"Don't trust anyone, not even us."

Much lauded by the west's liberal-left, Radio B92 was the former Yugoslavia's premier underground radio station in Belgrade under the rule of Slobodan Milosevic and the wars in the Balkans. Treated as traitors and subversives during this period, they were repeatedly forced off the airwaves by the government, but managed to keep broadcasting until Milosevic was overthrown. Matthew Collin's book 'This is Serbia Calling' and Doug Aubrey's film 'See You in the Next War' both conscientiously document this period of struggle from the perspective of those immediately involved in the scene in Belgrade.

Following a screening of Aubrey's film and a launch of Collin's 2nd edition of the book, both in the back room of the CCA bar in Glasgow, a discussion was held with Gordan Paunovic of B92 on Radio B92's impact and legacy. This is an edited transcript:

Matthew Colin: My connection to all this started eight years ago (1996) when I went to Belgrade to report on what I thought was a small story about student demonstrations. By the time I got there, ten days after it all kicked off, there was about half a million people in the streets demonstrating against the theft of election results by the government of Slobodan Milosevic. But there was another element to it; it wasn't just a political demonstration, students marching on the streets, just civic unrest, it had another 'cultural' element to it—music, film, art were all important to this. There were a lot of ways that messages were being transmitted, not just through your classic placard that you see on every demonstration, but in a really creative way, and this is what inspired me to get involved. Those demonstrations failed, as we all know, and some people argue that just being out on the streets in numbers and just creating a cultural alternative is not enough, that you actually need more power than that to get your message across. It took another four years for the ultimate goal of this protest movement to be realised, which was the overthrow of Milosevic, but it was a beginning.

Audience: Gordan, what do you think of Doug's representation of this time in Serbia, is it true to the feelings of people like you who were living in Serbia at the time?

Gordan Paunovic: The film definitely caught that moment in Belgrade; the time of the bombing (1999), the time after the bombing which was six, seven months when B92 was pretty much off air but still alive through different activities. It also caught the spirit of people who refused to surrender [to Milosevic and to the bombing]—for most people dealing with radio the transmitters being off would mean death to the whole thing, but B92 has never just been radio, maybe not even in '89—'90 at the very beginning. It was always more like a social movement, many things were based around the radio station. It was a focal point.

Audience: How did B92 start?

MC: It was set up as a temporary broadcaster to celebrate the birthday of Marshall Tito, the former ruler of Yugoslavia.

GP: He was already nine years dead!

MC: He was already dead, but Tito loved the youth... So this bunch of reprobates and wasters was given the chance to have two weeks airtime.

GP: We were making a youth programme which was broadcast daily on community radio in Belgrade for one hour everyday called "Rhythm of the Heart"—the official founder behind the whole programme was The Socialist Youth Organisation, which one was of the bodies you had in every communist country which was supposed to make sure that youth didn't do stupid things, and they wanted to be modern because already in '89 things were starting to change in Eastern Europe, so they thought that we should be given media to play with a little. We got a kind of temporary license for two weeks, which was the official time frame, but after two weeks somehow we fooled them.

Audience: So when did they get wise to you?

GP: Never, I think! After two weeks we just refused to stop. B92 was very lucky because at the same time they gave a chance to a group of other kids who set up a youth television, so when the two weeks expired they had to make a decision, whom are they going to shut down? And of course their common logic was that television was much more dangerous than radio so they shut down the TV and let us go on to give the impression that they weren't such bad guys all-in-all, and we survived. Youth Radio B92 was the official name at the beginning, and then after a couple of months we threw this 'youth' out.

Audience: Why was it called B92? Because of the American bombers?

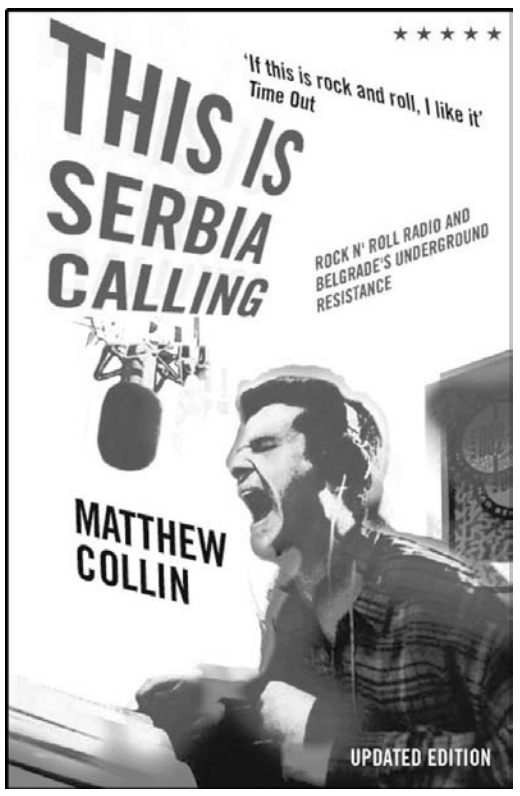
GP: That's one of the theories, but there's no big mystery behind it, actually. The frequency of the station was 92.5 and "B" stands for Belgrade. So it's very boring! Some people thought it was something to do with B-52, and we've been criticised many times over the years as being seen as promoting pro-western views, promoting this B-52 thing, but that was not the case.

Audience: Going back to B92's history and what it may have broadcast during the Bosnian conflict that could have upset the Serbian authorities, did B92 do anything like that?

GP: I wouldn't go into such a particular case as the Bosnian war, but generally we had problems all the time with the authorities because we were constantly expressing different political views from what they were promoting in their official statements, which constituted the basis of all national media broadcasts, so this was not just the case with the Bosnia conflict.

Audience: So did you never stand up for Sarajevo for example? Because what was happening in Sarajevo was very wrong.

GP: We stood up for Sarajevo before the war started, when the first barricades were put in Sarajevo, before the street fighting started we put the first barricade in Belgrade—which was more like an art performance—to bring to the attention of Belgraders what was happening in Sarajevo. In April '89 we had a concert in the main square of Belgrade with 50,000 people as a protest against



what was just about to happen in Sarajevo. Again, I'm talking about the kind of things we did which were wider than just being a radio station. Throughout the war we had our main reporters reporting from Sarajevo from inside the city.

DA: I think a good parallel is when 'Warchild' did that album for Bosnia, there was a track on it called "Serbia Calling", by 'K Foundation' which became the anthem of B92 in a lot of ways.

Audience: I spent two years in Sarajevo just after the war and there's a general conception, of even young people from Serbia and B92, that there was a lot of promotion given to injustice in Serbia—to a lot of people in Sarajevo it was Serbian bombs bombing them for four years on a roll continually and surrounding that city.

DA: That wasn't just Serbs though.

Audience: It was Serbs, Croats and Muslims in Sarajevo surrounded by Serbian warfare and a lot of Serbs actually saying: "Look, no, we will stand here and defend Sarajevo, a city that will be what Yugoslavia was. Everyone I knew in Sarajevo at that point had nothing from Belgrade. I just hope that B92 was also one of those beacons during that time. The NATO bombing of Belgrade was terrible, but for four years in Sarajevo a lot of Serbs, Croats and Muslims who wanted to live together as one nation looked out to hear something from Belgrade which was just down the road technically when you think about it (and they could drink coffee) and for four years Sarajevo was shelled with four thousand shells a day from Serbian artillery. I'm sorry I missed the film and I hope the film brought something up about it as that's a major issue about what happened.

MC: I think this is obviously a salient point, but when you're under a government which is suffocating you, to even get a voice which goes beyond your country is very difficult.

Audience: I would say that I don't have all the facts, but that this film was about the B92 radio station and it surviving, and it talked more about a culture of people trying to exist at that time.

MC: And also trying to change the culture of their

own government that was doing these things.

GP: At least 70% of Belgrade, about two million people, knew who Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic were and what they were doing, and obviously there are limits to what one radio station can do. And some limits are there because of the power of your transmitter, how far you can reach with what you are doing. And the other thing is that as news media the maximum you can do in such a situation is report the truth about what is happening and I think we did that 101%. We did reports from everywhere, we had people who were inside [Sarajevo] and they were reporting all the time. There would be a huge propaganda campaign on Serbian national television that Muslims are launching a big offensive on Pale and actually it was the other way around, and we would report what was really happening with the shelling of Sarajevo. Our reporters were seriously risking their lives.

Audience: B92, it's an excellent idea, but it should extend beyond Serbia into Bosnia, Croatia and finding out about and accepting what happened in the whole region. If it's one of these major forces which we're claiming tonight it should really have covered the whole of the region.

Audience: Let's look at the reality rather the fiction. There was a clampdown, how then did B92 manage to broadcast. You're claiming things here that quite frankly weren't capable. How did B92 actually come to be able to broadcast and who were they capable of broadcasting to?

GP: Our reach was the wider area of Belgrade in some parts. Belgrade is quite hilly so if you were on the hill you could get it—if you were in a valley you could not. We were using an old Italian transmitter from 1956 which wasn't the best you can get, and those were real limitations. The real improvement came in 1997 when, thanks to the success of the protest that Matthew described, more than 70% of local municipalities in Serbia were held by democratic parties. According to our law, local media was controlled by local authorities which meant that suddenly in 70% of Serbia the main radio stations in these places were free. We immediately set up a network where we were supplying these stations that didn't have enough funding for their own news programmes—we supplied them with a couple of hours of news everyday.

Audience: I was confused about B92 being just news or music or...

GP: It was a mixture of programmes. B92 has never been a strictly formatted station in the meaning that you have here in the west, with stations that just play the top 40, or just do news—it was a mixture. Of course we had music throughout the day but also different political

shows, news around the clock, and whenever there was a crisis or when big issues came up our programme scheme was turned upside-down to adjust to the situation.

Audience: How free is the media now in Belgrade? What is the attitude of the people towards the Hague and Milosevic, and how do you feel still working there?

GP: I don't work on the radio but within the company. It's a really different time from the one you saw in the film and from the '90s. At the moment we have a much more subtle enemy than the one we had before. Now it's free market capitalism which is shaping the media in a totally different way. Right now every media in order to survive in Serbia is forced to make lots of compromises on a commercial basis.

DA: Do you have a playlist now?

GP: We do. We try to resist somehow not to but unfortunately these days we are relying on advertising sales and stuff like that. We haven't lost our political edge but generally it feels more commercial than it was.

Audience: I come from the Sarajevo region, and the prevailing opinion in Bosnia at the time of the war was the crime for the war was the ignorance of the people in Serbia. We didn't actually believe there was free media in Belgrade. I thought there wasn't really a force in Serbia that could actually stop the war, because they couldn't see what was happening in Bosnia. But we are all ignorant now, we have Iraq now and what are we to do? Ok, we acknowledge what is happening but we don't really do anything. And actually there was very little B92 could do. I think at the time Belgrade was probably the centre of free media, there was very little free media in Zagreb, in Sarajevo. I think Belgrade was the only one that actually had some free media, had some free opinion about what was going on in other parts of the country, but they could do nothing, absolutely nothing.

MC: Is there a sense here that you were allowed to have your free media as long as you were reaching the hilly parts of Belgrade, and as long as you're not reaching the entire population of the country then your President can say: "We have free media here: I am allowing this radio station, I'm allowing this newspaper that sells five thousand copies."?

Audience: As long as it exists, it's ok. Even if I can't access community radio because I don't have the resources, I'm glad it exists.

Audience: But you're talking about different things, different situations. In the Serbian countryside there's nothing, there's two channels telling you what to think, what to wear and how to vote, and ok, B92 reached some of Belgrade, but you've got to aspire to more than that.

Audience: If B92 wasn't only a radio, you had a publishing house as well as DJs, so what else did B92 do? For example, just after the war did you organise parties, send aid, send books?

GP: We didn't wait until the end of the war. When Sarajevo library was shut in 1992, immediately at the beginning of the war and burned down, B92 started its own publishing house—which now has over one hundred books published since it began. We published a number of small pocket books but didn't sell them, we called our listeners to come to B92 with books from their home to exchange them for what we published. So we collected tons of books, organised a convoy and sent the books to Sarajevo in 1993. You can say it didn't help people, but it was a gesture. During the war we were constantly collecting food, clothes and stuff, and every two or three months sending them. You can also say it didn't stop the war—it didn't—but I mean, what can you do? We could all have gone to Pale and stood in front of cannons and got shot—maybe that would be something, but it wouldn't have stopped the war.

Audience: I think you're being a bit unfair here. We've just watched a fantastic film that captured a moment, a reality, and you're trying to have a political discussion about who was right and who was wrong. Why don't we try and understand what we've seen. I thought it was amazing seeing the film, Gordan doesn't need to sit there defending himself. What was really special was that we've got a committed film-maker who goes there and meets the people and tries to get some voices out, then we've got some fantastic editor that's put something like that together. Speaking personally I don't understand the whole politics of the thing, but at the same time we've had the privilege of meeting people there who are in a very deep sophisticated way trying to understand what's happened to them.

Audience: I understand that B92 was completely closed down during the war, can you tell me what happened then?

Gordon: B92 was shut down several times during the war, and the longest time was when it was physically thrown out of its premises, when even the name was taken by other people. The organisation that founded B92 in 1989, the youth organisation I mentioned before, was suddenly reactivated in 1999 for the purpose of throwing out the original B92 people—to throw them out of the premises, off the equipment, and to put pro-government guys in. B92 was always a part of the scene in Belgrade that was not just radio or the media, there were a couple of small local NGOs who were anti-war activists, there were feminist groups, minority groups, different kinds of things, it was like a big umbrella for all of them. But it was very difficult to work during the time of the bombing, and at the end of the day B92 was just a radio station, no matter how important it was—it was very important, of course—but we had a bigger problem.

Audience: So who listened to it?

GP: Well, at that time no-one, it was shut down!

Audience: Doug, how did you find out about B92? Did you take your camera, go there and discover them, or did you have knowledge of it before you went?

DA: The whole Balkan conflict was like a whirlpool, you got on a train somewhere and ended up getting sucked into it, and that's how I got involved with B92. Some friends of mine knew about other things that had gone on, and it grew from there. You identify things that are important and relevant and cross all borders, and I think that's what B92 did actually, it managed to cross all borders, whether you happened to be a Croat, Serb, Muslim, Hindu, whatever—an American even. But my question is, we've seen the reality, we've lived the reality, so what do you guys make of the B92 Hollywood movie?

MC: It's a farce, obviously!

Audience: How does Yugoslavia and specifically Serbia look at themselves in the sense of Europeanism, in the sense that it was their own

European neighbours that fought against them and bombed them. How do they see themselves becoming part of this united Europe, and where does B92 figure in this?

GP: I can tell you honestly that very few people in Serbia really believe that their country's going to become a part of Europe, ever. It's not some kind of widely-spread anti-Europe attitude, but rather that the majority of the people are aware that there are far too many troubles still going on within society for it to happen.

Audience: Is it about that Serbian cynicism you spoke about in the film, about how you were the good guys for a short period of time and then you were back to being the bad guys. How much does that affect the Serbian attitude to Europe?

GP: Europe isn't that happy with Serbia these days, there are still lots of problems which are perhaps typical of countries with a troubled past, that are now deeply into some kind of a transition, but even in comparison with countries that are now part of the EU—like Slovenia, Hungary, the Czech Republic—I think there are much more unusual things happening in Serbia. There is no general consensus in society about our direction and I think that's the main problem, and all the other problems we're having are because of this. We can watch on B92 television the Hague tribunal live, how Milosevic is still fighting against the whole world and I have to say for many people this kind of thing produces a counter-effect because for many people he's again being seen as someone who is fighting against injustice. It has something to do with the Balkan mentality that says you have to go against everyone.

Audience: You mentioned Milosevic fighting against the world. Don't you think it would be better if he was in the hands of Serbian justice instead of in the Hague?

GP: That's a common opinion, many people see the main injustice being that he's being tried by people that are also some sort of criminals, maybe bigger or smaller than him.

MC: The question is, is it 'victors' justice'?

GP: It's a big question whether Serbs would really be able to conduct a fair trial, because when it comes to hardcore national issues, unfortunately despite all the changes, there still are so many people who believe he was a real defender of Serbia—who believe that he was the one who for the first time in history of the Serbian nation gave the Serbs a state in Bosnia which they had never had before, and this is seen as a major achievement. So I'm not sure that putting him on trial in Belgrade would be better. I think much better would be a serious trial against him with much better funded evidence.

Audience: My point is his crime was against Serbs and Bosnians and all the peoples in the region generally.

GP: Exactly, given the nature of his crime the question could be: "Who has the right to put him on trial first?"

MC: This is a question we're not going to be able to answer tonight.

Audience: It's probably the perfect question with which to end the night, what does the future hold for B92?

GP: That's not the perfect question! I think B92 as it was portrayed in the film is pretty much finished, because ever since the end of the war B92 has existed in different conditions, in a media market that doesn't have censorship like there used to be, they can broadcast the news they like without any interference from the top. Generally today there are three or four television stations that are broadcasting relatively correct news. Ok, they are all somehow under different political

influences, but this is pretty much what you have in any society nowadays. Basically, we are just trying to stay normal.

Afterthoughts

Based on an e-mail exchange between Variant and Doug Aubrey, 'See You in the Next War.'

Variant: What of B92's internet and satellite broadcasts that you documented?

DA: These really came down to the super-human efforts of Gordan P and assorted global supporters of what B92 represented, that ranged from web-visionaries such as Radio Qualia and the Amsterdam Xs4All mob, and other assorted anarchists/autonomists to the dodgy involvement of alleged MI6 agents.

It was a strange temporary marriage between extremes really, that took place in Vienna, Amsterdam and finally back in Belgrade—that proved that voices from the margins perhaps really are the mainstream when it comes to dealing with the realities of war.

V: How did this relate to other media at the time, nationally and internationally?

DA: The mainstream media simply became a vehicle for western propaganda—as we all know.

In many ways what Net-aid/B92 were trying to do pre-empted much of what has come since on the www.

It also added to the romance/myth/legend and spirit of B92 as pirate broadcasters—which they never were—at least in the sense that we here regard pirates.

V: How did B92 function in terms of support/funding, infrastructure, technical ability and reach; and in terms of its content? I'm thinking of Help B92 / Free B92 (Amsterdam's XS4All)...?

DA: A pan-European love-in? The autonomous spirit at its best? I don't know…

Despite the idealism and super-human efforts of Gordon P and the webheads of free-Europe, I think the editorial and real strings were being pulled by both those in Belgrade being bombed (rightly so, they were on the frontline) and, without getting into conspiracy theories, by some dodgy western outsiders, 'trainers' and financial managers, who were 'minding things'.

V: ...and the transition to B2-B92 (said to be financed by Soros / US) and the charges of allegedly propagandising liberal-democratic free-market values during this period?

DA: Matt deals with this well in his book, but as B92s Editor-in-Chief Veran Matic says in the film: "You cannot fool all of the people all of the time..."

During the war, there was also an element of the likes of MTV, CNN and even the BBC to some extent washing their own conscience by supporting B92, i.e. winning the free your mind award from MTV and REM on the one hand, and on the other receiving 'training from the BBC'.

Now do talented people like many at B92 really need training in how to play good music?! and if so, for what, to learn to play what they're told and introduce playlists etc.?

Another aspect is that critics of B92 said they didn't think twice about cosying up to dodgy Serbian politicians/establishment figures to get back on air as B292. It's something that's not really been dealt with in depth—even by Matt—as far as I can tell...

In the end I guess B92 got what they wanted—recognition and mainstream status, which perhaps has alienated a new generation who were growing up and also a lot of their original supporters.

V: What of the eventual shift to IMF enforced free-market values, which includes not just private but foreign ownership of media? Where does this leave independent media (once said to be 'the basis for any democratic change and reform') today?

DA: You should really ask them this, all I can talk about is my film—which has generally been ignored, or accused of pandering to Serbian nationalist sentiments.

But just look at what's happened here to anything half decent—in any media—dissenting and different voices are marginalized or censored for being in some way 'political' for daring to combine content and style.

Just look at where we ended up showing the film—was the audience marginal or mainstream—I ask you that!?

As an outsider looking in now, who has by choice not been back to the Balkan region since 2001, I think you just have to look at what's happened since the 'peace' came to ex-Yu in general: There's no future, a shit past and a state of stagnating limbo-land for many who didn't have the mafia connections to jump on the free-market gravy train, something that's mirrored in the underclass here.

B92 really was true to the spirit of the rock 'n' roll dream and represented all that's positive about art, music, youth and rebellion too—they caught a moment and moved on.

Now with 'democracy' and the free market, it's perhaps ironic that their mainstream image is more suited to euro-trashing (C4's Passengers for instance made a totally exploitative piece about the station) and the forthcoming Hollywood musical based I guess extremely loosely on Matt's book.

I guess both the voices and truth I was chasing in 'See You in the Next War' will be largely written out of the mainstream-take on history now—which is why the CCA gig was important because it at least raised some critical debate in a place and culture increasingly devoid of such things.

To sum up, good art and rock 'n' roll at its best helps people survive and escape...but in the free (global) market it's also, as we discovered with what happened to punk, a bit of a swindle. That's Capitalism. As the B92 slogan used to say:

"Trust no one—not even us—but keep the faith..."

'This is Serbia Calling: Rock 'n' Roll Radio and Belgrade's Underground Resistance', Matthew Collin; *Serpent's Tail, ISBN 1-85242-776-0.*

For copy and screening information of 'See You in the Next War' please contact: Autonomi ltd, 35 Old Dumbarton Road, Glasgow, G3 8RD, email marie@autonomi.tv, www.autonomi.tv