

# INTERVIEW WITH LEADING CROATIAN BLUES MUSICIAN, TOMISLAV GOLUBAN

## Zagorski blues - a true musical phenomenon



Slavica HABJANOVIĆ

The first time I saw Tomislav Goluban play, I was blown away. It was at the famous Purgeraj Rock Club in Zagreb and never did it occur to me that the mouth organ could sound so good, or that someone who played it could infect their audience with such a sense of fun. Part of the charm lay in the fact that this person was singing the blues - in Croatian, and more precisely, in a dialect from Zagorje. It almost doesn't get much crazier than that.

Tomislav Goluban is the man behind the Little Pigeon's ForHill Blues band, which emerged on the Croatian blues scene a number of years ago and things have not been the same since. Debuting on the scene with the album 'Pigeon's flight' in 2005, their next

album was the sophisticated 'Mr B'. Their most recent album, 'Zagorje Blues' reflects the band's development and maturity without losing their distinctive touch.

With concerts all over Croatia and international acclaim already knocking at his door, Goluban is truly a musical phenomenon in that he has managed to seamlessly merge

American delta blues with traditional music from his native Zagorje region, creating something that nobody in Croatia ever has.

Goluban was born and raised in the northern Croatian town of Zabok, only half an hour's drive out of Zagreb, a place where music and wine are integral to the spirit of the people. It is little wonder then that any concert Goluban plays at becomes a party - that first time I saw him play, I swore I'd be in bed by 1am. It just didn't happen.

**■ CROATIAN HERALD (CH):** Could you tell us firstly what Zagorje blues is? Where does it come from and why is this type of music specific? How did you decide on the name of your group?

**■ TOMISLAV GOLUBAN (TG):** Zagorje Blues is the name of my third

album but it is also the second part of the name of my band. The complete name is Pigeon's ForHill Blues and the first part 'Little Pigeon' is the translation of my surname Goluban, and the second part is the translation of Zagorje (Za-for, Gorje-hills).

Thirdly, the music is a subtype of blues which, as the name itself says, is a combination of traditional Zagorje music and American blues. The main thing that makes it specific is its original mixture, a product of my musical inspirations and inclinations and of course, the region I live in.

**■ CH:** Croatians love the blues, however, there are not many musicians who play it in the country ("There are less blues people in Croatia than there are on the moon," skier Ivica Kostelić famously said way back in 2004). How did you get into it, where did the love come from and what is the journey of a Croatian blues musician?

**■ TG:** The situation with blues in Croatia has changed hugely in the last few years. In 2008, we formed a part of the blues musicians' section of the Croatian Blues Forces (Hrvatske Blues Snage), registered with the Croatian Musical Union in Zagreb, and since then a real Croatian blues boom has taken place. The statistics are incredible - there are over 50 blues bands in Croatia that are ready to perform live at any time, all of very high quality.

Venues where blues can be played have also started multiplying - clubs, wineries, restaurants. With this, audiences have started accepting blues as it has become more accessible and sought after. I think we can safely say that the dark era of blues musicians playing in their own garages is now a part of history.

I began like any typical blues musician by playing in the local bar for the waiters and unassuming guests who used to leave quicker than they arrived (smiles). Thankfully, we soon managed to turn that trend around and we began playing at more popular venues.

My love for blues was born through listening to records of the old blues masters, and it was only later that I discovered that my late grandfather used to play the mouth organ, so I think that it must have been partly to do with genes.

**■ CH:** You transform blues into something joyful and almost akin to popular music. How do you feel when you see so many people enjoying your music? Wherever you play, happiness, dancing and good times are the rule, for example, the recent album launch you had for Zagorje Blues in your hometown of Zabok.

**■ TG:** It's a huge mistake to define blues as a sad type of music. Blues was inspired by sad things when it was conceived, but by singing about these things, people attempted to come face to face with their problems and run away from the desperation, looking for hope, faith and a reason to live. That's exactly why we say that blues is a feeling.

I want the audience to feel good at my concerts, or even better - I want them to feel the best they can, just like I do while I'm playing my songs. I try to make them feel happy, make them laugh, by playing the only thing I know how to and that is blues. When people leave the concert feeling happy, my mission has succeeded.

I'm especially happy that one recent such event happened in my Zabok, it was a combination of happiness, joy and of course, great music. There's an old blues anecdote that says that if your music hasn't made people dance (which also means to laugh, feel happy...), you've done something very wrong.

**"Zagorje: a fairytale in the palm of your hands"**

**■ CH:** You've already had a lot of international success, did you expect this to happen when you began playing the mouth organ in 1997? The result you achieved at the International Blues Challenge

in Memphis was something to really be proud of!

**■ TG:** When I started playing the mouth organ back in 1997, my main aim was to feel good while playing and I had no ambitions to have concerts, let alone international tours. As the years went by, my playing matured. After a few visits to the German town of Trossingen and the Hohner mouth organ factory, I travelled to Italy in 2008 to participate in the first European Blues Conference (thanks Buha for making me go!). It was there that I was invited to participate in the largest blues competition in the world - the one in Memphis.

I don't need to tell you that it's every blues musician's dream to visit the source of their inspiration. That was what made my visit to the USA so special. It was made even more special by the fact that I was the first Croatian to participate in the 25 year-old festival.

**■ CH:** Zagorje is one of the most idyllic parts of Croatia - gentle people, green hills, lots of wine and music. How is it growing up in Zagorje, spending your childhood and youth there?

**■ TG:** I guess everyone praises their own region, but Zagorje is definitely something special. Just like the new tourism slogan says, 'Zagorje: a fairytale in the palm of your hands' (Zagorje: bajka na dlanu). This is especially true when you go 'back to nature' after spending some time in an urban environment, the feeling is amazing.

I have to admit that the complete picture of Zagorje is an unfailing source of inspiration to me. When you're a child, you don't think about the advantages of your region, but when you're a bit older, you begin to value the pristine nature, the peace and feeling of wellbeing the area gives, all things which are becoming harder to find in an era of globalisation.

**■ CH:** Your three albums so far include beautiful folk melodies as well as imitations of old steam trains. There are renditions of songs such

as 'Oj mladosti moja' and 'Išel budem v kleticu' as well as instrumental and vocal compositions that you are the author of. Is it important to you to make sure that the wealth of music from Zagorje does not become extinct, particularly as it is somewhat forgotten and not represented enough in the mainstream media channels?

**■ TG:** When I am choosing which songs to include on the albums, I don't think about the market or how well represented these songs may already be in the media.

What I really like at any given moment is what I use and I make something for my own pleasure. That has proven to be a good thing to do so far. The compositions gain a new form, they become current once again and maybe they find their path to a new audience. I think that in this way, I am contributing at least a little to preserving the Zagorje musical heritage.

**■ CH:** How hard is it making it onto Croatian radio stations, the television and getting to the media and audiences, wading through so much pop music, especially considering that music from Croatia's southern regions is so much more favoured and represented?

**■ TG:** I came to terms with the fact that I play very non-commercial music a long time ago. Looking at the evolution of contemporary music, blues has never been popular, apart from a short period in the 1950s. Therefore, I don't expect a huge commercial spectacle, and I can't blame the media for advertising pop, commercial music.

Croatian society has undergone a breakdown of its system of values. Education is in a state of chaos, corruption has got into all pores of society, so it can't be expected that people are looking to be culturally uplifted.

Unfortunately, it has become the rule that primitivism, silicones and uneducated people have become popular, rich and due to that, powerful.

The media helps in this game be-

cause unfortunately this is where the money lays, so everything keeps going around in the same dark circle.

However, blues people are the last to lose faith and hope. We are aware of the situation around us and we adapt to it, waiting for a brighter future. In spe!

**"Life is really like a fast train"**

**■ CH:** You collaborate with a lot of people, including one of Croatia's most prominent jazz musicians, Boško Petrović, and Croatia's most successful male skier, Ivica Kostelić, who is a guest musician on all your albums and gives a special character to the songs. How did these working relationships come about and which moments have you look back on fondly?

**■ TG:** Boško Petrović is Croatia's most famous jazz musician, a man who has received a multitude of domestic and foreign awards for his work, so it is a huge honour that he played on my second album in the title song, Mr. B. I often play at his BP Club in Zagreb with my band. We spend time together, cooking up plans and ideas, so who knows what the future will bring us.

I met Ivica Kostelić in 2004 and we have been friends ever since. He is an exceptional musician who really gets the blues, even from a theoretical perspective. From the work we have done together, I would particularly like to mention a song from my album Zagorje Blues called 'Brzi vlak' (Fast Train).

The song is a story about the lifestyle he leads, the sacrifices he has had to make and a series of situations that have taken place in the past five years. Ivica wrote the lyrics to the song along with Zvonko Kudelić-Zuna, he sang the lead vocals and played the guitar on it. He is an incredible person - my blues brother!

**■ CH:** So is life really like a fast train, like you say in the song?

**■ TG:** Unfortunately yes. It's impor-

tant that you get onto the train of life on time, and not just sit by watching it as it races past you.

**■ CH:** As a blues musician, you comment on many situations, but as opposed to many other musicians, you usually have a life, social or political message - for example in '0.5', 'Sv. Rok', 'Brzi vlak', 'Šerif Mirko'. How do people react to your messages?

**■ TG:** When the legendary BB King defined blues, he said that it was everything that happened yesterday, everything that is happening now and all of what will happen tomorrow. In the context of that definition, I observe everything that happens around me and translate it into musical notes.

I'm happy that some of my notes have had an effect (the 0.5 alcohol level for drivers has been brought back

and the second tunnel at Sv. Rok has been made). It means that someone is actually listening to us. The inner circle of my colleagues say that I act like a catalyst for social change.

**■ CH:** Tell us the story about Sheriff Mirko, also from the 'Zagorje Blues' album.

**■ TG:** A real sheriff from Zagorje, Mirko Tomek (1930-2003) was the last such sheriff in this region, and also the epitome of human consistency and perseverance.

He was also my neighbour in Grabrovec, and as a child I used to admire the skill with which he would ride a horse on the asphalt streets. The rest of the story about Sheriff Mirko you can read in the very detailed booklet that comes with the album.

**■ CH:** What do you see in the future for yourself as a blues musician?

**■ TG:** In autumn 2010 we should be releasing a new album which was recorded during my stay in the USA last year.

The album was recorded at the SUN studio where Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, U2 and others all made names for themselves. I plan on touring in Sweden, France and Spain, so we'll see when that happens.

I also hope to visit Australia in the near future, as I have relatives in Sydney. It would be a fantastic opportunity to present my work to readers of the Croatian Herald as well!

For more information and sample music:

[www.goluban.com](http://www.goluban.com)  
[www.myspace.com/littlepigeonsforhillblues](http://www.myspace.com/littlepigeonsforhillblues)

## A few words from skiing champion and blues musician Ivica Kostelić

I have been working and cooperating with Tomislav for a number of years now and our working relationship has now turned into a deep friendship. I'm especially pleased to be able to participate in the work of a man who has dedicated himself to blues, because it's a unique example on the Croatian music scene.

Our relationship is foremostly one of friendship, so our work in music together has continued on in that vein.

Blues, in my opinion, is the most honest type of music. It is the backbone of the pop-rock culture of the 20th century, and one of the most recognisable musical forms in history. I only came to understand this when I started playing seriously. What attracted me was this 'spilling over' of feelings into music which is not tonally restricted, but which still manages to have a recognisable form.

Zagorski blues, of which Tomislav is the protagonist, is a combination of American and (northern) Croatian traditions. Blues is the original American folklore, but by tastefully mixing it with the musical legacy of other nations, it realises its essence. Even the original Afro-American delta blues is a mixture of African and European elements.

Today, when the world is one great big global village, blues has found a great new stimulation in mixing the folklore of various peoples, and in our case, Tomislav superbly combines blues with the sounds of his native Zagorje."

(A very big thank you to Ivica for agreeing to write 'a few' words - and a few more! - for the Croatian Herald.)



Ivica Kostelić and Tomislav Goluban

