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From a Yugoslav to a Balkan Star and Back: Lepa Brena's Public Figure in Transition

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I deal with the public figure of the singer Lepa Brena in the context of the cultural and music politics in socialist Yugoslavia and in the war and post-war times, by focusing on her transition from a "genuine" Yugoslav star, through the period in which the Yugoslav label was not desirable, to the singer's recent transformations in which she has been involved in the process of commodifying Yugonostalgia for repositioning her public figure in a new context.

Keywords: Yugoslav popular music, politics of music, Lepa Brena, Yugonostalgia

IZVLEČEK

V tem članku obravnavam javno podobo pevke Lepe Brene v kontekstu kulturne in glasbene politike v socialistični Jugoslaviji med vojno in po njej, pri čemer se osredotočim na njen prehod od »pristine«¹ jugoslovanske zvezde, v obdobju, ko oznaka »jugoslovanski«² ni bila zaželena, do pevkinih nedavnih preobrazb, ki so se odvijale v procesu komodifikacije jugonostalgije, znotraj katerega je svojo javno podobo umestila v nov kontekst.

Ključne besede: jugoslovanska zabavna glasba, politika glasbe, Lepa Brena, jugonostalgija

Introduction

In this article I deal with a singer who is recognized as one of the legends of Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav popular culture – Lepa Brena (the Beautiful Brena). Her political potential has been constructed in the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav public sphere on the basis of her national and social background and her official labeling, firstly as a typical Yugoslav star and symbol of the socialist era, and secondly as a Balkan star. In order to identify the contextual framework for the interpretation of her public figure as a relevant part of the current cultural scene in the post-Yugoslav spaces, it is essential to point out the political and affective potential of Yugoslav popular music after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and Brena's position in this context.¹

As discussed elsewhere, various practises of Yugoslav folk music did not disappear after the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Rather, music has become a means of redefining borders in the post-Yugoslav context.² It could trigger new discussions about the contested past or a place for consolidation and new beginnings, both in concert venues and in virtual spaces such as forums, social media, and the like. After the Yugoslav wars, listening to Yugoslav popular music was understood as a choice charged with political meaning, a symptom of Yugonostalgia, and a statement in the context of nationalist discourses in post-Yugoslav states. Even though the music market has been redefined and reshaped after the wars, it can still be a platform where the political and affective potential of Yugoslav music, as well as Yugoslav music stars, can provoke emotional reactions from the audience and a specific (pro- or contra-Yugoslav) reception from the public. It is often concluded that although Yugoslavia has ceased to exist and is often labelled as “departed”³ and “late”,⁴ popular culture is seen as its cultural heritage and as something that is still somehow “alive”. Moreover, Yugoslav popular music shows that the continuity of Yugoslav popular cultures and markets is still relevant. Thus, certain personalities, groups, and even songs remained powerful Yugoslav symbols even after the country's dissolution.

- 1 Yugoslav musical market was divided between pop, rock and roll, and folk music industries, including divergent centres, institutions and recording companies accordingly. Even though there were several different currents in the Yugoslav music scene, and many genres developed during Yugoslav era, by the term “Yugoslav popular music” I here simply refer to the music practices that were popular in the socialist Yugoslavia and are today commonly associated with that country.
- 2 See, for instance, Catherine Baker, *Sounds of the Borderland: Popular Music, War and Nationalism in Croatia Since 1991* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010); Ana Hofman, *Glasba, Politika, Afekt: Novo življenje partizanskih pesmi v Sloveniji* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2015); Ana Petrov, *Jugoslovenska muzika bez Jugoslavije: Koncerti kao mesta sećanja* (Beograd: Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2016).
- 3 Ante Perković, *Sedma republika: Pop kultura u Yu raspadu* (Beograd and Zagreb: Službeni glasnik and Novi liber, 2011).
- 4 Mitja Velikonja, “Povratak otpisanih: Emancipatorski potencijali jugonostalgije,” in *Zid je mrtav, živeli zidovi: Pad Berlinskog zida i raspad Jugoslavije*, ed. Ivan Čolović (Beograd: XX. vek, 2015), 366–398.

It is from the perspective described above that the discussion of problematic and unproblematic figures should be conducted, including that relating to the public figure of Brena, which has recently undergone a transformation that has provoked new reactions. As is common knowledge, she was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her repertoire is based on so-called newly composed folk music,⁵ and she also sang songs related to Yugoslavia. Public figures from the Yugoslav era have changed since the dissolution of the country in which they made their careers. Some of them take advantage of the fact that Yugoslav popular culture can still be an important element for success in post-Yugoslav markets. Others, however, saw the Yugoslav element as a potential threat to their reputation. Brena went through both of the aforementioned scenarios and initially tried to distance herself from the Yugoslav past. At a time when Yugonostalgia has become one of the trends in post-Yugoslav popular culture, she decided to reposition herself in a new context.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia affected the entire music market, which disintegrated and created a tension between newly formed national musical identities created through the prism of “otherness” – the prism discursively manifested in the division between “us” and “them”.⁶ In the 1990s, musical practices in the divided post-Yugoslav territories were shaped by numerous political measures. Certain genres were associated with official nationalist politics, while others were commonly regarded as supposedly neutral. Moreover, some of the musical activities of artists who came to Serbia (and vice versa) from war-affected areas (Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) were sometimes seen as provocative, potentially making the concerts risky events. However, the music practices eventually blurred the newly created “borders” between national music practices and markets and became a means to cross them.⁷ It is also important to point out that certain musicians were implicated in different media politics after the disintegration of Yugoslavia due to their ethnicity, place of origin or family affiliation, spoken dialect and the like.⁸

5 Newly composed folk music is a commercial music genre that emerged in the mid-1960s. It was rooted in Yugoslavia's folk music and was developed into a commercially successful genre in the 1970s, while retaining its grassroots, working-class associations with *kafana* (tavern) entertainment. It began to dominate Yugoslav music market in the 1980s. As Nenić points out, the *novokomponovana* (meaning “newly composed”) label was commonly used pejoratively by urban audiences, who sought to distinguish their aspirational middle-class values constructed around *zabavna* – pop and rock music – from the negatively referenced peasant (*seljačko*) connotations frequently ascribed to *novokomponovana* music audiences. Iva Nenić, “My Yuga, My Dearest Flower: The Yugoslav Legacy of Newly Composed Yugoslav Music Revisited,” in *Made in Yugoslavia: Studies in Yugoslav Music*, eds. Danijela Š. Beard and Ljerka V. Rasmussen (London: Routledge, 2020), 133.

6 Baker, *Sounds of the Borderland*, 175.

7 Ana Petrov, “The Songs We Love to Sing and the History We Like to Remember: Tereza Kesovija's Come Back in Serbia,” *Southeastern Europe* 39, no. 2 (2015): 192–214.

8 Catherine Baker, “The Afterlife of Neda Ukraden: Negotiating Space and Memory through Popular Music after the Fall of Yugoslavia, 1990–2008,” in *Music, Politics and Violence*, eds. Susan Fast and Kip Pegley (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 60–82.

All these are essential elements to position Lepa Brena's public figure in the context of cultural and musical politics in socialist Yugoslavia and in the war and post-war period. The issue of Lepa Brena has hardly been discussed in scholarship (partly due to a rather negative labelling of the genre she represents). I will point to how her public figure can be problematized in the Yugoslav and especially in the post-Yugoslav context. In particular, I will focus on her transition from a genuine Yugoslav star, through the period when the Yugoslav label was undesirable, to the singer's recent changes, involving her in the process of commercialising Yugonostalgia in order to reposition her public figure in a new context.

Keeping in mind the mentioned, the article will entail the following problematic sections: constructing Yugoslav diva, neutralising traces of Yugoslavia, and repackaging the residuals of Yugoslavia. The analysis focuses on the publicly available testimonials on and by Lepa Brena that seem to be crucial for the discursive construction of her figure in the public spheres of Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav cultures. Furthermore, when necessary, the analyses of the songs and their receptions are also included.

Constructing Yugoslav Diva

In order to understand the position of her public figure in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav cultural politics, it is necessary to contextualise the singer against the background of Yugoslav history.

Fahreta Živojinović (*b*Jahić, 1960), known by her stage name Lepa Brena, grew up in Brčko, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and has lived in Belgrade, Serbia, where she began her career, since the 1980s. Brena began singing with a band called Lira Show (later Slatki greh, meaning the Sweet Sin) in 1980, and soon after she and Slatki Greh recorded their first studio album *Čačak, Čačak* (1982). This was the beginning of the period in which she became arguably the most famous singer in the former Yugoslavia. A number of factors accelerated her almost immediate success and fame. Firstly, in the same year that the first album was released, Lepa Brena and her band appeared in the film *Tesna koža* (literally *Tight Skin*, i.e. *Jumped out of Skin*), which soon became one of the most popular Yugoslav films. Secondly, in 1983 they won the Yugoslav selection for the Eurovision Song Contest with the song *Sitnije, Cile, sitnije*,⁹ which was very controversial as it belonged to the aforementioned genre of newly composed folk music, which was highly unusual for a pop contest. Thus, in the first years of her career, Lepa Brena became both highly popular and highly controversial due to her performances, the genre she contributed to, and the quick and colossal success she achieved.

9 The title is a wordplay combining the Italian word for Yes (*si*) and the name of the guy (*Cile*). The first verse opens with "Si, Cile, si".

In the mid-1980s, Brena recorded the song *Živela Jugoslavija* (*Long Live Yugoslavia*), together with another popular folk singer Miroslav Ilić. This was the time when she was perceived as a true Yugoslav star due to her success and widely popular (albeit controversial) genre. Moreover, the song reflected Brena's political stance on Yugoslav unity, which she would represent in the years to come. In the 1980s, it was not uncommon to sing songs about Yugoslavia, but combined with Brena's captivating performances and enormous popularity, she soon became one of the most popular public figures in Yugoslavia, a musician with the highest sales figures, and a figure considered a true Yugoslav star, representing the realisation of the idea of constructing a typical Yugoslav pop figure that would be widely accepted and an equivalent to top Western-oriented star musicians. In the following years, she recorded three films. The Brena Barbie doll was manufactured. She held several records for the number of concerts. She was also a great success in other socialist countries, such as Bulgaria and Romania.¹⁰

In view of what has been said, it is important to point out two aspects of the phenomenon of Lepa Brena. Why was she a typical Yugoslav figure, and why can it be argued that the phenomenon was contrived? The singer attracted so much interest not only because she brought certain innovations to the Yugoslav music scene, but also because her activities coincided with arguably the most fascinating period in Yugoslav history: the peak of Yugoslav cultural production in the 1980s, the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and its afterlife in the 2000s. This allowed her (and many other public figures from the Yugoslav era) to achieve even greater symbolic potential than they might have had under different circumstances.

One of the reasons why Brena was fascinating in Yugoslavia was that she contributed to a certain genre, which was a mixture of pop and folk. Since the demand and search for a type of music that would be recognised as a "typical" Yugoslav sound characterised the entire Yugoslav era, Yugoslav music was often changed so that each decade in the second half of the twentieth century was specific to certain trends in music policy. Thus, in the 1950s, Yugoslav popular music was generally characterised by imitations and adaptations of Western popular music genres (such as Italian *canzone*, French *chanson*, and German *Schlager*); in the 1960s, rock and roll dominated; in the 1970s, disco influenced the style and repertoire of many pop musicians, while the 1980s brought new wave currents as well as various types of blends of pop and folk sounds. Since pop and especially rock music culture was perceived as an urban phenomenon,

10 Lepa Brena and Slatki Greh held more than 350 concerts yearly and would often hold two concerts in one day. They set a record by holding thirty-one concerts consecutively at Dom Sindikata, and seventeen concerts consecutively at the Sava Center. On 24 July 1990, Brena was lowered with a helicopter at Levski stadium in Sofia, Bulgaria, and held her then-most-attended concert with an audience of more than 90,000 (perhaps even 100,000) people.

while folk was associated with the rural parts of the country, the combination of folk-like melodies and pop sound combined with provocative verses and an often Western-looking outfit and performance, made Brena a unique feature in Yugoslav culture.¹¹

As Yugoslavia underwent a profound transformation from a rural to an urban country after second World War, the entire politics of genre became a complex issue in Yugoslav music politics. At the same time, there was a dichotomy between folk music, which was considered reserved for country people, and pop and especially rock music, which was seen as a kind of “high culture.” There was also a tendency to break down class barriers and create a new typically Yugoslav culture that would represent class unity. From this perspective, Brena had just the right potential to become what Yugoslav culture needed at that time – a unique combination of cultural practises that were previously considered different, but were expected to be united to be a means of overcoming class barriers that were not desired in the socialist country.

Apart from cultural and musical politics in Yugoslavia, her origins, and the specific moment she emerged in Yugoslav culture, Brena obviously contributed to a practice of using (and eventually becoming one of) explicitly Yugoslav symbols, namely recording songs about Yugoslavia and publicly professing to be Yugoslav. One of her biggest hits from the late 1980s is called *Jugoslovenka* (*Yugoslav Woman*), sung with three other singers – Danijel Popović, Vlado Kalember, and Alen Islamović. Since they were from different parts of socialist Yugoslavia and used different dialects of the official Serbo-Croatian language,¹² they gave the song symbolic power in multiple ways (which indeed became evident after the disintegration of Yugoslavia). Furthermore, the video for the song was shot in different parts of Yugoslavia; the verses refer to the relationship between the beauty of Yugoslavia and the woman the song is about; and Yugoslav flags were used abundantly in the song, making it one of Yugoslavia’s unofficial pop anthems.¹³

11 Another similar phenomenon on the Yugoslav scene was the case of the band Bijelo dugme (“White Button”), which also contributed to the context of mixing genres and tendencies, and also soon became one of the Yugoslav symbols, despite the fact that it also was often labelled as problematic and controversial.

12 Croatian pop star Vlado Kalember, Montenegrin pop star Daniel Popović, and Bosnian Muslim rock star Alen Islamović – along with Brena herself, who was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina but lived in Belgrade, Serbia.

13 In the narrative of the song, each of the three men asks Brena different questions, such as: “Where are you from, you beautiful girl? Where are you from, you unknown woman? Where do you dance so freely? What place did you steal the sunshine from? Where did you get these beautiful spring flowers? Where do you drink honey wine, love so sweetly?” Her answer is the chorus, ending with a euphoric “I am Yugoslavian” every time. On the Yugonostalgic potential of the song see, for instance, Jasmina Tumbas, “Yugonostalgia,” *Art Monthly* 425 (2019), accessed February 3, 2020, <https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/issue/april-2019>.

To sum up, Brena's life story, the transition from lower to upper class, her origin, the genre she contributed to, and the actual socio-historical moment when she joined the Yugoslav scene made her one of the typical Yugoslav public figures. Her biography stands for the context of a typical Yugoslav story: the singer's origin from a "typical Yugoslav" family, the standard of living, the fact that she came from a Bosnian working-class family, etc. Moreover, the social context is relevant to make her a typical Yugoslav: she appeared on the Yugoslav stage at one of the most critical moments in the history of socialist Yugoslavia, such as the death of Josip Broz Tito, and at a time when a narrative about the social change that took place in the country after the second World War, namely the migration from the countryside to the cities and the urbanisation process, needed to be refreshed as the country was going through severe social and economic crises. Brena's first hit *Čačak*, *Čačak* is a typical example of the combination of pop and folk genres. It is often interpreted as the result of the emancipation process of the working-class.¹⁴ In the film *Nema problema (No Problem)*, Brena's performance is presented as the choice of the workers. Because she was easily associated with different social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, contributed to a particular genre that was both very popular and very controversial, and also publicly declared and referred to herself as a Yugoslav, Brena quickly became arguably the most popular figure of the Yugoslav era.

Neutralising Traces of Yugoslavia

As mentioned above, in scholarly contexts Lepa Brena is mainly considered in the context of the discussion of the genre to which she contributed.¹⁵ There are, however, certain analyses of her public figure in a broader cultural context. Indeed, it has been shown that her public figure is a vehicle for an "emotional continuity of the past that derives primarily from sentimental attachments to her music."¹⁶ From this perspective, Lepa Brena's public appearances have been

14 In Brena's hit *Mile voli disko (Mile Loves Disco)*, 1982): the "conventional" world of Serbian peasant Mile meeting the modern discotheque, epitomised in an effort of the Serbian folk accordion to play disco music. What used to be perceived as antagonistic counterparts in modern reality suddenly became non-contradictory in music: mixing urban and rural, contemporary and traditional. And while this music was practiced with its standard themes of love, family, homeliness, and patriotism, it was also possible to interpret it as "a product of acculturation, indicating a process of cultural impoverishment caused by the migration of rural populations to the cities." Ljerka Vidić Rasmussen, "From Source to Commodity: Newly Composed Folk Music of Yugoslavia," *Popular Music* 14, no. 2 (1995): 241. Brena's song announced the radical break with the nostalgic pathos of the homeland; the return to "rural" roots was no longer in question.

15 For instance, Milena Dragičević-Šešić, *Neofolk kultura: publika i njene zvezde* (Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad: Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, 1988).

16 Ana Hofman, "Lepa Brena: Repolitization of Musical Memories on Yugoslavia," *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta SANU*, 60, no.1 (2012): 22.

analysed, among other things, as “strategies of navigation through intersecting discourses of the Yugoslav past” and their perception by the public.¹⁷ Lepa Brena’s association with Yugoslavia is more than clear, as she represented a project of mainstream Yugoslav cultural politics and was the biggest Yugoslav and the first big Balkan star.¹⁸ However, as her statements in the media as well as the research on the subject in the 2000s showed, Brena did not mean to refer to Yugoslavia. Hofman shows, for example, how Brena even tried to “escape her image of the Yugoslav star” during the promotion of the Ex-YU 2009 tour and concerts in Ljubljana, Sarajevo, and Zagreb, Sofia, Timisoara, and Tirana.¹⁹ She tried to avoid talking about socialism and not using terms like socialist or Yugoslavian. During the promotion for the 2009 tour, Brena tried to distance herself from the image of the Yugoslav star, and she rarely expressed any kind of longing for the past. She managed to do this by being careful not to use terms like socialist or Yugoslavian, but more neutral phrases like “earlier times,” “our times,” “old times.” The reference to Yugoslavia was always indirect or non-existent. As Hofman explains, Brena was “particularly careful not to give any reason for her statements to be interpreted as Yugonostalgic, and she also tried to distance herself from any political or committed stance, especially explicit patriotism or nationalism,”²⁰ which was no easy task, given the aforementioned songs with explicit Yugoslav and socialist content. Despite the more than transparent Yugoslav background, she even insisted in interviews in the 2000s that even her song *Jugoslovenka* was only a “love song” and not a patriotic one.²¹ However, even though Brena tried to distance herself from the past in certain interviews and public appearances, especially when she commented on the controversial song, there are some interviews in which she did not want to adapt to the new post-Yugoslav national politics, calling herself neither Serb nor Croat, but still Yugoslav.²² From this perspective, it can be concluded that her position was somewhat ambivalent in the 2000s.

However, Brena was more than just a Yugoslav star even before the end of Yugoslavia. The highlight of her career was probably the spectacular performance at Sofia’s Vasil Levski stadium in 1990: she was brought on stage by helicopter and sang for three hours in front of 100,000 spectators. This event

17 Ibid.

18 I will not go into the details here of what the complex adjective “Balkan” can mean in general musical practice. I use it here only as a discursive label officially applied to Brena’s music and her public figure, often as a label referring to the singer’s larger (or possibly different) role in the public sphere than the Yugoslav one.

19 Ibid., 24.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 25.

22 “Lepa Brena: Nisam ni Hrvatica ni Srkinja, ja sam Jugoslovenka,” in *IndexHR*, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.index.hr/magazin/clanak/lepa-brena-nisam-ni-hrvatica-ni-srkinja-ja-sam-jugoslavenka/412754.aspx>.

also reflected one crucial political moment in Bulgaria: the fall of the “Iron Curtain.” The significance of Brena’s performance in Sofia has been compared to Pink Floyd’s (*The Wall*) concert in Berlin in 1989. The paradox is that Brena’s performances in Yugoslavia were perceived as Eastern and Oriental, while in Bulgaria and other socialist countries this music played the role of liberating sound coming from the West, but spiced with the local flavour of the Balkans. As Donna A. Buchanan shows, “Bulgarians preferred Serbian ethnopop because it was at once more ‘Western’ than anything produced locally, and yet ‘closer to home’.”²³ From this perspective, the transition of the label (both by Brena herself and by the media in the post-Yugoslav context) from the greatest Yugoslav to one of the greatest Balkans star is not such an unexpected step under the circumstances in the 1990s and 2000s, as she was indeed both a Balkan and a Yugoslav phenomenon. Moreover, the transitional processes shaped many careers during this period, especially those of musicians with mixed ethnic backgrounds or who were otherwise considered typically Yugoslav performers, while some were seen as transnational and not so problematic figures.²⁴ By using supposedly more neutral terms such as “region,” “Balkan,” “Western Balkan” or simply “our spaces,” Brena somewhat blurred her relationship to the contested Yugoslav past. In this way, she was able to redefine her position in the new post-Yugoslav societies, where she continued to be popular in all parts of the former Yugoslavia and the diaspora.

One of the reasons why she became exceptionally provocative during the war in Yugoslavia is to be found in one controversial episode. Namely, the media reported that she supported the military forces of the so-called Republika Srpska, one of the entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the early stages of the war in Bosnia and Hercegovina, Lepa Brena appeared dressed in military uniform (which she later claimed to be a “safari suit”) in the company of Bosnian Serb soldiers, causing strong adverse reactions outside Serbia.²⁵ In

23 Donna A. Buchanan, “Bulgarian Ethnopop along the Old Via Militaris: Ottomanism, Orientalism, or Balkan Cosmopolitanism,” in *Balkan Popular Culture and the Ottoman Ecumene: Music, Image, and Regional Political Discourse*, ed. Donna A. Buchanan (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2007), 233. See also: Ewa Mazierska and Zsolt Györi, “Introduction: Crossing National and Regional Borders in Eastern European Popular Music,” in *Eastern European Popular Music in a Transnational Context: Beyond the Borders*, eds. Ewa Mazierska and Zsolt Zsolt (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 8.

24 For instance, Đorđe Balašević and Momčilo Bajagić Bajaga were the musicians from the former country who has often been recognized as “transnational” musical figures. Catherine Baker, “The Politics of Performance: Transnationalism and its Limits in Former Yugoslav Popular Music, 1999–2004,” *Ethnopolitics* 5, no. 3 (2006): 275. Furthermore, certain musicians declared that they would never cross newly formed borders after the wars and thus provoked huge reactions when eventually they changed their minds. Petrov, *Jugoslovenska muzika bez Jugoslavije*, 9–40.

25 For dealing with the topic in the newspaper discourses, see, for instance, “Lepa Brena u Brčkom 1994. godine,” in *Otisak.ba*, accessed April 10, 2019, http://www.otisak.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9190:lepa-brena-u-brkom-1994godine-foto&catid=31:bih&Itemid=46.

addition to the mentioned, Brena's political potential was also constructed in the after-war public sphere due to her national and social background (she is from a poor Bosnian family) and her official label as a typical Yugoslav star, even a symbol of the time. She represented a Yugoslav mainstream culture policy project, having been born in Bosnia and Herzegovina, having repertoire based on so-called newly composed folk music (marked as undesirable in Croatia after the breakdown of Yugoslavia)²⁶ and singing songs related to Yugoslavia (which was commonly done by numerous musicians during the Yugoslav period). Most of the opposition against her, especially in Croatia, can also be seen as connected with specific politics of genre, i.e. with public disapproval of listening to (Serbian) folk music and the politics of sentiments attached to her music its association with Yugoslavia.²⁷

However, after the war and the transitional period in which she tried to distance herself from both Yugoslav and the war past, she was soon to revitalise and regain her old recognisable label as a genuine (post)Yugoslav star. She even explicitly discussed the controversial episode from the war and openly referred to Yugoslavia on several levels in her albums and public appearances.

Repackaging: Lepa Brena as a Yugoslav Symbol after Yugoslavia

Three decades after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, it has been rather evident that Lepa Brena is one of the representative residuals of the past times. In fact, it has hardly been arguable that she is one of the Yugoslav symbols nowadays. In *Leksikon YU mitologije (Lexicon of YU Mythology)*,²⁸ the singer is unequivocally marked as fundamentally connected to Yugoslavia in all its aspects, geographically, culturally and symbolically. It is stated that the concert in Sofia was especially relevant since there Brena, "like Mick Jagger, standing on a crane in front of 100,000 people with their arms up in the air, stopped and sang

26 Baker, *Sounds of the Borderland*.

27 See: Baker, "The Politics of Performance," 275–293; Hofman, "Lepa Brena," 21–32.

28 *Lexicon of YU Mythology* is a web site and a book containing the explanations about the most well-known features in Yugoslav popular culture. The idea about writing such a document was made in 1989 by Dubravka Ugrešić, a writer and critic, and a few journalists from Zagreb, but it was basically opened to anyone, since the editors made an open call for contributions. In the aftermath of the wars, the *Lexicon* became a controversial document. It has been criticized for its Yugo-nostalgic implications and an approach to Yugoslav popular culture as to a subject for nostalgic, supposedly utopist emotional recollections on the past. The project was designed to involve all citizens who wanted to contribute to the compilation and thus become a part of a process of articulating Yugoslav popular culture. Since the project was realized as a web site during the 1990s, the original goal was eventually changed. As Bošković notices, "while at the start the goal of the *Lexicon* was to provide an account in published form that would represent the memories of lived experience in a particular culture, by post-1990 it had become a political statement by ex-Yugoslavs who did not wish their social and cultural history to be erased from public memory." Aleksandar Bošković, "Yugonostalgia and Yugoslav Cultural Memory: Lexicon of YU Mythology," *Slavic Review* 72, no. 1 (2013): 56. See also: <http://www.leksikon-yu-mitologije.net/>, accessed March 2, 2020.

Long live Yugoslavia, whereas the whole stadium exploded from amazement.”²⁹ It is further pointed out that “the slaves that lived in the darkness in our neighbourhood saw our country as freedom and Tito’s name as her symbol.”³⁰ Finally, it is said that the formulation “Ja sam Jugoslovenka” (“I am a Yugoslavian Woman”) eventually became a statement that no one believed in anymore, so that the fall of Yugoslavia is somewhat connected to the fall of Brena. As stated, “Brena was at her career’s culmination when the country she essentially belonged to broke up [...] her life afterwards became a tragic epilogue. [...] For us today, it is enough to say just the following: Lepa Brena is the greatest star in the history of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia.”³¹

However, the fact that she has been recognised as the greatest Yugoslav star could not necessarily mean the singer herself would see her position in the same fashion. But she did eventually decide to give in to the perennial Yugoslav label to which she adhered. It is intriguing to notice the singer’s recent transformation that started in 2017. She embarked on a new project – releasing a new album, a documentary movie, and a post-Yugoslav concert tour, all of these being explicitly pro-Yugoslav. She achieved the pro-Yugoslav orientation through her selection of new songs, her image and the visual solutions for the videos, and especially the discourse she promoted, all of which was made as a contribution to retro culture (such as some of her videos), the reconciliation paradigm after the wars she promoted with her affirmative discourse on the past, and the promotion of the core ideology of Yugoslav socialism: the ideology of “brotherhood and unity”³² that she addressed in her title song on the album *Zar je važno da l’ se peva ili pjeva?* (*Does it Matter if you Say “peva” or “pjeva”?*).

The answer is actually positive, since it really does matter which word we choose because behind the difference in what seems to be a simple word-play lays politics of national identity in post-Yugoslav spaces.³³ Hence, the

29 Đorđe Matić, “Lepa Brena,” in *Leksikon Yu mitologije*, accessed March 1, 2010, <http://www.leksikon-yu-mitologije.net/lepa-brena/>.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 This ideology was founded on the presumption that all the nations living in Yugoslavia, including national minorities, are equal groups coexisting in the federation, promoting their similarities, but also their differences, and having the right to declare themselves as Yugoslavs.

33 The official language of Yugoslavia was Serbo-Croatian/Croato-Serbian. It was the language spoken in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, except for the Macedonian language spoken in Macedonia and Slovenian in Slovenia. The language was in fact standardized in the nineteenth century, even before the establishment of The Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Differences between the Serbian and Croatian standards have always existed and the language also includes several dialects. Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the language issue has become deeply politicized and the formerly unique language has undergone new processes of standardization (based on ethnic and political reasons), including the designation of new languages (essentially based on divergent dialects) from what used to be simple variations of one language. Ranko Bugarski and Celia Hawkesworth, eds., *Language in the Former Yugoslav Lands* (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2006).

singer's cover song (which is also the cover of her ongoing concert tour), is unequivocally a political statement: the promulgation of the language of the peoples of former Yugoslav republics as being one. In other words, the songs' message is: it does not matter which dialect you speak; we understand each other since we speak the same language. The song can be interpreted as provocative because the difference in how the words are pronounced could actually be significant for many people during and after the war. Despite having a clear political message, the song is allegedly just a love song. Certain parts could be understood as an emotional message given by a woman to someone she loved. Among other things, it stated that "many years have passed, we should let it go, and let us love each other," which is the title of one of Brena's greatest hits, as well as the title of her movie series from the 1980s. In the post-Yugoslav context, it can be understood as a message of reconciliation, peace, and love after the wars. In addition to the song, there was a video filmed in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia, and starring the actors from different parts of former Yugoslavia. Also, the affirmative and explicit stance on Yugoslavia is also present in a TV documentary about Brena premiered on Serbian Prva TV in January 2018. In the film, the songs on Yugoslavia were abundantly played and referred. To mention some of the representative statements, for instance, Brena stresses how these songs "belong to this country."³⁴

Another strategy used for regaining the Yugoslav label can be found in Brena's concert tours on the territory of former Yugoslavia and also in the diaspora. For example, she started the new pro-Yugoslav image on the stage in USA tour in 2018, where she regularly sang her song *Jugoslovenka*, while putting the Yugoslav flag on the scene, which provoked the comments on "spreading of love and brotherhood and unity" in media.³⁵ Using explicit Yugoslav symbols and regularly singing the famous song is a new component of her concerts since it had not been a regular part of her repertoire after the wars. In 2018 and 2019 she gave concerts in Belgrade and Zagreb, both of which had the same scenography and the repertoire, which meant that the Yugoslav component was not excluded anywhere anymore. The scenography that might be understood as a reference to the Yugoslav symbolism entailed a star on which the singer descended on the stage at the beginning of the concert. Even though it was not a red star but a golden one (and as such could

34 The fact that a speaker's ethnical background could be identified just by the dialect that they use, can be troublesome. Hence, in 1990s especially but also in present day, it is definitely not unimportant if you say the word "sing" as "peva" (Ekavian) or "pjeva" (Ijekavian). See: Ana Petrov, "Yugonostalgia as a Kind of Love: Politics of Emotional Reconciliations through Yugoslav Popular Music," *The Journal of Humanities* 7, no. 4 (2018), <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/7/4/119>.

35 "Lepa Brena širi bratstvo i jedinstvo," accessed December 15, 2019, https://www.kurir.rs/stars/3031301/video-lepa-brena-siri-bratstvo-i-jedinstvo-folk-diva-na-turneji-po-americi-rasirila-zastavu-sfrj-i-zapevala-jugoslovenku?ref=related_box.

be also interpreted as a symbol of Brena herself being like a proper Hollywood star), it certainly provoked reactions and was seen as being related to the socialist past. This symbolism was especially relevant in the case of the Zagreb concert, where both the star and the performance of *Jugoslovenka* triggered specific reactions. Whereas in 2009 potentially controversial songs were not sung, including *Čačak*, *Čačak* and *Jugoslovenka*, in 2019 the times had changed. In two concerts, each with 20,000 people in the audience, the songs were successfully performed, without incidents. Moreover, the audience showed their approval of Brena's choice of singing *Jugoslovenka* by singing all the verses from the problematic song, thus pointing to the fact that the song is well known and remembered.

After the concert, the media reported about the Croatian military generals' disapproval of this act, labelling it as "an attack to Croatian sovereignty" and "national embarrassment,"³⁶ referring to Brena's mentioned controversial appearance during the war among the military forces of Republika Srpska. In addition, the fact that a representative of Yugoslavia performed in Zagreb during the advent and just before the elections for the new president of Croatia was also marked as highly provocative. In one of the articles reporting about the issue, the song itself is labelled as "a Yugoslav patriotic genre."³⁷ Despite the open letter the generals wrote and circulated in public in the days after the concert, the so-called incident did not influence much on the general reception of the concerts. It remained an isolated reaction that did not coincide with the reception of the concert audience and the broader public. Most of them concluded that times have changed and we can now sing the songs that were once considered controversial.³⁸

Finally, a recent example from Belgrade cultural scene bears witness to another repackaging of Brena's public figure, again in the Yugoslav context. In late 2019 the Belgrade Bitez teatar (Bitez Theatre) produced a play *Lepa Brena prodžekt* (*Lepa Brena Project*) by Olga Dimitrijević and Vladimir Aleksić, in which the singer is interpreted as a symbol that transcends Yugoslavia and its dissolution. Also, Brena in the play seems to be a specific figure through which numerous social issues in post-Yugoslav times can be addressed. As it was announced, Brena is seen as the greatest Yugoslav star, but also as a symbol of the Yugoslav show business, as well as the prosperity of the country. Since her career started in the turbulent 1980s, it followed

36 "Jugoslovenka u areni: Publika oduševljena, generali zgroženi," accessed March 9, 2020, <https://www.mojevrjeme.hr/magazin/2019/12/jugoslovenka-u-areni-publika-odusevljena-generalizgrozeni-brena-narusava-hrvatski-suverenitet/>.

37 Ibid.

38 "Jugoslovenka u Zagrebu: Da li je bilo rano za ovu pesmu," accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/11/region/3779440/jugoslovenka-u-zagrebu--da-li-je-bilo-rano-za-ovu-pesmu.html>.

all socialist and post-socialist cultural, political, and economic transformations. The main argument in the play is to be found in the claim that the changes of Brena's public figure and interpretations of it coincided with the social transformations. In this figure, the following themes were inscribed: the capitalism logic in the socialist country, the transition to capitalism after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and finally, nostalgia for the past times.³⁹ At the same time, Brena is seen as a figure through which personal histories and lived experiences can be read. There are five Brenas on the stage, each telling their own stories about different aspects of personal and/or historical past (Brena of the song, Brena of the architecture, Brena the Yugoslavian woman, Brena of the sexuality, and Brena the businesswoman). Brena is openly proclaimed as a symbol of the past times and the past of our personal lives. In other words, the play argues that we are all Brena one way or the other, since we can hardly escape the Yugoslav past in which we grew up, or the post-Yugoslav present in which the meanings that are connected to this figure are still present, still apparently controversial, and still uniting divergent entities in newly divided societies.⁴⁰

Concluding Remarks

There is one symptomatic replica one of Brenas said in the play – she said that Zdravko Čolić and herself were the only ones that have never “changed sides.” Thus, she alluded to the fact that they have always been Yugoslav stars. The play is announced and vastly understood as being about Brena as a symbol, and not about her personally. However, Brena herself was contacted for approval of the play, and she was present at the premiere, which in fact points to that the play is actually about both Brena the singer and Brena the symbol. The peculiarities from her personal life were chosen to comply with the overall nostalgic atmosphere in the play, not including the perspective that would shed light on Brena's current life. It is interesting to notice that the character of Brena the architect testifies about the grandeur of the architecture but also working-class awareness in Yugoslavia. Also, she refers to the project of Belgrade Waterfront, a controversial luxurious block of buildings made in the centre of Belgrade, implying that Brena herself and the symbol were connected to a more “normal” life oriented towards the needs of the working-class. The play, however, does

39 https://teatar.bitef.rs/Predstave/545/LEPA-BRENA-PRODzEKT.shtml/lang_type=lat, accessed December 30, 2019.

40 It is interesting to mention that, in addition to a highly Yugonostalgic and pro-Yugoslav atmosphere, the play also triggered old debates about the genre Brena represents. Some of the comments of the virtual audience refer to the issue of her being “kitsch” that is now incorporated in the “high culture”. See, for instance: “Slika društva kroz fenomen Lepe Brene,” in *N1 info*, accessed March 10, 2020, <http://rs.n1info.com/Kultura/a551738/Slika-drustva-kroz-fenomen-Lepe-Brene.html>.

not refer to the information about Brena herself buying and moving to the controversial block.⁴¹

From this perspective, I argue that the symbolism of Brena has had tremendous potential that nowadays tends to be overused. As the journalist Jovana Gligorijević observes regarding the so-called incident in the Zagreb concert, it is in fact not a scandal at all. The song is sung by the generations that were taught about Yugoslavia as the “dark times.” The fact that the verses are well-known does not show that the post-Yugoslav times are over Yugoslav issues, but rather that the song is “empty of meaning,” and just one of many Brena’s hits. Yugoslavia is gone, but also Brena and the public as we used to know. Gligorijević claims that “*Jugoslovenka* was annulled” during the performance in Zagreb, since it has been over-interpreted and imbued with too many meanings so that it eventually lost its potential to provoke.⁴² Similarly, it appears that the play that tends to treat Brena as a symbol of post-Yugoslav transition brings the singer to a null phase of meaning, where this public figure can be connected to copious aspects of our lives and histories. Still, it neglects to critically shed light on the position the singer has in current culture. At the same time, it adequately contributes to numerous transformations of meanings and ambiguities Brena has always had.

In other words, the singer did change sides, trying to adjust to turbulent social shifts in the past forty years. Many controversies about the Yugoslav past are now over. The word “Yugoslavia” is not controversial as it used to be, and it is sometimes trendy in certain public discourses. Brena has become a multifaceted symbol. That symbol imbued another layer of meanings: the layer in which Yugoslav history is supposedly critically observed but is simultaneously commodified.

41 In fact, the peculiarities from her personal life were chosen so that they can comply with overall nostalgic atmosphere in the play, and not including the perspective that would shed light to Brena’s current life. For example, it is interesting to notice that the character of Brena the architect, that testifies about the grandeur but also working-class awareness in Yugoslavia, in fact makes a reference about the project of Belgrade Waterfront, a controversial luxurious block of buildings made in the centre of Belgrade, implying that Brena herself and the symbol were connected to a more “normal” life oriented towards the needs of a working-class person. From this perspective, it is interesting that the play does not refer to the information about Brena herself buying and apparently moving to the controversial block. “Lepa Brena kupila stan u Beogradu na vodi,” accessed March 10, 2020, <https://mondo.rs/Zabava/Zvezde-i-tracevi/a1293520/Lepa-Brena-kupila-stan-u-Beogradu-na-vodi-za-450.000-evra.html>.

42 Jovana Gligorijević, “Imam pesmu da vam pevam,” *Vreme*, December 26, 2019, accessed March 2, 2020, <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1742999>.

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POVZETEK

Od jugoslovanske do balkanske zvezde in nazaj: Lepa Brena v očeh javnosti

V tem članku obravnavam pevko, ki velja za eno največjih legend jugoslovanske popularne kulture – Lepo Breno. Njen politični potencial se je v jugoslovanski in postjugoslovanski javni sferi izoblikoval zaradi njenega nacionalnega in socialnega porekla ter njene uradne oznake kot tipične jugoslovanske zvezdnice in simbola socialističnega obdobja, nenazadnje pa tudi balkanske zvezdnice. Rodila se je v Bosni in Hercegovini, njen repertoar temelji na t. i. novokomponirani narodni glasbi, poleg tega pa je prepevala pesmi, ki so se navezovale na Jugoslavijo. Vse to so pomembni elementi za umestitev javne podobe Lepe Brene v kontekst kulturne in glasbene politike v socialistični Jugoslaviji ter v vojnem in povojnem obdobju.

Tozadevno prikažem, kako je njeno javno podobo mogoče problematizirati v jugoslovanskih in postjugoslovanskih kontekstih. Posvetim se tudi odnosom med najpomembnejšimi problematikami, povezanimi z njenimi glasbenimi praksami, in podobi, s katero se je pevka predstavljala javnosti skozi različna obdobja svoje kariere, poleg tega pa predstavim tudi načine, kako sta bila koncept jugoslovanstva in Balkana uporabljena pri strategijah pozicioniranja pevke na različnih točkah njene kariere. Posebno pozornost namenim njenemu prehodu od pristne jugoslovanske zvezde, v obdobju, ko oznaka »jugoslovanski« ni bila zaželeno, do pevkinih nedavnih preobrazb, ki so se odvijale znotraj procesa komodifikacije jugonostalgije in s katerimi je svojo javno podobo umestila v nov kontekst.

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