained out Belgrade is served a double whammy of dance. Detroit DJs Derrick May and Carl Craig play an impromptu intimate club gig at Akademija in the city. Seeing Godfather of techno Derrick May play to a mad for it crowd in a Serbian club echoes the ambience of the city's club scene a decade earlier – before former president, Slobodan Milosevic, reigned. When May finishes his set around 6am hundreds of Serbs chant “one more, one more”, stamping their feet incessantly until the club owners allow May to play on.

Akademija Club is a cavernous labyrinth under the university. It was named one of Europe's top clubs before Milosevic took hold of the country. The Akademija became a popular daytime club during the 1999 NATO bombings of Serbia – these bombings were an international response to Milosevic's expulsion of ethnic Albanians living in Kosovo.

People went to hear DJs and bands play at Akademija, returning home at 9pm before the air raid curfew. Serbian youth recall the bombing days as the most stressful – but exciting – time, when music fostered a community spirit.

Bombed out buildings still litter Belgrade's landscape as a reminder of past and present troubles, and young people carry a sense of sadness and burden. But come festival time the Serbs always muster a genuine smile and take time to converse in broken English.

Although they're friendly to the British – despite the NATO bombings still regularly popping up in conversation – say you're from New Zealand and expect awe and warm envy. Many have family who immigrated here after the war, others dream of going, but all are welcoming and touched by your presence.

Echo organiser Gigi Markovic, an experienced music promoter who was based in New York and

set up Serbia's first music festival, Exit, says proving to Belgrade's bureaucrats they could get 80,000 people on-and-off the island without any problems was one obstacle.

But they also faced the extra trials and tribulations of staging a new event in an Eastern European country still scarred by years of war; a place where the Mafia now run the show; the Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic was assassinated in March; and wages for young people border on third world rates.

The Echo organisers were determined to bring a wider world of music to the youth of Belgrade, while taking this 2300 year-old city to the rest of the world.

Ticket prices are a sixth of the price of the famous Glastonbury festival, making flying to Belgrade from London for the festival affordable.

Echo came about through the desire of Markovic and former British *New York Times* Balkan correspondent Daniel Simpson to create a festival for Belgrade that was about music, rather than money.

Bored of journalism and how people talked about the Balkan region, 29-year-old Simpson threw himself into promoting Echo and eventually quit the *New York Times* when the two jobs were no longer sustainable. He feels Echo can tap into the energy around Belgrade and believes the city of two million people can support a festival of quality, non-commercial music – given time.

“There's quite a lively scene here but it doesn't change shape or direction very often. I thought if we had something really alive in the centre of the city – in a beautiful location – we might regenerate cultural life.”

Perhaps Serbian youth can draw motivation from the Bristol Stage at Echo that showcases the success stories from this poor part of England – made famous by Massive Attack, Tricky, Portishead and Roni Size and Reprazent.

Full Cycle crew member DJ Suv draws crowds on the Bristol Stage throughout the long weekend. Suv has played Serbia several times since the NATO bombing. “It's great to be part of new beginnings, of the new Serbia. I was hoping there wouldn't be McDonalds here, but unfortunately >>



ECHO STARS

CLASSIC ALBUMS FROM THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ECHO FESTIVAL IN BELGRADE.



Sonic Youth

Daydream Nation (1988)

When their noise and darkness became songs, like the classic *Silver Rocket* and *Cross The*

Breeze. 1992's *Dirty* was good, this precursor, was the best.



Derrick May

Innovator (1997)

A rare chance to get Derrick May on CD. Schizophrenic master mixing from, well, one of the masters.

Nine second tracks launching into six, or seven minute epics. Excellent.



Carl Craig

Abstract Funk Theory (2001)

Blasting out 80s funk, electro, techno – starting with George Clinton's 10-minute long *Atomic*

Dog – what more do you want to party to?



Burning Spear

Hail H.I.M. (1980)

Marcus Garvey (from 1975) is hailed as Burning Spear's classic but this album shows how enduring Burning Spear would be – even in the present.



Morcheeba

Big Calm (1998)

Morcheeba's second album was close to a masterpiece for the trip hop, lounge sound. Busy with a mix of styles but so peaceful, thanks to Skye Edwards voice.



us," he says.

"There's a drum'n'bass scene popping up in Belgrade too, it's really happening, the kids really love it." And a field of non-English speaking Serbs singing along to the soulful Kiwi voice of MC Tali – since Suv drops several of her tracks – is evidence of that.

Morcheeba, on their "last tour for a while, before going in different directions to try out solo projects", are the biggest act on the Echo line-up, designed to move tickets. Although the British trio play an extended set and the Serbs did their best to respond to sing-along requests from Skye Edwards, the atmosphere amongst the crowd is stilted compared to the response Burning Spear receive the following night.

The mere presence of Jamaican reggae legend Burning Spear (aka Winston Rodney) and his band in Belgrade for the first time woo the ecstatic Serbs. Simply uttering the word Rastafari evokes an outbreak of cheering, clapping and jubilant smiles.

Reggae hits a spot with Serbs. Burning Spear's two-hour set culminates with a remarkable demonstration of genuine unity, the crowd spontaneously chanting in reggae style with Rodney standing, watching in appreciation.

Dedicated fan Milan Dabic, a Serbian military worker, came alone to see Burning Spear. He couldn't convince his friends to fork out the \$NZ30 for a one-night ticket. Looking around the relatively empty site he's disappointed more of Belgrade's youth haven't made it to the city's first real festival – for financial reasons or other. But he predicts a different picture for the final night with Sonic Youth headlining.

Belgrade design student Maria Cupovich says her city's new festival is badly needed. But she complains about the tough security at the gates delaying her entry, with police searching every punter and confiscating anything from tampons to headache pills.

Lots of Maria's friends didn't make it to Echo because they spent their energy, and money at Exit festival which ended up being held only the weekend before. But she says Belgraders feel Echo stands its ground with a better line up and venue. It's a good chance for Belgrade residents to visit Great War Island for the first time too – historically a frontline for war as a former frontier between the Turkish Ottoman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire – and for foreigners to discover Serbia.

"Yugoslavia, or Serbia, is like a black hole in Europe. Everybody thinks we are killing people, or killing each other, and they don't want to come here. This festival is good to make people come here. To realise we are very friendly, that we want to be hosts to people from abroad."

On the London Xpress Stage Carl Craig opens to the 80,000 dancing Serbs with Michael

Jackson's *Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'*. On the main stage, Sonic Youth plays to an awestruck crowd. Halfway through the New York rockers set they move into a guitar frenzy marathon creating mesmerising soundscapes of distortion and feedback. "The people were shocked after Sonic Youth," enthuses radio guru Sloba Konjovic, who is Serbia's answer to John Peel. "I think music must be provocative and it must open up your mind to let you enjoy different spirits and possibilities.

"Music has the power not just to unite people but to spread that common feeling of togetherness. That's why I think an event like the Sonic Youth concert on Monday night was so significant...it was like God sent us the rain on Sunday. Because Monday was the amalgamation of artists from both days, and the crowd just came in because it was free and the people just don't have any money."

It is Sloba's dream that Echo becomes known as one of Europe's most eclectic and artistic festivals. "The music scene in Belgrade had a one-mindedness during the Milosevic years, I mean everybody was so fucking unified. So, when we are talking about the alternative to this, it's very small, it's very hidden and it's completely in opposition to that sort of mass brainwashing."

British author Matthew Collin, who wrote

This Is Serbia Calling, says the city has always had a strong tradition of underground music that's mostly gone unrecognised. Collin, who also wrote dance culture book *Altered State* and whose day job is a reporter for BBC World, says Milosevic tried to

kill Belgrade's music scene, but there was always a thread trying keep it alive.

"Belgrade had always been a serious party town, it had great post-punk bands doing quite exciting stuff. Now, Echo Festival has got serious links back to what's been going on here in the past decades."

From the guest appearance of a poisonous snake on the reggae stage, giving Jah Shaka one hell of a fright, to the ex-special forces scuba divers patrolling the island, Echo is one surreal experience. Especially for out of towners. But the fact that Echo happened in their city at all leaves Belgraders reeling.

Belgrade reggae DJ, Dragana Bajic', 23, explains ecstatically the satisfaction of helping bring reggae heroes to play in her hometown. "Burning Spear was magic. Sometimes reggae is sad. That's the music of struggling, it's the rebel music."

In the words of the soon to be retiring Burning Spear: "We will be singing about the history, the culture, the rights, the suffering and the struggling of the people.

"Tonight I'm going to get everyone relaxed and enjoying themselves, as that's what it is about."

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