

11/11/13

Review: Belgrade Jazz Festival 2013

Against all odds, a festival in Serbia has become one of the coolest in Europe

By [Thomas Conrad](#)

On October 11, 2013, an article by Viia Beaumanis appeared in the *New York Times*. The title was “On the Verge: Belgrade, Europe’s Latest Urban Success Story.” It claimed that this “war-torn city” has emerged from the “long slumber” imposed by the “struggle and strife” of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Beaumanis portrays Belgrade as a “burgeoning hub for design, culture and creativity,” with boutique hotels, trendy restaurants and a new art museum.



1

Ana Sofrenovic, Belgrade Jazz Festival 2013

By Tim Dickeson



2

Bushman's Revenge, Belgrade Jazz Festival 2013

By Tim Dickeson



3

Cassandra Wilson, Belgrade Jazz Festival 2013

By Tim Dickeson



4

Vijay Iyer, Belgrade Jazz Festival 2013

By Tim Dickeson



5

Giovanni Guidi, Belgrade Jazz Festival 2013

By Tim Dickeson



6

Lars Danelsson, Belgrade Jazz Festival 2013

By Tim Dickeson



7

Leszek Mozdzer, Belgrade Jazz Festival 2013

By Tim Dickeson



8

Gianluca Petrella, Belgrade Jazz Festival 2013

By Tim Dickeson



9

Shai Maestro Trio, Belgrade Jazz Festival 2013

By Tim Dickeson



10

Jam session at the 2013 Belgrade Jazz Festival: Leszek Możdżer, keys; Shai Maestro, keys; Petar Krstajić, bass; Pedja Milutinović, drums; Miloš Nikolić, trumpet
By Tim Dickeson

I just got back from there, and I don't recognize the Belgrade Beumanis describes. The Belgrade of my experience is a huge, teeming, gritty, austere city whose endless blocks of tattered gray buildings are covered in Cyrillic graffiti. That it is one of the poorest urban centers in Europe, with high unemployment and low wages, is obvious from the dress and demeanor of people on the streets. While it is true that a small new art museum, Macura, has opened on the outskirts of town, the National Museum on Trg Republike (Republic Square) has been "closed for renovation" for many years. The Museum of Contemporary Art, opened in 1965 and one of Europe's first national modern art museums, also sits closed, in disrepair. And I never saw a single trendy restaurant. You can eat very well in Belgrade, but you do it in small old family restaurants like Savski Ekspres, that serve heaping platters of grilled meats cheap.

The political situation in Serbia is still shaky. In 2012, a hardline nationalist, Tomislav Nikolić, became President. He defeated Boris Tadić, who had been viewed in the West as a progressive who could lead Serbia back to Europe. When it comes to politics, Belgrade is dominated by cynicism and conspiracy theories. Serbia was incapacitated by war, repression, isolation and economic sanctions through the 1990s. Such a society does not heal itself quickly. All sides were guilty of atrocities in the appalling, genocidal Balkan wars, but in the whole civilized world, the only place where it is not widely recognized that Serbia bears most of the blame is Serbia. Recent history is so horrific that most Serbs prefer to rewrite it or forget it. But they cannot forget it because there are still bombed-out buildings all over Belgrade, eyesores of rubble and hanging rebar. Every destroyed building I saw looked like it had not been touched since 1999, when the NATO planes hit. (Serbs who remember say, "They always came at night. Always by night.")

It is in this context that Belgrade hosted a jazz festival in late October 2013. Beaumanis' *New York Times* article cites a design summit in June as an example of resurgent creativity in the city. A much better example would have been the Belgrade Jazz Festival. Its history goes back to 1971. In the '70s and '80s, Miles, Duke, Dizzy and Monk played BJB. But like everything else good in the Balkans, the festival went dark between 1991 and 2004 because of the wars. In 2005, a few members of Belgrade's dedicated jazz community, including Vojislav Pantić and Dragan Ambrosić, started it up again, from scratch, on a shoestring. By 2009, they were using venues around town like Dom Sindikata and the acoustically superb Kolarac. They were threadbare facilities (like most things in Belgrade), but held approximately 1600 and 900, respectively. The festival can no longer afford to rent such spaces. Since 2011, except for opening night, all concerts have been held in two venues in Dom Omladine, a plain building just off Trg Republike. It was originally a community youth center during the communist era.

The two venues are Velika Sala, recently refurbished, with a capacity of approximately 600, and Amerikana, home of the midnight concerts, a funky space upstairs, painted black. You can squeeze 700 people into Amerikana if most of them stand. Pantić is now the Artistic Director of the festival. Ambrosić is Program Manager. There is a proactive new Festival Director, Marko Stojanović. These three hope to use venues like Kolarac again in the future, but in the meantime there are advantages to their current circumstances. Because the Dom Omladine venues are undersized, and because ticket prices are kept extremely low (the equivalent in Serbian dinars of \$12-\$14, \$7 for the midnight shows), BJB is a sold-out standing-room-only festival. And because everything centers around Dom Omladine, it is the place to be seen in Belgrade in late October if you have aspirations toward hipness. It is an electric scene for five days, a major hang, overflowing with the jazz faithful and fellow travelers from early evening until the wee hours. (Belgrade is like New York in one respect: It is a city that never sleeps. When you emerge from Dom Omladine at 2:30 a.m., Trg Republike and the streets are still alive.)

But the strength of BJB is the programming. While ever strapped for cash, Pantić and Ambrosić somehow always come up with a lineup that lives on the leading edges of the jazz art form. I have been to BJB for five straight years. I always reacquaint myself there with important Americans and Europeans, often when they are presenting interesting new projects. I always make exciting discoveries. And I am always impressed with at least one Serb. In 2013 it was Ana Sofrenović.

Her show, titled "Voices," was beyond a jazz concert. It was multi-media performance art: challenging, exhilarating, baffling, hypnotic. It could only have come from an artist fully functional in two disciplines, acting and singing. Sofrenović is well known in Serbia for her work as an actress in films and television. She came out on the stage of Velika Sala and stood stock still and silent. Video images of a blue sky and clouds were projected on a screen above her and a quiet wind began to stir. The wind was Ana, blowing into her microphone. Then her voice was heard, a voice subtly transfigured by electronics, a wordless soft moaning and sighing, like breathing aloud. Suddenly you realized it was a song. I did not recognize it. (Later I learned it was "Djelem Djelem," often called the Gypsy National Anthem.) Musicians began to appear on stage, alone or in pairs, to contribute a gesture (a few percussion strokes, a dark piano chord) before departing. Ana's hands, moving now, were essential to the unfolding mystery, and so was the stark, minimal stage lighting. Familiar songs became discernible ("Poinciana," "You Don't

Know What Love Is,” “Don’t Explain”), but they barely moved. They were like achingly slow soundtracks to Ana’s private fantasy. It was as if she were dreaming them. “Voices” was a closed circle, a dramatization of inner life that could not be expressed by more conventional means, and one of the most unique performances I have ever experienced at a jazz festival.

On opening night, Cassandra Wilson and her new project, Black Sun, played Sava Centar, a 4,000-seat auditorium across the Sava River from the city center. It was the fifth and last stop on their first tour, which had included concerts in France, Sweden and Macedonia. The first floor of Sava Centar holds approximately 3,000, and Wilson came close to filling it. That is the good news. The other news is that many left before the concert was over. Black Sun is a departure for Wilson. Perhaps those who left early had come to hear the Wilson of Grammy-winning albums like *New Moon Daughter*, and were not ready for Black Sun’s new stark presentation, with its biting rock ’n’ roll and more biting social protest.

Considering Wilson’s high profile, it is notable that Black Sun is essentially a collective. It is Wilson plus a trio that calls itself Harriet Tubman, in honor of the African-American abolitionist who rescued more than 300 slaves. Brandon Ross is on guitar and banjo; Melvin Gibbs is on bass; J.T. Lewis is on drums. It is a collective but with two stars: Wilson, whose dark voice is still one of the most compelling, expressive instruments in jazz, and Ross, who was on fire in Sava Centar. He has been Wilson’s guitarist of choice for many years, best known for his atmospheric acoustic sonorities. In Belgrade he played banjo, which imparted an ominous twang to the proceedings, and electric guitar, on which he took solos fierce enough to make most rock guitarists run and hide.

The concert began with a long instrumental prelude by the trio before Wilson came on stage. When she began to sing “Strange Fruit,” it was electrifying. It may be the most disturbing song in the vocal jazz canon, and Wilson’s version was dead slow and defiant. The agonizing impact of the song was intensified many times over by visual images projected on a screen over the stage. They were old photographs of lynchings and slave markets and Ku Klux Klan cross burnings. The tone of the evening was set, or seemed to be. Wilson’s second song was “Overcome Someday,” which fit the theme. But her third song was “Tomorrow Never Knows” by Lennon-McCartney, which did not.

I was surprised to learn after the concert that Black Sun had not used visual imagery on the other four stops on its tour. The photographs were put together only for Belgrade. One of them depicted something like a White Citizens Council, on the march, carrying Confederate flags, their pinched, bigoted faces familiar from newsreels of the 1960s. Familiar, that is, to an American in the audience. I can only speculate as to how a Serbian audience received and processed these images. At one point Wilson announced, “All of our songs are about struggle.” She no doubt sees struggle in a larger, universal human sense, but the photographs were so gut-wrenching and specific that they precluded other histories. The images had the effect of shoving her message down her audience’s throat. Her music was strong enough to carry the evening by itself. The visuals may have been a one-time experiment. Her concert would have been more focused and clear if she had used the images only on “Strange Fruit.” In any case, Wilson is in excellent voice right now, looks fit, and seems energized by the possibilities of the Black Sun project.

Wilson and Sofrenović notwithstanding, a case could be made that BJJ 2013 was about pianists. The extravagantly gifted young Italian, Giovanni Guidi, appeared in a duo with trombone virtuoso/wild man Gianluca Petrella. They both play in Enrico Rava's quintet, and they both pursue their own projects. (Guidi has a beautifully understated, daring new album on ECM, *City of Broken Dreams*.) The fact that BJJ brought them in as a duo may reflect economics more than aesthetics. Given today's omnipresent budgetary challenges, many jazz festivals have developed a fondness for solo artists and duos. But putting Guidi and Petrella alone together worked brilliantly, because their fearless imaginations were set free. Guidi was definitely not understated in Belgrade. He splashed and crashed across the full width of the keyboard, and Petrella blasted and squealed, and it all became music. It was a rush when they careened together into "Prelude to a Kiss," smearing and distorting the song's tenderness into something hip and hilarious and somehow still heartfelt.

Leszek Możdżer of Poland was one of the revelations of the festival. He has an album on the ACT label, *Komeda*, dedicated to the music of the great Polish film composer. In Velika Sala he played lush, swirling, intricate interpretations of "Sleep Safe and Warm" and "The Law and the Fist," from Komeda's score for the Roman Polanski film *Rosemary's Baby*. Możdżer possesses chops so extreme that, as a listener, you trust him completely and let go and just drown in his music. Sometimes he uses his technical facility for fun, to show off, like when he played one minute of Bach in a blur, or a Chopin etude with his left hand and a very fast "Secret Love" with his right. But more often he employed his skill in the service of art. On his original ballad "Incognitor," he overwhelmed his own song with glittering decoration yet retained enough of the melody to make it a stirring recurrence. Only very special pianists give the piano their own sound. When Możdżer plays it, it is a different Steinway, the notes richer, more resonant, more complex.

He has a brand new album with Swedish bassist Lars Danielsson, *Polska*, on ACT. Danielsson's quartet followed Możdżer's solo concert in Velika Sala, and when it came time for encores, Danielsson invited Możdżer to join him. They played three soaring numbers as a duo that were even better than anything in Możdżer's own set. Danielsson, by the way, is a spellbinder. The first number of his set was a long, freely wandering bass solo that became a rapt "Both Sides Now" by Joni Mitchell. It was one of the magic moments of the festival.

Julia Hülsmann of Germany is a pianist very different from Guidi and Możdżer: orderly, strategic, minimalist in her entries upon musical space. She released two interesting albums on ECM in 2008 and 2011 with her trio (bassist Marc Muellbauer, drummer Heinrich Köbberling). Her new ECM album, *In Full View*, adds British trumpeter Tom Arthurs, who was with her in Belgrade. His melodically conditional, ambiguous lines bring new dimensions of emotional suggestion to Hülsmann's rather cerebral music.

I did not know the Israeli pianist Shai Maestro at all before Belgrade. His concert had enough sweeping power to lift you right out of your chair, even long after midnight in Amerikana. Wave after wave of irresistible energy emanated from three co-equal sources: Maestro, bassist Jorge Roeder and Ziv Ravitz, the most maniacal and exciting drummer of the festival. It was a trio tight enough to seethe and erupt without flying apart. Maestro's music has qualities you do not often encounter together: sharp intelligence and sheer ecstasy.

Two pianists who disappointed were Nik Bärtsch (with his trio Ronin) and Vijay Iyer (with his critically acclaimed trio of bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Marcus Gilmore). Bärtsch was a colossal bore. (Full disclosure: I left when the bass clarinetist, who calls himself Sha, began to use his horn to create a click track.)

Iyer's performance was puzzling. I have always respected his music for its intellectual rigor, technical skill and originality. Perhaps the context of Belgrade worked to his disadvantage. Players like Guidi, Mozdzer, Hülsmann and Maestro may never achieve the renown of Iyer. They may never be awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, which Iyer received a month before his appearance in Belgrade. But they are all, in their various ways, profoundly *pianistic*. In Belgrade Iyer mostly approached the piano as a percussion instrument. He was oddly repetitive all night. He still made surprising note choices, and his dynamics included spikes in unexpected places. But he often stayed with chord cycles and figures and single notes for so long that they dissipated whatever tension they generated. He seemed more interested in creating complex forms of rhythmic force than in exploring melodic and harmonic ideas. In this endeavor he had a powerful ally in Gilmore, who can hold a riveting, insidious pattern patiently while Iyer and Crump juxtapose contrasting metrical alternatives. Together they generate a formidable, unusual thrust. An Iyer concert is never going to be less than meticulous and clever. But on an off night, his continuous cryptic calculations sound a little cold, his energy nervous, his leaps spasmodic. Sometimes you wish Iyer would just play you a song.

I have heard Lee Konitz's music all my adult life but had never seen him live until Belgrade. It was a moving experience. He played a gentle, luminous, whimsical concert in Velika Sala with pianist Dan Tepfer. At 86, he still sounds like Lee Konitz. When he operates an alto saxophone, it is as if fresh, elegant melodic variations flow from him, almost without effort. He announced that he considers himself "fortunate to have been able to play the same songs for 60 years." He played some of them in Belgrade, and they glowed: "Alone Together," "Out of Nowhere," "Skylark," "Subconscious-Lee."

This year an off-site venue, Jazz Club Čekaonica (which means "meeting room") became the festival's after-hours hang. It is on the seventh floor of a near-derelict building near the Sava River. The entrance to the building is spooky and dark. The ride up in the elevator is spookier. You lack confidence in the regularity of elevator inspections. Every floor that goes by is more covered in graffiti than the last. But once you reach the seventh floor, the club is a simpatico place to hear music. There are tall windows that would provide lovely city views if someone ever washed them. But clean windows might interfere with the ambience of Jazz Club Čekaonica. Leszek Mozdzer and Shai Maestro showed up one night and jammed until 4 a.m. An 18-year-old Serbian bassist, Peter Krstajić, found himself in heavy company between Mozdzer and Maestro's drummer Ziv Ravitz, and held his own. On the festival's last night, Bushman's Revenge (Even Helte Hermansen, guitar; Rune Norgaard, bass; Gard Nilssen, drums) played the most violent version of Ornette Coleman's "Lonely Woman" I have ever heard. They threatened to solve the issue of the club's dirty windows by blowing them out. It was a perfect way to end a festival like this one. Bushman's Revenge is from Norway, but they play music as hard and edgy as the mean streets of Belgrade.