

If cardigans are ever suitable attire for men? Jay-Z appeared in one last week at Radio City Music Hall where he was headlining for the World Basketball Festival. Warning: the fact that he can work it doesn't necessarily mean mere mortals elsewhere can



The annual Guca Trumpet Festival was established in 1961 in western Serbia and this year has opened its doors to performers from around the globe. Alexa Stankovic / AFP

# The horn blowers

Celebrating its 50th anniversary, the Guca Trumpet Festival in Serbia is a noisy and unique experience, writes Ed Stocker

Follow the winding mountain road from the town of Cacak, in western Serbia, and after half an hour's drive you'll arrive at the small village of Guca. It's a sleepy place of a few thousand residents, not far from the border with Bosnia. For much of the year, the pace of life is slow as villagers attend to their vegetable patches and mill about on their porches, talking to neighbours. Approach in mid-August, though, and the first thing you notice is the noise of hundreds of trumpets echoing around the forest valley, long before the first few houses begin to appear.

Every year a radical transformation takes place as the village turns itself into a buzzing, 24-hour party. Hundreds of thousands of people arrive for a festival of non-stop brass music, probably the most important gathering of its type in the world.

The trumpet is an essential part of life in the Balkans, explains Aleksandar Milosavljevic, one of the festival organisers. "When a child is born, we celebrate with the trumpet," he says. "When someone gets married, we celebrate with a trumpet. And when there's a funeral, we bury people with the trumpet."

Bands from all over the country – and this year the US, Macedonia and the UK among others – play in bars, restaurants and the village's stadium. Some are just here to busk for a few dinar in the street, while others are competing for the much-coveted Top Trumpet, a prestige prize that opens doors to international festivals and lucrative recording contracts. With 2010 marking the event's 50th anniversary, the standard five days of partying have been doubled to 10 days of musical excess.

The Guca Trumpet Festival was established in 1961 by villagers who'd settled in Guca in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the first year only four, self-taught brass bands performed, but it quickly spawned into a much larger event. That founding year, the old folk song *Sa Ovcara i Kablara* was played for the first time – a tale of a female shepherd calling an unnamed person from the mountains – and is now the official anthem of the festival, guaranteed to provoke tears in even the most hardened of Serbs.

Brass band music in the Balkans has its roots in the conflict that swept through Serbia for centuries while it was part of the Ottoman Empire. After the second Serbian uprising against the Turks in 1831, the country's first military orchestra was founded and subsequently decommissioned soldiers took the tradition back to their home villages around the country. To the newly initiated, the music played at the festival can seem like a wall of thumping noise and it's certainly one of the loudest sounds on the planet. Troupes have a staggering array of firepower, including drums, several trumpets and the helicon, a huge tuba that wraps around the player's back and above the right shoulder.

Serbia's location in south-eastern Europe is what Milosavljevic calls "a crossroad between Asia and Europe". And the bands performing at Guca offer a staggering range of western and eastern influences as a result. The legacy of the country's six centuries of Turkish domination can be felt in the music of the south, known as *cocek*, and played by the large Roma population that live there. The east of the country plays Romanian-influenced *oro*

music which can also be heard in northern Greece, Macedonia and Bulgaria, while the north and west of the country play *colo*, a more western rhythm that is often accompanied by dancers holding hands and shaking their feet.

"Maybe you can compare it with American line dancing, but without the instructor," laughs Milosavljevic. "You raise your foot 15cm from the level of the ground. Any higher and the origin of the dance isn't Serbia!"

One of the most remarkable aspects of the festival is that it literally comes to the punter. In fact, there are only two stages: a small platform outside the cultural centre and the stadium where the competitions for Golden Trumpet (the audience award) and Top Trumpet (the jury prize) take place, among others. Arriving too early in the centre of town can seem like a bit of a disappointment. "You come here in the morning perhaps, and it can look unremarkable," explains Shantel, a DJ and musician who performed on Tuesday at the festival. "There are no big stages like you have at major festivals and it looks like a big wedding with grills for cooking meat and people camping. It's a bit anarchic in a way. And then it turns into a totally thrilling, emotional party extravaganza."

The real heart of the festival is the central thoroughfare of the village, where thousands of people pack out the restaurants and bars, tucking into huge steaming plates of grilled meat and hearty stews. It's here that mostly Roma bands wander the streets, busking for cash. Swarming around tables, they serenade and hustle for cash and it's up to the table to coax them into ever more dazzling displays



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Aleksandar Milosavljevic  
festival organiser

of virtuosity. It's demanding work, especially given that temperatures climb well into the mid-30s at this time of year, and playing requires the physical stamina and lungs of an athlete. As players work up a sweat on their foreheads, it's tradition to stick a 200 or 500 dinar note on their brow as payment – or stuff it down the bell of their trumpet – in order to get them to keep playing.

Guca is a unique and welcoming celebration, yet it's hard to talk about the festival – and the country in general – without some reference to the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Serbia is still seen by many travellers as edgy and the newspaper headlines of ethnic violence and aggressive nationalism are still fresh in people's minds. Serbians seem eager to welcome foreigners and move on from the past, yet they take huge pride in their country, their history and their music. In the past this may have spilled over into more extreme views, but Milosavljevic flatly denies any association with politicians.

"This festival has always been for the people," he asserts, becoming emotional. "Many politicians have tried to hijack it but they never succeeded."

Clearly Guca is opening up to the world, with foreign bands being invited to compete in an International Top Trumpet for the very first time and Shantel – a huge name in Balkan beats music who fuses Eastern Europe sounds with pop and electro – rocking the stadium on Tuesday night alongside the Roma trumpet heroes and national superstars Boban and Marko Markovic. Among the invited acts, the UK's Fanfara played several performances around the village

and, walking the streets, French, German, Italian and British accents mingle with Serb. They've been inspired to visit Guca thanks to the films of Emir Kusturica, a director who has helped promote the music of Goran Bregovic (the country's most famous artist, who played on Wednesday night), among others.

"We live in a technocratic world," adds Shantel, explaining the appeal. "We live in a situation where pop music has lost its rebelliousness and Balkan music has this attitude that is perhaps the antithesis of the status quo we have in rock and pop culture today."

The music at the 50th edition has been staggering. Even after the bands have finished, brass music continues to pump down the main streets of the village on a tannoy system, just in case anyone was contemplating sleep. On the second night of the festival, Dejan Lazarevic, along with his brass band, showed just what makes him a "master" – a player who has won three or more top awards and is a member of the Guca hall of fame. The 25-year-old, who only took up the instrument 10 years ago, was bang on the money: tight, funky and playing with lightning speed. Yet often it was the less well-known bands walking the streets that provided the biggest surprises.

"When someone gives you a gift, you have to nurture it," explains Adam Tadic, the director of the festival. "Many players are uneducated and just learn from listening to the music. This is a gift!"

● **The Guca Trumpet Festival, celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, runs until Sunday. For more information visit [www.guca.rs](http://www.guca.rs).**