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Goosepimples in Sarajevo

AFTER YUSUF'S *Cannons that Roar* album came out it was ignored, as expected, in the western media. We weren't going to re-trigger an awareness that had barely flickered when the actual war was in full flow. The duplicity of the British in that time had been breathtaking. But there was naturally a lot of interest in Bosnia itself where Yusuf was a national hero for 1) being a famous pop star turned Muslim 2) for having campaigned for the Bosnians in the war 3) for having organised aid during the war. So he was approached to do a concert, his first in twenty years, in Sarajevo.

Although the concert, to celebrate Bosnian culture, was to be organized by a national TV station and newspaper in Sarajevo, Mustafa Cerić the formidable head religious scholar in Bosnia, who was the number one Serb target in the war, independently came over to talk to us and others in the UK in September 1997. He said some pretty candid things to us like "the war was the best thing that ever happened to us – as we found who our friends were".

But I was privately amused at how he berated all these Muslim organisations in the UK for having 'privatised' Islam for their personal benefit and that their problems were because they had no religious authority for what they did. Their representatives all looked flustered. He invited them to take their authority from Sarajevo and Bosnia which he claimed still possessed the authority of the caliphate as it hadn't been dismantled as it had in Turkey by Attaturk and the western powers. It had been preserved as in aspic.

The collapse of the Ottoman caliphate, the wars and the madness emerging in the middle east all seemed to assemble in Bosnia as much as it focused on Palestine and Jerusalem.

I was told in advance that Yusuf and I had to sing three songs each and I had a rough idea of what I was going to do. It was a challenge for me as they were mounting the concert in a sports stadium and expecting an audience of 10,000, TV, radio, news reporters politicians, presidents and ambassadors.

Enter stage right Danny Thompson, the renowned string bass player whose paths had crossed with mine over twenty five years earlier in the John Martyn recording session. He had been recovering from a serious heart operation but who was happy to be employed by Yusuf as a tour manager. Danny deserves a bio of his own after a long career in the music business well known to the cognoscenti. Suffice to say he made the tour work just because he has lived all his life touring and we benefited from his recent hands on experience. Myself and Yusuf hadn't performed for 20 years and were pretty out of practice. It was a powerful experience for me, not just the concert, but all that surrounded it. Sarajevo, two years after the war was needing a cultural boost as the aftermath of the war had left the populace empty and needy for Bosnian culture to help counter the vacuum sucking in commercial western, as well as mindless Turkish commercial culture.

Arriving in Sarajevo was extraordinary. It was still very militarised and at the small airport you were very aware of the military presence with UN aircraft and personnel everywhere. I could imagine all too clearly the narrow tunnel under the airport which was the Bosnians' sole connection with the outside world during the war. There is a shadow cast by a war that has just ended, like an echo of the horrors and fears that went with it and you get a taste of that when you enter its zone. We were whisked through all the formalities and were soon heading down what was known as Snipers' Alley, the long road that connects the airport with old city that snucks neatly in the enfolding mountains. Many buildings looked unscathed only to see on their reverse side that they were smashed to pieces by gunfire and shellfire. The 60-s and 70s architecture was dismal and heavily communist-flavoured, its brutalist sculptures and murals now bullet scarred. A vestige from seventy years of the communist jackboot. But in the old city you entered the comforting old Ottoman world, of narrow streets and stone mosques. It was all crying out for revitalisation but

the people needed this as much as the buildings did. The economy was broken, there was real hardship and they needed outside support to help revive their whole society. One reason I imagined Yusuf had been invited there.

To be honest I don't think Yusuf had realised the import of this concert but on our way to the hotel he saw all these posters plastered on all the walls of every building and it suddenly dawned on him what he was in for. I heard him speak a few years later on a Berkeley radio station about the fear he used to experience on arriving at a stadium in front of a concert of 70,000 people. I think he secretly had a flashback to that on arriving in Sarajevo.

We immediately met up with some of the Bosnian singers who had featured on *I Have No Cannons That Roar* for some urgent rehearsals. The main singers, Burhan Shaban, Aziz Alli and Senad Podojak, were all in fact graduates of the famous Gazi Husrev-Beg madrasa in Sarajevo and all, believe it or not, *hafiz* (memorisers) of the complete arabic Qur'an. They had found careers in the war singing these morale raising songs which had made them famous there. Dino Merlin, who also features on the album had, before the war, been the number one pop star in Yugoslavia when it was one nation and when he used to perform in football stadiums in Belgrade to capacity audiences. To him Yusuf was a musical hero from his pre-Islamic days and to have him singing in Sarajevo was a dream come true. You couldn't help love these men, real lights in their own right but all together with the mixed choir of the madrasa (probably the only mixed choir in the Muslim world incidentally) they shone with their unique Ottoman/Balkan voices which gave me goose pimples hearing them live in the concert. In the actual concert Aziz Alili began the whole proceedings, quite rightly given the nature of the occasion with a large part of Sura Rahman (the All-Merciful) from the Qur'an. I'd love the recording of that to come out one day. It exists and I have it. It sets the tone for the rest of the event. We had a day's grace to rest and rehearse but the event approached and the weather was getting cold.

The concert lasted two hours and was a broad mixture of Bosnian choral and orchestral music with Bosnian rock music and our English music featuring Yusuf backed by the mixed choir of

the famous Gazi Husrev-Beg's Madrassa of Sarajevo. The Sarajevo Philharmonic lacked fifteen musicians who had been killed in the war but made up its number with amateurs. At times it seemed the music was going to fall apart but the atmosphere was so extraordinary that the cosmetics of the music mattered little and it flowed on for two hours finishing with be-turbanned Yusuf singing *Talal Badru Alyna*, a song famous throughout the Muslim world. To rapturous applause of course.

Bosnian music is a mixture of Turkish and Balkan and Arabic themes sung in several languages and it's a clue to this unique and courageous people, the result of a kind of cultural alchemy resulting from 600 years of Ottoman rule. I spoke with ordinary non-Muslim Bosnians in the audience who said that this was their music although it was principally of a soft Islamic and proudly sufic nature. Rather as an atheist Englishman might identify with the very Catholic Edward Elgar as being quintessentially an English composer. Rumi was read between the various musical acts on pre-recordings by professional actors with added sonic effects which enhanced the audience expectation and the electric atmosphere of the stadium. The vital part that music plays in national culture is so misunderstood by the hardline Islamists who have sterilised their lives of such richness. They would have learnt much from this musical experience of ours and Yusuf, very moved, was taking it all in.

We had the day before walked around the main park, a once large public park but which was now filled with the graves of young men and women who died in the war. We were shown graves of young Serbs who fought and died fighting on the same side as Bosniaks and Croatians against the Serb onslaught. It was made very clear to me by everyone I spoke to that what the Serb politicians had in mind was destroying the rich pluralistic society that had survived in Bosnia for 600 years, symbolised and exemplified by the proximity of the old Abd ar-Rahman mosque, the Orthodox and Catholic churches and the Synagogue. After the fall of Granada and the advance of the Inquisition, thousands came to Bosnia including many Sephardic Jews, welcomed there by the Ottoman sultan and given protection and freedom. The Sephardic jews of Sarajevo had spoken a kind of ancient

Spanish even up to the middle of the last century before many Jews left for the concentration camps or Israel.

This blend of faiths was beautifully illustrated on the late morning as we walked around the park grave yard. Through the weak elegiac sun and mists, church bells echoed across the valley, followed in minutes by a long ecstatic call to prayer from the old wooden mosque above the park. This is the picture that the Serbs so wanted to destroy.

The old walking streets indeed reminded me very much of Granada. But the cut-off lampposts, left as a reminder of the war, had been bent at an angle pointing up to the surrounding mountains. These were improvised launchers from which they fired Serb mortars that hadn't exploded and were re-primed and fired back up at the Serb infantry lined round the city. Also every so often there were holes in the pavement filled with red cement. These were known as the "roses" of Sarajevo to commemorate where a massacre had taken place from a Serb mortar explosion.

You had to see all this context to really make sense of the concert and the music. We met an old Imam named Imam Hafiz who like many in this city was a *hafiz* or memoriser of the whole Qur'an and he served us tea in his old wooden Ottoman house perched on the mountainside that three quarters surrounds the old city. He told us how every few years two *hafiz* would walk around the city and recite a *khatm* (complete recitation) of Qur'an in a giant circle finishing it where they began and this route that they walked was the very line that the Serb tanks and infantry didn't penetrate in the siege of Sarajevo except for the Jewish graveyard which they bypassed out of respect. This graveyard was where the Serbs nationalists, drugged and drunk, penetrated and massacred and mutilated a whole small township near the airport men, women and children, a war crime which the Canadian UN commander in Sarajevo was warned of but who chose to ignore it or as I was told "put the phone down when he was called to warn him about what was going to happen".

There were many more stories, many of them miraculous, stories that never made the news agencies. I was amazed at how little bitterness there was, though I know of the deep trauma that persists. What the Serb nationalists administered was unspeakable government

sanctioned horror and the freedom still allowed to General Mladic and Karajic, the masterminds of the genocide, is a dark disgrace.

But in our short stay there I met positive, educated, serious, even cheerful people who were proud and who, if they were suffering, hid it. As it was and still is a military zone I expected so soon after the war to see soup kitchens and wheel chairs and walking wounded. In public what I saw was unscarved women in fur coats mixed with scarved women in fur coats in a quite natural mix, men in old black berets and soldiers from Germany, Italy and the US cheerfully walking in the streets. Behind the scenes though I knew there was some real poverty, hunger and trauma. One pizza house, which we were taken to by the organisers, distributed food to the needy in that locality as they knew where the destitute lived. The conventional Bosnian food was a wonderful mix of Turkish and Balkan dishes. A bit on the heavy side but very tasty.

Before the concert Yusuf, Danny and myself were taken to meet Alija Izabegovic, the Bosnian president in a small meeting protected by security men in leather jackets with curly headphone leads behind their ears and gun-bulged pockets. I commented to the president that the food tasted very good in Sarajevo. He answered that the country was poor and the peasant farmers couldn't afford fertilizers and insecticides which generally meant better tasting dishes. He looked tired.

In the concert in the enormous sports stadium there was a 30ft clear space in front of the front row of seats where Izabegovic sat with the ambassadors and their wives and all the VIPs and in that gap it was as if all the young men who had died were all sitting watching. The air had that intense goosepimple electric sparkle that I had tasted in saint's tombs when something inexplicable grips your heart. When my turn to sing came I was pushed out on to the stage by Danny, like a parachutist being shoved out of a plane. Scared but in the end not caring too much.

In fact for most of that trip Danny Thompson had us laughing. I mean weeping with laughter. He was a natural cockney comedian who happened to be a virtuoso bass player and a religious man as well. It was the first time I had traveled with him and when standing before some of Istanbul's mosques he quietly said " I thought I would never

see this sight.” He meant it too as he nearly died in his heart operation when the anti-coagulant failed and he had a stroke, paralysing the left side of his body and leaving him temporarily blind. The price, he said, for 20 years of raising hell in the music business. With rehabilitation and physiotherapy he made a pretty complete recovery.

After Sarajevo, Turkey was just a promotional visit, a huge country where Yusuf has a big following and where coming through the airport we suddenly had to face a barrage of a hundred photographers and TV cameras. When I saw myself on the evening news I looked some kind of lost goldfish. The experienced Yusuf always seemed remarkably calm when confronted with crowds though at one point on the return journey in the airport he was literally carried away on the shoulders of a huge crowd of Algerian students. He had become a hero of the young unemployed and frustrated youth of the Muslim world. Quite a responsibility. It was my first visit to the magical Istanbul and where I was to return fairly soon.

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