

Romani Brass Bands in Southeast Serbia – An Overview

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In south-eastern Serbia, Romani musicians dominate the brass band genre. Professional musical performance has long been one of the most lucrative and prestigious ways for Roma to make a living, as marginalization by majority society limited their access to more mainstream forms of work.

Romani brass musicians have become deeply embedded in the local sociocultural fabric in places like Vranje, Serbia. Local Serbs and Roma cannot conceive of family celebrations like weddings without brass because the music is tightly linked to major rituals and cultural traditions. Romani brass musicians are central to the ceremonies that clinch marriages, expand kinship networks, and shape community identity through shared cultural practices of music, dance, and ritual.



The legendary Bakija Bakić and ensemble perform for a Romani wedding. Vranje, Serbia, mid-1980s

Romani brass musicians are also key cultural brokers in the musical life of southeastern Serbia. Roma were likely first exposed to brass instruments through military service during the Balkan Wars (ca. 1912–1913), and subsequently formed ensembles to perform local folk music upon their return home. Romani brass bands have preserved older repertoires from the 19th century, performing them at present-day celebrations in Vranje.



Romani brass band performing at the patron-saint celebration (slava) of the Crevarci family. Vranje, Serbia, 1920s



Romani brass musicians entertain a group of Serb townsmen at an outdoor excursion for May Day. Vranje, Serbia, 1 May 1938

At the same time, Romani performers are also impressive musical innovators. Romani brass musicians regularly adapt tunes from global popular music hits and film scores to generate new dance tunes for local consumers, reworking them to connect with the aesthetic standards and ‘groove’ desired by local Roma and Serb patrons.

Romani musicians also increasingly engage with demand for so-called ‘Balkan Gypsy Brass’ among national and international audiences, popularizing the sound of Serbian Romani much further abroad. Romani musicians are central attractions at the internationally-renowned *Guča* brass band festival in Serbia, often winning top prizes in the annual national competition. Winning bands record widely-circulated albums, appear on TV shows and in film soundtracks, and secure international touring contracts and gigs.

Bibliography

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