

## The Critics

► the next month's rent, or whether our jobs will still be here a year from now, merge into an indistinct, smeary backdrop to the life of this boy who has already amassed more capital than most people on the planet will see in their entire snail's-pace existence.

None of this should be confused with the practice of "i-dosing", which was fearlessly exposed by a recent investigative feature in the *Daily Mail*. According to the *Mail's* reporter, i-dosing is a craze whereby American teenagers "change their brains in the same way as [taking] real-life narcotics" by listening to clips of ambient music that feature binaural beats – two tones played at slightly different frequencies in either ear. "The craze has so far been popular among teenagers in the US," the *Mail* says, "but given how easily available the videos are, it is just a matter of time before it catches on in Britain." Let's hope that young Bieber fans aren't tempted by such nefarious pursuits. ●

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### TRAVEL

## Brassed off

*Ed Stocker* visits the home of Balkan music – a trumpet festival in Serbia

The spiritual home of music in Serbia is located far away from the capital city. Three hours' drive west of Belgrade, not far from the border with Bosnia, the village of Guca is situated at the end of a winding mountain road that leads from the town of Cacak, passing the occasional Orthodox monastery and small farm. It's a beautiful setting, nestled at the bottom of a deep valley and bordering dense pine forests.

With only a few thousand residents, the village is not the most obvious location for perhaps the most important celebration of Balkan brass music in the world, a sound that has its roots in the marching bands of the 19th century. The Guca Trumpet Festival – which celebrated its 50th anniversary this year – attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors, descending en masse in August for five days of partying (extended to ten for this year's celebrations).

Guca is by no means a normal festival. For a start, it doesn't have any of the big stages or tents that one sees at similar events. There are only two arenas: one small area outside the village cultural centre and a larger stadium stage where players compete for the coveted Top Trumpet (jury) and Golden Trumpet (audience) awards. Instead, the heart of the festival is the itinerant group of brass bands – mostly



**Horn of plenty:** blasting away in the hills above Guca

Roma musicians from the south of the country – that wander the streets of the village searching for custom at the packed bars and restaurants where people tuck in to steaming plates of stew and grilled meat. It's a musical tradition unique to this corner of the globe, and watching the exchange between hustler and potential audience is a fascinating experience.

The barter starts with the group picking a table and swarming around it, where they immediately launch into playing at trademark lightning speed. It's up to the table – treated to an intimate performance – to coax ever more dazzling displays of virtuosity from the players as the trumpeters move ever closer to their seated audience, a wall of sound closing in on the listener.

If the music is good, the table will erupt into clapping, arm waving and possibly dancing on

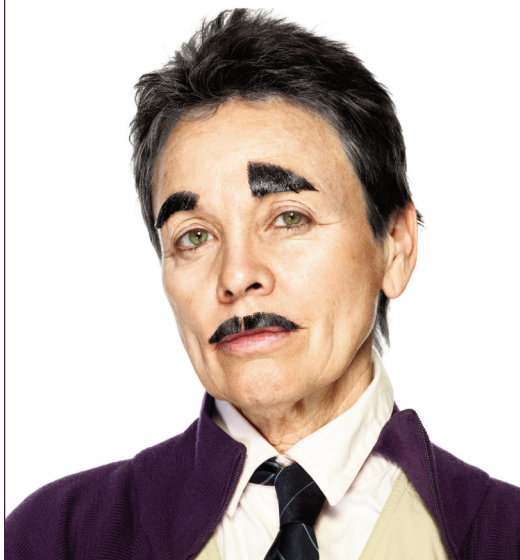
the tables. Appreciative listeners stuff 200 and 500 dinar notes down the bells of the players' trumpets as a sign that life is good and they must play on.

Occasionally, as a player works up a sweat, a note will be plastered to their forehead as a means of payment. For visitors from western Europe, it's a wonderfully anarchic way of paying for music.

The festival has certainly changed over the past few years – foreign bands are programmed to play at the stadium for the first time this year – and German, French, British and Italian voices now regularly mingle with the Serbs'. In the past, the festival, although never aligned with a political movement, was accused of being too nationalistic, and there are still occasional vendors who sell Slobodan Milosevic or Radovan Karadzic T-shirts. But this is now minority behaviour and people I spoke to were both welcoming and eager for the world to move past the newspaper headlines that have marred Serbia's reputation since the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

For all the changes, Guca is rightly proud of its traditions and clearly not ready to sell out. Much of the year, not a lot happens: the villagers mingle on their doorsteps, chatting to neighbours, and grow their own fruit and vegetables. Aside from camping, accommodation is with local families that give up their beds to make a quick buck during the festival. It's quite an experience being invited into their homes and their hospitality is humbling. Almost no one speaks English – but after a few hand gestures and several shots of rakija (the local plum brandy that fuels the festival), none of that seems to matter. ●

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