

# PROLOGUE

## The Play-On Track: Teenage Kicks

I have a friend Darko Kujundžić from Sarajevo [...] who now lives in Zagreb [...] He was a kid, a teenager in Sarajevo, and he bought the second LP of Obojeni Program just before the war started. And he lived in Dobrinja, which was a heavily contested area. He was living on the front-line, in these high-rise blocks on the front-line. So they spent days without electricity.

So what he did was, he put his headphones on, and he would play the Obojeni Program LP by spinning it with his finger on the turntable. And at a certain moment he would get to the 33½ rpms – to the right speed. He had mastered the technique quickly and so he would manually power his turntable hitting the 33½ rpm mark without a problem during the rest of the war.

And he would spin that Obojeni Program record often [...] he's still got the album at home in Zagreb. On the label, you can still see the mark where his finger was. He would put the finger on the same spot, and he would spin it around.

Ante Čikara, Amsterdam, December 2017

Gloucester, England, 1981: multi-racial, teenage street-punk band, Demob, recorded and released what would become their best-known and most enduring song, 'No Room For You'. Three minutes and fifteen seconds of raw, chainsaw guitars, a thumping 1950s rock 'n' roll bass line and machine-gun military drumming, underscored a rasping vocal which told the story of the 1979 closure of a short-lived, punk rock venue at a disused motel on the edge of the stagnating, provincial city. Depending on your mindset, the lyrics were either a howl of rage at the injustice, a wail at the loss or a love song to an era. It began, 'Oh we don't go there anymore. It's boarded up, the doors are closed'. At the time, it achieved some critical success and sold out of the relatively modest pressing of a few thousand copies. In truth though, it would never reach much more than 'cult-status'. Still at school, I was Demob's bass player. Scroll forward to the summer of 2011; late one night I receive a Facebook Friend Request and accompanying message from a Saša Mijatović. He lives in a city called Kragujevac in central Serbia and wants to talk about 'No Room For You': 'This song is famous throughout the Balkans. Everybody knows this song [...] it has been recorded by some of the most famous Yugoslavian punk bands.'

My new friend tells me the most famous version is by a band called KUD Idijoti and the Yugoslavian title is 'To nije mjesto za nas' (This is not the place for us). I search online, and sure enough there it is. The first version I find has over 150,000 views on YouTube, but there are several other versions. This is the first that I – and my former band mates – have ever heard of our 'fame' under the fringe of the Iron Curtain. It was as surreal as it was baffling and intriguing.

So it was that the journey of a song became the lens to seek a better understanding of Yugoslavia and a generation of Yugoslavs. Bonded by punk rock, and specifically this one song, I wondered about our parallel lives.

I had joined Demob in late 1980, a few months prior to the recording of 'No Room For You.' Vocalist and songwriter, Robert 'Miff' Smith, was an old friend from school. One day he called me to say the bass player had left and did I fancy joining the band? My own band, the Blitz Boys, had supported Demob on several occasions. We had released one single, the knowingly ridiculous 'Eddy's New Shoes', and had received some airplay from the legendary 'Godfather of Punk', BBC DJ, John Peel. We combined catchy guitar-riffs, light-hearted teenage-angst and high-energy as we aspired towards becoming 'the Undertones of the West Country'. Unfortunately, we lacked their lyrical dexterity, musical ability, creative genius, charisma, discipline and dedication. Nonetheless, Peel had even invited us to the BBC in London and showed us around one afternoon as we bunked school.<sup>1</sup> We were all school friends raised in the isolated, rural, former coal-mining villages of the Forest of Dean – a place so remote from the public consciousness as to be virtually invisible. Every few years the tabloid press, conservative politicians and Christian activists would launch a moral crusade calling for the new TV series from the 'controversial' (visionary) local playwright Dennis Potter to be banned. Other than that, the best we could hope for was an occasional 'humorous' item on the national news about a local 'character' carried home from the pub by his faithful (and sober) horse at the end of an evening's heavy drinking. We were 200 kilometres from the uber-cool, punk rock epicentres of London's Kings Road, the cliques of the 'Bromley Contingent' or the Roots and Rockers, Gangsters and Ganja, cartoon urban-landscapes of the Clash's Camden Town or the Westway. In fact, we were 30 kilometres away from the mean streets even of Gloucester, itself a backwater in rock 'n' roll terms. Or any terms.

And then there was Demob's notoriety to consider. As testosterone-fuelled teenagers from a coal-mining culture, we were no strangers to resorting to fists and boots. However, Demob's reputation as a magnet, or catalyst (depending on your

---

1. To our surprise and delight, the Blitz Boys E.P. would be re-released by New York's Sing Sing Records in 2012.

point of view), for violence was of another magnitude and had by this time begun to obscure both the band's musical ambitions and the positive things it was trying to achieve for the disenfranchised youth of the city. The most infamous outbreak reached the national UK press when the annual Gloucester Carnival was suspended after a mass brawl between local motorbike gangs and Demob's comparatively youthful 'Riot Squad'. Added to this incendiary mix, and almost guaranteed to attract unwanted violence at the end of the 1970s, was Demob's multi-racial DNA. Drummer John Melfah is black and was then a professional boxer. Guitarist Terry Elcock is also black, and never one to back down. Miff is white, and in those days a mix of inquisitiveness and impulsiveness meant he was either charming or dangerous to be with – sometimes both. Founder member and original vocalist, Andy K, was by now in prison for assault. Demob's fans were black, white, brown and mixed race. Whilst punk rock was never racist and was avowedly anti-racist, it was also overwhelmingly white in the United Kingdom before Demob. And by 1981, the United Kingdom was inarguably in the grip of serious racial tensions. The previous summer there had been race riots in St Pauls, a largely Afro-Caribbean central suburb of nearby Bristol. The summer of 1981 would see widespread disturbances in cities and towns across the United Kingdom. Some of these were nothing but vandalism and extreme mischief-making, but some undoubtedly arose out of genuine grievances amongst the black (and white) youth. Not wholly unrelated, these years also witnessed the rise of neo-fascist and racist groups such as the National Front. It was unfortunate that many of the individuals who espoused affinity with these groups besmirched the traditional skinhead culture – and attached themselves to punk rock, often through the new Oi! movement. Apparently keen to distance himself and the movement from the white-supremacist fringes, the journalist who coined the term 'Oi!' was quick to champion Demob. Somehow, the band had become the anti-racist 'conscience' of a movement whose credentials in the field were legitimately questioned. But still, how could I not say yes?

I vaguely recall I had one warm-up gig before we joined the Angelic Upstarts tour at the very time they were making regular television appearances on *Top of the Pops* and were one of the most talked-up bands in Europe. In June – as support to 'hardcore sensations' Discharge – we took the stage in front of an audience of 1500 at Malvern Winter Gardens. This was the very same stage I had gazed upon, awestruck, watching the Jam, Elvis Costello, the Damned, AC/DC, Siouxsie & the Banshees, the Ruts, the Undertones, Stiff Little Fingers and many more. It was undeniably exciting. It was a great experience. But we had some issues with this 'new breed' of punks who, to our minds, seemed to be all studs and spit. We also played with the Exploited in Bristol and there was an almighty ruckus between the Gloucester kids and Bristol skinheads. From the stage I could see the 'martial-arts faction' of the

Gloucester kids drawing rice-flails as the crowd parted, readying to charge. Perhaps it was not just the racists and the Nazis? Perhaps the reality was becoming clearer and a little more depressing to those of us for whom punk rock had been both a deliriously unhinged, technicolour escape from the dystopian greyness and a justification for an alternative way to the priggish, Victorian, narrow-mindedness of the mid 1970s. This was the beginning of the Thatcher era.

It did not help that I was not keen on the music of many new bands. I felt that we were already becoming 'men out of time'. We were being lifted and carried on a contaminated wave. I understood the anger and the frustration which propelled these bands. I too was often angry and frustrated with our bleak and suffocating horizons. But it just was not for me. It would turn out that some of my bandmates felt exactly the same. The Coventry date with the Angelic Upstarts was cancelled by the police after they had intelligence that rival factions had entered into a local arms-race and were intending to bring shotguns. Perhaps punk was dying before our eyes? My last gig with Demob was ruined by a mind-numbingly pointless evening of wanton destruction and violence in a small South Wales town. Dismayed, I left soon after to begin a new life in Sheffield. Miff's interview for this book would later revisit all of these events in detail.

Almost exactly thirty years after that final gig with Demob I received the unexpected message from a stranger in a city I had never heard of and a country that no longer existed. Over the next five years – with Saša's unstinting support – I accumulated a network of individuals from across former Yugoslavia. I had hoped to identify a nucleus of contributors who would be agreeable to a face-to-face interview should I succeed in turning my Balkan 'homage' into a reality. I did not anticipate the scale of the response. I now had a list of potential interviewees so rich that it brought its own logistical challenge; how could I ever hope to travel to all of these places and meet with all of these people? I was now connecting with my peers from Belgrade, Ljubljana, Pula, Zagreb, Novi Sad, Kragujevac and from cities, towns and villages of which I had been previously unaware. And then from Sarajevo, Smederevo, Paraćin, Vinkovci, Split, Karlovac, Tuzla, Arandelovac, Vienna, Berlin, Amsterdam, Toronto, Strängnäs (Sweden) and beyond they came. There were musicians, TV celebrities, esteemed journalists, filmmakers and actors, authors, cartoonists, academics, an anarchist taxi-driver, a famous fashion designer, a former shipyard worker turned second-hand record seller and a one-man publishing empire. I learned of Pankrti ('the Bastards') who were 'Yugoslavia's Sex Pistols', one of the most influential and popular bands in the history of Balkan Punk. My speculative and unsolicited e-mail to their charismatic, livewire, frontman Pero Lovšin came back with the reply, 'Nice to hear from you. Sure we can meet and talk about Tito's punks. Peter, who also

made cover of “No Room For You” with the title “A še pomnite pankerji”, what a song, a!!!! I knew I had begun to plough a deep and fertile furrow. Balkan generosity of spirit, punk rock attitude and the kudos of having played on ‘No Room For You’ had combined to create a magical key (a deliberately ambiguous use of the word ‘key’). Time and again, I was struck by how many of the old punks were ‘high-achievers’, articulate, cultured and successful. Each seemed to have a story. I vowed that, somehow, they would all be told. These stars may never align so kindly again.

What follows is not so much a history book as a mural of the stories collected. There are no tidy chronologies and no glib conclusions here. At its heart is the 2017 road-trip (more accurately ‘bus-trip’ as my companion Tomislav would comment) across Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia, although there were two brief visits (one to Serbia in 2014 and one to Croatia in 2019) on either side of that. But the narrative is not confined to the Western Balkans. Living within the shadow of the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (the ICTY) in The Hague, I felt compelled to find out more about an institution which – apparently – continues to throw long shadows across the region.

No one of sound mind would dispute the ghastliness of the Yugoslavian Wars of 1991–99, nor that the causes were convoluted and to outsiders often incomprehensible. Mercifully for most of us, we were insulated. We viewed the horrors only through the deodorising filter of the TV screen or on the lifeless pages of a newspaper. Our daily lives remained materially untouched – even those of us on the same continent. Returning from my first (budget) package holiday to Greece, in the late 1990s, the pilot apologised that the flight would take a ‘slight diversion due to the situation on the ground’. But that was fine, because now we would see the ‘beautiful Dalmatian coastline below’. Meanwhile, on the ground, the lives of the contributors to this book (even those not born at the time) were irrevocably twisted. Some were enlisted, some emigrated; some had family members and friends murdered or were driven from their homes taking only what they could carry. None seem to have allowed themselves to be defined by the wars. Taking their lead, I acknowledge the conflicts only where it is manifestly valuable; mention of individuals, nation-states or specific events is kept to a bare minimum. I apologise to those who think it either unnecessary or trivial and hope that these fragments contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the issues and, perhaps, a shield against our complacency and exceptionalism.

In December 2017 I gave a presentation to a pleasingly attentive audience at the ‘Fourth Punk Scholars Network Conference’ in Bolton, Greater Manchester, England. As I queued for coffee with Martin Ware (Human League, Heaven 17), Gaye Black (the Adverts), Joolz Denby (New Model Army) and even Mad Macka

from the Cosmic Psychos I could not help but reflect on how unlikely this would have seemed forty years ago. From snotty-minded, ideologically convinced-yet-confused, rabble-rousing, small-town, teenage-punks, drunk on lager-snakebite and dreams of being 'The Last Gang In Town', to a conference of punk academics with contributors from the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, Poland, Czech Republic, Turkey, Portugal, France, Hungary, Austria, Romania and the Netherlands. As a senior lecturer from Birmingham City University unscrambled 'Ethnographic studies concerning ageing and exiting punk subcultures', and a young post-graduate female student led a discussion on 'punk aesthetics', I realised that punk is not dead, it just got a Ph.D.; I can hear the nihilist-punk-fundamentalist faction howling 'fucking sell-out'. Personally, I never cared for punk as a lowest common denominator. Now my own thoughts pinballed around my personal journey in search of Tito's punks. A lot of hard work stretched ahead of me to do justice to the stories I had been gifted. The journey had already been far more than I had dared hope it would be. And then it was my turn. My unashamedly 'not academic' presentation was introduced by a deservedly renowned professor of punk:

If in 1983 you'd told the thirteen-year-old me, as I sat in my bedroom singing along with one of my all-time favourite records, 'No Room For You', that one day I'd be introducing a member of Demob at an academic conference [...] I'd have told you to fuck off!

Indeed Professor. I would have said the same.  
Step lightly. Stay free. Up the punks!