



Sounds from the Outer Yugoslav Periphery: Masculinity, Satire, and Cultural Identity in the Bosnian New Primitives

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Abstract: This article examines the Bosnian New Primitives movement as a distinctive expression of the Yugoslav New Wave, focusing on how cultural peripherality was transformed into an aesthetic and critical resource within late socialist Sarajevo. Through a close stylistic and semiotic analysis of three emblematic songs by Zabranjeno Pušenje and Elvis J. Kurtović & His Meteors, the study explores the interaction between musical form, humor, irony, and performance in the construction of locally grounded forms of modernity. The designation New Primitives, adopted by the movement's protagonists as a deliberately parodic self-definition, functioned as a strategy for reappropriating external stereotypes that represented Bosnia-Herzegovina as a culturally backward periphery within both Yugoslavia and Europe. Rather than merely imitating Western rock and New Wave models, these artists reworked them through Sarajevo's urban slang, black humor, grotesque satire, and performative self-irony, producing hybrid musical forms deeply embedded in local social experience.

While the Yugoslav New Wave has often been examined through sociological and cultural-studies approaches, this article foregrounds the importance of musicological analysis in understanding how sound, lyrical discourse, and performance operate together as forms of social critique. Particular attention is devoted to the representation of masculinity and patriarchal authority, which emerge in these songs not as stable social norms but as fragile and performative constructions exposed through humor, exaggeration, and parody. By situating the New Primitives within broader center-periphery dynamics, the article argues that the movement articulated an alternative, sub-peripheral modernity that challenged dominant cultural hierarchies in late socialist Yugoslavia.

Keywords: New Primitives; Yugoslav New Wave; Sarajevo; peripherality; masculinity; irony; Zabranjeno Pušenje; Elvis J. Kurtović & His Meteors

Over the past decade, alongside renewed interest in cultural studies approaches to Eastern Europe, musical phenomena such as rock, punk, and post-punk in socialist Yugoslavia have been examined primarily through sociological frameworks. Recent scholarship has begun to address these dynamics more systematically, such as Dalibor Mišina's *Shake, Rattle and Roll: Yugoslav Rock Music and the Poetics of Social Critique* (2014) and Danijela Beard and Ljerka Rasmussen's edited volume *Made in Yugoslavia: Studies in Popular Music* (2020). Recent international studies focusing more directly on Yugoslav New Wave also include Julijana Papazova's *Alternative Rock in Yugoslavia in the Period 1980–1991* (2017) and Barry Phillips's *In Search of Tito's Punks* (2023). Within the literature aimed at a popular, non-academic audience produced in the South Slavic languages (Slovenian, Croatian, Bosnian, Serbian, Montenegrin)—excluding firsthand accounts and autobiographical contributions by lead vocalists and musicians, as well as studies of specific scenes and bands (with the case of Neue Slowenische Kunst being the most thoroughly analyzed)—readings framed by a “Yugo-nostalgic” paradigm predominate. From this perspective, the entire Yugoslav New Wave movement is often interpreted through post-socialist nostalgia and is frequently regarded as the last unified cultural project preceding the state's disintegration in 1991.¹

This study presents a stylistic analysis of selected tracks from the Bosnian New Primitives movement, conceived as a paradigmatic case through which to explore the aesthetic and sociocultural complexity of the Yugoslav New Wave. More specifically, this article asks: how did the Bosnian New Primitives movement transform conditions of cultural peripherality into a distinctive aesthetic and critical practice? In addressing this question, the article moves beyond predominantly sociological readings of Yugoslav New Wave by offering a close stylistic and semiotic analysis of musical works.

Existing scholarship, including the work of Dalibor Mišina, has provided important insights into the historical and cultural significance of Yugoslav popular music. However, less attention has been paid to how musical form, humor, and performance operate as interconnected strategies of social critique in the Bosnian context. In this perspective, the analysis demonstrates that the Bosnian New Primitives scene transformed Sarajevo's dual marginality—both within Yugoslavia and in the broader Balkan context—into a source of cultural autonomy, generating socially engaged and musically innovative practices. In doing so, it contributed to reshaping understandings of modernity from a marginal placement within Yugoslav cultural hierarchies.

Given the centrality of humor and irony in the New Primitives' aesthetic, it is also necessary to clarify how irony is understood in this study. Approaches in musicology and cultural studies treat irony not as a purely rhetorical device but as a mode of expression that emerges through the tension between musical form, lyrical content, and performance context.² In popular music, irony may operate at multiple levels, often in interaction with humor, parody, and performative framing: through the contrast between sound and meaning, through exaggeration and parody, or through the performative framing of familiar cultural codes in ways that invite critical distance. This framework allows for a more nuanced reading of how comedic strategies and critical expression operate across the selected case studies.

Yugoslavia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1980s

The emergence of the Yugoslav musical movement known locally as *Novi val* or *Novi talas* coincides with the year of the death of Josip Broz Tito, President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, who died in Ljubljana on 4 May 1980. Just over a month later, a concert featuring three new rock groups—VIS Idoli, Električni Orgazam, and Šarlo Akrobata—was held at the Student Cultural Center (SKC) in Belgrade. The arrival of the New Wave on the capital's stages symbolically marks the beginning of *Novi val*, although the movement had already been anticipated in western Yugoslavia by the scenes in Rijeka and Ljubljana since the mid-1970s. For instance, the Slovenian band Buldožer had already introduced a critical and experimental approach to rock in the mid-1970s, while the Rijeka-based group Paraf emerged as an early punk influence within the Yugoslav context.³ The transformation of Yugoslav rock music in the early 1980s quickly spread to other local contexts across the country. In that year and subsequently, new and diverse rock genres emerged in all republics. As Dalibor Mišina notes, the distinctions among the various currents of Yugoslav New Wave were less about stylistic divergence than about local specificities and forms of youth rebellion against the socialist cultural and political establishment.⁴

I will provide a brief overview of the political context of the period, which serves as a necessary foundation for understanding this musical phenomenon. In the early 1980s, the Communist Party found itself in a delicate phase, with internal struggles between liberal and conservative factions—long underway even before Tito's death—intensifying. The loosening of ideological pressure

suggested a potential shift from the official ideology of “Yugoslav socialist self-management,” as theorized by Edvard Kardelj, toward liberal democracy.⁵ Consequently, ideological control and surveillance by the “guardians of the revolution” relaxed in the early 1980s, and the ideological provocations of youth bands were initially tolerated. The Yugoslav cultural establishment initially responded almost benevolently to the emergence of the New Wave movement, and the government’s cultural policy granted limited sponsorship (e.g., state-sponsored festivals, radio programs).⁶

Against this backdrop of instability, with ongoing economic and political transition, it is also necessary to consider the social context of 1980s Bosnia-Herzegovina, characterized as a relatively conservative and traditionalist society.⁷ Although Sarajevo was the capital of the Socialist Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, it was perceived as peripheral relative to the more influential cultural and political centers of Yugoslavia, such as Belgrade, Zagreb, or Ljubljana, occupying a marginal position within the broader national framework. This dual marginality—both internal to Yugoslavia and external as a perceived periphery of the Balkans—positions Sarajevo as a veritable sub-periphery, or the “periphery of the European periphery,” a concept that proves useful for understanding both the city’s cultural production and the ways in which it was received beyond its borders. This perception is closely linked to what Maria Todorova has described as the Balkans’ construction as an “internal other” within Europe, a discourse that frames the region as culturally backward or incomplete.⁸ The internal hierarchy within Yugoslavia has also been noted in broader studies of the region’s cultural production, which describe it as structured through multiple layers of center–periphery relations.⁹

In this context, the notion of “periphery” employed in this article is not intended in a strictly geographical sense, nor does it imply that Sarajevo constituted the most marginal space within Yugoslavia. Rather, it refers to a form of cultural and symbolic marginality within the dominant urban networks of late socialist Yugoslavia. These networks were largely structured around major centers such as Belgrade and Zagreb. From this perspective, Sarajevo may be understood as a “center of the periphery”: while functioning as the principal cultural hub of Bosnia-Herzegovina, it remained positioned as marginal within broader Yugoslav cultural hierarchies. It is precisely this tension that enabled the emergence of distinctive cultural forms such as the New Primitives movement. Within this geographically marginalized context,

the Sarajevo New Wave scene began to take shape, primarily represented by the bands Zabranjeno Pušenje and Elvis J. Kurtović & His Meteors, who self-identified as New Primitives.¹⁰ Through their irreverent humor, satirical references to everyday life, engagement with social taboos, and subtle critique of sociopolitical norms and patriarchy, the New Primitives operated in an environment in which provocative cultural expressions could easily attract the attention of socialist authorities. However, the combination of irony, self-deprecation, and popular language enabled these artists to navigate a degree of creative freedom, circumventing direct censorship while generating debate and attention beyond the local scene, thereby negotiating their social position. This approach was also explicitly articulated by the movement's protagonists, who framed their practice as a conscious strategy of transforming marginality into an aesthetic resource.¹¹ The choice of the name is thus directly linked to the external perception of Bosnia as a culturally marginal space. In other words, through self-irony and the reappropriation of stigmatizing stereotypes depicting Bosnia as provincial, the movement transformed culturally "embarrassing" elements into aesthetic resources and instruments of urban cohesion and social critique.

"Primitivism" as a Strategy: Three Case Studies

This section examines two key bands of the Bosnian New Primitives movement: the pioneering Zabranjeno Pušenje (literally "No Smoking") and Elvis J. Kurtović & His Meteors. These bands developed performances that fused international musical influences, particularly Western New Wave, with contributions from other Yugoslav republics, such as the band Azra from Zagreb, as well as elements drawn from punk and the tradition of urban satire. These hybridizations extended beyond the mere adoption of musical styles, encompassing the construction of complex stage performances that combined theatricality, playful irony, and audience interaction, thus creating an innovative expressive space.

Events such as concerts at Sarajevo's Dom Mladih, local festivals, and frequent television appearances made the scene visible to a broader audience, consolidating Sarajevo's reputation as an urban creative laboratory where musical experimentation and social intervention were closely intertwined. The cultural production of the scene extended beyond music, encompassing television sketches by the comedy group *Top lista Nadrealista*. Modeled on

Monty Python's Flying Circus, the program was a satirical television show from Sarajevo closely connected to the New Primitives movement.¹² Together, these forms of expression spread an ironic, popular, and provocative language that redefined youth culture, fostering the emergence of a shared urban identity among Bosnian youth. The scene incorporated all channels through which ironic and critical forms of communication were transmitted.¹³ It emerged as a symbol of urban and local identity, offering a context for aggregation, self-representation, and cultural participation, in which young audiences responded positively to the satire of anti-intellectualism and playful irony, perceiving the scene as authentic, grounded in everyday life, and capable of critically skewering the social, cultural, and political contradictions of Bosnia in that period. The three case-study songs have been chosen because of their historical and cultural significance and their capacity to represent, in post-Yugoslav societies, these distinctive features and aesthetic values of the New Primitives era.

The three case-study songs have been selected as representative examples of different yet complementary facets of the New Primitives aesthetic. Rather than aiming for exhaustiveness, the selection highlights distinct modes through which the movement articulated its critical and expressive strategies: "Zenica Blues" foregrounds local realism and black humor rooted in working-class experience, "Kad se babo vrati kući pijan" explores domestic satire and the performative construction of masculinity, while "Da bog da crk'o rock'n'roll" offers a reflexive and parodic commentary on rock culture itself. Taken together, these case studies illustrate how musical form, humor, and performance functioned as interconnected tools for negotiating cultural identity and peripherality in the Bosnian context.

"Zenica Blues" by Zabranjeno Pušenje (1984)

"Zenica Blues," by the band Zabranjeno Pušenje, from their debut album *Das ist Walter* (1984), occupies a distinct cultural frontier: on one hand, it incorporates the rock and New Wave imaginaries imported into Yugoslavia in the late 1970s; on the other, it remains deeply rooted in Bosnian reality, employing the language and expressions characteristic of Sarajevo.

Formally, the song draws on an external model: American blues rock, albeit in a loose and locally reinterpreted form. Its harmonic progression is simple, almost canonical, and the piece maintains the repetitiveness typical of the

twelve-bar blues. Interestingly, the song's lyrical structure departs from the canonical AAB pattern of traditional African-American blues, instead following a more irregular ABB structure. Musically, it also draws on elements closer to country blues traditions, particularly in its two-beat rhythmic feel and relatively clean electric guitar timbre.

In this context, the song invites comparison with Johnny Cash's "San Quentin," particularly in its evocation of prison as both a physical and symbolic space. While *Zabranjeno Pušenje* do not reproduce the sonic intensity or moral gravitas of Cash's live performance, the intertextual reference to the "prison song" tradition is nonetheless significant. Whereas Cash's rendition constructs a collective, almost confrontational relationship between performer and incarcerated audience, *Zenica Blues* reworks this model through a more fragmented and locally grounded narrative perspective. Rather than functioning as overt satire, the song creates a subtle tension between its musical form and narrative content, allowing for a degree of interpretive distance that may be perceived as ironic within its cultural context. The prison is no longer a site of existential protest but becomes embedded in a culturally specific, darkly comic story shaped by Sarajevo's urban idioms. From a musical perspective, this transformation is reflected in the use of a simplified blues structure that is refunctionalized as a vehicle for narrative expression rather than emotional depth. The authenticity of the piece lies in its local roots. These emerge through semi-spoken vocal delivery, a theatrical tone, and sparse arrangements. The protagonist is not a heroic rebel but a morally ambiguous protagonist, whose actions may be perceived as both socially intelligible and ethically problematic—who ends up in prison for committing a so-called "crime of honor."¹⁴

When I roll out toward Zenica, man,
five, six cops tailin' me again.

County judge said, "Twelve years,
twelve damn years in a hard-time pen." [2x]

Yeah, my fate's a sad-ass tale,
Hakija screwed¹⁵ my wife.

Hakija screwed my wife—and the blade spoke his fate.
"You can't grasp that, Judge, my comrade." [2x]

Ain't no point in me explainin', you won't feel. [spoken]

Zenica, I hate every stone you own,
'cause of you my whole life's blown.

Whoever survives twelve years inside
the KP joint in Zenica,
that man's a real hajji¹⁶ with pride. [2x]

One thing keeps my spirit straight:
from the KP joint, I'll walk out someday,

But Hakija? He ain't ever leavin' Bare,¹⁷
nobody comes back from Bare. [2x]

Thanks, Mujo.¹⁸

U Zenicu kada pođem ja,
prati me pet-šest drotova.

Okružni sudija rek'o dvanaest godina
dvanaest godina strogo zatvora. [2x]

Tužna je moja sudbina,
ženu mi krećo Hakija.

Krećo Hakija, presudila mu čakija,
Ne razumiješ ti to, druže sudija. [2x]

Džabe ja to tebi pričam.

Zenico mrzim svaki kamen tvoj,
zbog tebe ja mrzim život svoj.

Ko preživi dvanaest godina
U KP Domu Zenica,
taj je pravi hadžija. [2x]

Raduje me jedna istina:
iz KP Doma vратиću se ja,

ali Hakija, nikad neće sa Bara,
jer sa Bara se niko ne vraća. [2x]

Hvala, Mujo.

The choice of Zenica as the setting is deliberate: the city carries a constellation of meanings recognizable within the broader Yugoslav context. Zenica, located in central Bosnia, was the quintessential industrial city, with its famous steelworks (Željezara), factories, and working-class neighborhoods. Referencing it immediately conjures an urban landscape that is harsh, industrial, and gray, far from the "high" cultural centers. Thus, it epitomized precisely the unglamorous quotidian milieu around which the New Primitives constructed their aesthetic universe. Furthermore, Zenica prison (KP Dom Zenica), where the protagonist is condemned to serve twelve years, was imagined throughout Yugoslavia as the embodiment of the harsh penal regime—a site of fear and punishment, more simply the "place where one does not wish to end up." To sing a "Zenica blues" is therefore a highly specific cultural operation: taking an American archetype—the prisoner's blues, as in the classics of Lead Belly or Johnny Cash—and fusing it with an entirely Yugoslav symbol. This collision produces grotesque comedy, a distorting mirror effect typical of the New Primitives. From this perspective, the use of Zenica as a setting reinforces the culturally marginal standpoint explored in this article. It not only evokes a marginal industrial landscape within Bosnia itself but also mirrors Sarajevo's broader position within Yugoslav cultural hierarchies. The song thus operates across multiple layers of peripherality, transforming them into a source of narrative and aesthetic agency.

The song makes extensive use of the language spoken in Sarajevo streets at the time. For example, the term *kreč'o* denotes a sexual act in the local Sarajevo idiom, unknown in other Yugoslav republics and nearly obsolete today. Similarly, the expression *pravi hadžija*, derived from Bosniak culture and denoting one who has completed the pilgrimage to Mecca, is here employed poetically—the prison becomes a forced “pilgrimage,” and surviving it is a harsh and painful journey akin to the spiritual meaning of Hajj. Cynical references to Bare cemetery, as a place from which no one returns, further intensify this local realism. When addressing the judge, the protagonist adopts an intentionally sarcastic tone, ridiculing authority and symbolically subverting its legitimacy. The story, built from small paradoxes and self-irony, conveys the impression that the protagonist is recounting his misadventure in a *kafana*,¹⁹ not as an existential tragedy but almost as a joke, to an audience that laughs bitterly at his misfortune. Zabranjeno Pušenje thus rely on humor and tonal contrast as a foundational expressive strategy—a form of critique more directed at the prevailing mentalities in Bosnian society than at a socialist political structure. Music becomes a vessel for an entirely local story, infused with Sarajevo realism and black humor; musical elements are not merely ornamental but function as a key semiotic device, amplifying the song’s darkly humorous tone and enabling humor to operate as a culturally situated form of social commentary.²⁰ The upbeat tempo and straightforward rock-blues chord progressions contrast sharply with the grim subject matter of honor killings. This deliberate tension highlights the absurdity of the events being recounted. Playful instrumental interludes, off-kilter rhythmic accents, and exaggerated vocal delivery further reinforce the sarcastic humor. The band signals that they are not merely narrating a story but critically engaging with social norms. In this way, the music itself becomes an active agent of satire, shaping the listener’s perception and framing the lyrical content as both humorous and socially reflective. In the words of the band’s frontman, Davor Sučić, aka Sejo Sexon, self-mockery was from the outset one of the movement’s aesthetic pillars:

For the New Primitives, humor is the greatest human virtue and the foundation of all good creativity. ... A people capable of laughing at themselves—from their nationalism, their icons, to their criminals—is a society able to overcome any crisis. Remove humor and satire from a society, marginalize them, and it will inevitably collapse. This, in short, was the philosophy of the New Primitives.²¹

“Zenica Blues” cannot be classified as authentic blues or as Balkan folk music; rather, it represents a cultural product of Sarajevo youth in the 1980s,

immersed in listening to Western bands such as The Clash and Talking Heads and consuming satirical local television programs like *Top Lista Nadrealista*. While integrating Western references such as the blues, the song reinterprets them through a local, popular, theatrical, and self-ironic lens. The result is a musical expression that transcends mere stylistic imitation, constituting a vivid, locally grounded form of cultural expression.

“Kad se babo vrati kući pijan” by Elvis J. Kurtović & His Meteors (1984)

“Kad se babo vrati kući pijan” (When Babo comes home drunk), from the 1984 album *Mitovi i legende o kralju Elvisu* (The myths and legends about Elvis the king), provides a clear illustration of how Elvis J. Kurtović & His Meteors, an early and significant founding group in the movement, turned quite everyday material into a miniature musical comedy supported by straightforward rock language. Musically, the track occupies a hybrid space between tamed punk and garage rock: guitars are clean, and the rhythm is square and fast, with accelerations and deliberately adolescent energy that underscores the caricatural nature of the narrative. Vocals—often more narrational than sung—enhance the theatrical and farcical quality, as if the song were a short sketch, a fragment of a family sitcom recounted by a child observing the father in an altered state, with a mixture of fear and dark humor. While elements of humor are present, the song does not primarily rely on irony as a structuring device. Rather, it constructs a form of grotesque domestic satire in which patriarchal masculinity is exaggerated to the point of distortion. The comic effect emerges less from ironic distance than from the accumulation of hyperbolic situations and the performative staging of violence as absurd routine. In this way, the song exposes the instability of male authority, presenting it not as a coherent social norm but as a fragile and contradictory performance. The father becomes a grotesque, clumsy figure, and the music supports this caricature with rhythmic straightforwardness that emphasizes the light, irreverent tone of the narrative, despite its foundation in an episode of domestic violence.

When babo²² comes home drunk,
he always makes some kind of zijan.²³
O-o-o, babo, babo,
O-o-o, don't do it, dad.²⁴

When he's back from the road
and parks his truck outside,
he drops by the birtija²⁵ for a moment,
just to get at least a little drink.
O-o-o, babo, babo,
O-o-o, don't do it, dad.

When babo comes back home
and has had a little to drink,
whoever tries to block his way
gets a punch straight to the head.
O-o-o, babo, babo,
O-o-o, don't do it, dad.

When babo comes home drunk,
he strangles our dog,²⁶
beats up his wife and assaults her,
and he gouged out Kemo's eye.
O-o-o, babo, babo,
O-o-o, don't do it, dad.²⁷ [4x]

Kad se babo vrati kući pijan
On napravi uvijek neki zijan.
O-o-o, babo, babo
O-o-o, ma mojne, babo.

Sa terena kad se vrati
I parkira kamion
Do birtije načas svrati
da popije bar imalo.
O-o-o, babo, babo,
O-o-o, ma mojne, babo.

Kad se babo kući vrati
I kad malo popije
Ko mu proba na put stati
Štos u glavu dobije.
O-o-o, babo, babo,
O-o-o, ma mojne, babo.

Kad se babo pijan vrati,
našeg cuku zadavi,
ženu bije i mariše,
a Kemi oko izvadi.
O-o-o, babo, babo,
O-o-o, ma mojne, babo. [4x]

The father character operates on at least two levels: First, exaggeration functions as a humoristic strategy. Using hyperbole, the song portrays the father as a “larger-than-life” character, amplifying the mundane drama of the family. Second, the lyrics reflect the local patriarchal model, but they do so in a way that exposes the performative and socially constructed nature of masculinity.²⁸ Male authority, often vested in the adult male as head of household, is intertwined with dominant masculinity stereotypes, yet the song’s grotesque portrayal of the “drunk and violent man” undermines this authority by exposing its absurdity and fragility. Alcohol, socially sanctioned in male rituals, becomes a lens through which social tensions such as economic precarity and urban marginality play out in domestic spaces. Textually, the grotesque father does more than reflect patriarchy; he functions as a satirical figure that reveals the contradictions of societal norms. His character highlights the gap between the idealized image of male authority and the lived reality of instability, moral hypocrisy, and emotional violence within the family.

“Kad se babo vrati kući pijan” relies on a minimal instrumental setup, which enhances the “shambolic” tone of a story that would otherwise confront the listener with its unsettling domestic violence themes. The musical structure revolves around electric guitar, supported by electric bass and drums, which are direct and unembellished, delivering a dry, immediate sound that propels the song forward like a hurried domestic chase, consistent with the comedic

atmosphere. Minimal keyboard interventions, typical of recordings of the period, occasionally appear to fill sonic space, but the core remains that of a classic rock quartet. This instrumentation sustains a garage-band energy that amplifies the narrative: the father's return takes on the sonic form of an electric domestic theater, integrating music and text into a coherent whole immediately recognizable within the New Primitives style. Elvis J. Kurtović & His Meteors do not aim for formal elegance in this piece, but for expressive efficacy. The song offers an acidic snapshot of the domestic microcosm dominated by violence and patriarchy—a theme still taboo in conservative Bosnian society—where rock functions as an immediate vehicle for a story conveyed through Sarajevo slang and the frequent use of Turkisms (*mojne, babo, zijan, birtija*) and oral cadences, transforming culturally sensitive material into grotesque representation of patriarchal masculinity. In this sense, the song's critical force lies less in irony than in its exposure of the instability and violence underlying normative models of masculinity, revealing the gap between socially sanctioned authority and its lived, often destructive, reality.

“Da bog da crk'o rock 'n' roll” by Elvis J. Kurtović & His Meteors (1985)

The track, from the eponymous 1985 album (meaning literally “May rock and roll drop dead”) is musically structured around a linear harmonic framework, based on chord progressions typical of classic rock 'n' roll, directly evoking the British and American traditions of the previous decade (the 1970s). The rhythm section, consisting of bass and drums, maintains a steady, driving pulse, imparting an almost physical sense of energy to the piece, while the electric guitars oscillate between simple yet incisive riffs and arpeggios reminiscent of the phrasing characteristic of the Rolling Stones, suggesting an implicit dialogue with their repertoire, particularly with the track “It's Only Rock 'n' Roll.” However, this resemblance does not translate into mere imitation: Elvis J. Kurtović and his band reinvent these patterns through an ironic and satirical lens, introducing unexpected rhythmic accents, strategic pauses, and micro-accelerations that subvert listener expectations, simultaneously amplifying the song's parodic and self-reflexive effect.

The vocal delivery, performed in a deliberately theatrical register, alternates between linear melodic passages and grotesque, almost spoken, hummed inflections, emphasizing the intrinsic irony of the lyrics. The lyrical content

stands out for its social satire: linguistic exaggeration and wordplay create a parodic effect that exposes both the clichés of Western rock and certain aspects of urban Yugoslav life. In this sense, text and music operate in symbiosis: while the musical arrangement evokes a register of apparent rock authenticity, the lyrics destabilize that authenticity through sarcasm, allowing the audience to perceive the distance between form and meaning, between musical imitation and cultural reinvention.

You think I'm squealing with joy
when I climb up here on the stage,
but I'm watching Zijo, drunk and wobbling,
pretending he's Page.²⁹
Ay ay ayyy

You think I'm rich as a king now,
but I've only got ten to my name,
and I'm watching Fića grinning wildly,
pretending he's Jagger.
Ay ay ayyy

Ohh, may rock'n'roll just curl up and die³⁰
when everyone plays it...
Ohh, may rock'n'roll just curl up and die,
and me, and me, and me stuck in it.
Ay ay ayyy

You think we're fearless heroes,
afraid of nothing at all,
but you don't know how hard it is hiding
when bottles start to fall.
Ay ay ayyy

You think I'm driving a Jaguar,
but I'm hungrier than fed,
and everyone asks me for drinks,
and everyone picks my bread.
Ay ay ayyy³¹

Ti misliš da ja piškim od sreće
kad popnem se ovde na stejdž,
a gledam Ziju kako pijan tetura
i zamišlja da je Pejdz.
Aj aj ajiji

Ti misliš da sam vrlo bogat
a u džepu mi ost'o cener
a gledam Fiću kako se kezi
i zamišlja da je Džeger.
Aj aj ajiji

Ooo, da Bog da crk'o rock n roll
kad ga svako svira
Ooo, da Bog da crk'o rock n roll
a ja, a ja, a ja - sa njima.
Aj aj ajiji

Ti misliš da smo mi neki heroji
sto ničeg se ne plaše
al' ne znaš kako se teško sakrivat
kad počnu da lete flaše.
Aj aj ajiji

Ti misliš da ja Jaguar vozam
a više sam gladan no sit
a svi stalno traže da ih častim
i svi mi se grebu za sit.
Aj aj ajiji

Irony manifests not only through hyperbole but also through the use of phrases that mimic the solemnity of moralistic or religious discourse, applied, however, to an object as mundanely banal as a musical genre. This incongruity produces a calibrated comic effect, in which the pseudo-seriousness of the linguistic register serves to highlight the absurdity of the protagonist's situation. The obsessive repetition of a "cursing" formula (which, in the Yugoslav cultural context, acquires both ritualistic and playful nuances) forms a refrain that functions as a performative device: not a literal wish but rather a caricature of ritual itself. Semantically, the lyrics stage a friction between the imagery of rock as a symbol of modernity and the sociocultural specificity of socialist Yugoslavia, where rock music was widespread and beloved yet filtered through a political and social context profoundly different from that of the West. The

song exploits this friction to produce a playful reflection: not a rejection of rock but a lovingly corrosive deconstruction of it. Rock thus becomes a mirror onto which urban identity, the contradictions of modernization, and a taste for the absurd—later to become a cornerstone of the New Primitivist aesthetic—are projected. While such tensions between Western musical models and socialist cultural contexts were present across Yugoslavia, in the case of Sarajevo they acquire a specific inflection shaped by its marginal cultural position. Here, the adoption of rock idioms is not only a negotiation with global modernity but also a strategy of cultural positioning from the margins, in which imitation, parody, and distortion become tools for articulating a locally grounded modern identity.

In conclusion, “Da Bog da crk’o rock’n’roll” constitutes a complex rhetorical device operating on the tension between citation, desecration, and cultural identity. This piece can be regarded as a paradigmatic example of musical contamination: the forms and registers of Western rock are assimilated and reworked to serve local communicative and cultural purposes, in a nuanced balance between quotation, reinvention, and social critique. The appropriation of classic rock here is thus not nostalgic but rather a caricatural reinterpretation aimed at transforming the language of traditional rock into a critical instrument. The irony of the piece does not delegitimize rock; rather, it demonstrates its transformation in the Yugoslav context, where the Western tradition is reinterpreted and, in a sense, “domesticated” through the lens of Sarajevo’s urban humor.³² The “novelty” introduced by the New Primitives lies not in the adoption of innovative stylistic paradigms but in their ironic manipulation: in this specific case, the gesture of returning to the rock ‘n’ roll of previous decades—rather than adhering to the avant-garde aesthetics of the New Wave—becomes a conscious act of distancing and cultural commentary.

Masculinity, Humor, and Performance

An additional dimension of the New Primitives’ cultural practice lies in its construction and critique of masculinity. As noted by recent scholarship on Balkan masculinities, late socialist Yugoslavia featured highly codified models of male behavior, reinforced through both domestic and public spheres.³³ Within this context, the New Primitives scenes can be understood as masculine homosocial spaces where young men negotiated identity, authority, and performativity through music and humor.

In “Kad se babo vrati kući pijan,” the father figure embodies a grotesque, exaggerated form of patriarchal masculinity, revealing its fragility and performative nature. Similarly, *Zabranjeno Pušenje*’s protagonists often inhabit anti-heroic male roles, where failure, irony, and everyday misadventures substitute for the dominant, normative male ideal. Even in “Da bog da crk’o rock ‘n’ roll,” the mimicry of Western rock heroes represents a performative masculinity, one that is self-conscious and satirically reinterpreted through the lens of Sarajevo urban culture.

Importantly, these representations of masculinity are closely tied to the sub-peripheral condition discussed throughout this article. In the Bosnian context, dominant models of male authority—associated with strength, control, and social stability—are not simply reproduced but are instead destabilized through humor, exaggeration, and narrative fragmentation. The figures that populate these songs are not powerful patriarchs or heroic subjects but rather flawed, excessive, or ridiculous characters whose authority is constantly undermined. In this sense, humor functions as a critical strategy: by exposing masculinity as performance rather than essence, the New Primitives transform socially sanctioned behaviors into objects of parody. This process reflects broader tensions within late socialist Yugoslavia, where economic uncertainty and shifting social structures contributed to the erosion of stable gender roles. As a result, masculinity in these songs appears not as a fixed identity but as a contested and unstable construct, shaped by both local cultural norms and wider processes of social change.

By highlighting these constructions, the analysis shows how comedic expression, performativity, and musical structure intersect to critique dominant gender norms while simultaneously affirming a local, socially embedded form of masculine identity. In this sense, the New Primitives not only comment on social and political peripherality but also explore, deconstruct, and perform the cultural codes of masculinity that shaped late socialist Bosnian society.

Conclusions: “You call us primitives? Fine, we become New Primitives, modern in our own way!”

As argued throughout this article, the New Primitives movement demonstrates how cultural peripherality could be actively reworked into an aesthetic and

critical resource. Through the analysis of three songs, this study has shown how Bosnia's marginal position within Yugoslav and broader European cultural hierarchies enabled the emergence of a distinctive and locally grounded creative voice. Rather than simply imitating Western musical models, the New Primitives reinterpreted them through humor, parody, and stylistic hybridization. In doing so, they transformed marginality into a productive space of cultural negotiation, where global influences were reshaped through local linguistic, social, and performative practices.

The three case studies highlight complementary dimensions of this process. "Zenica Blues" reworks the blues tradition through local realism and dark humor, "Kad se babo vrati kući pijan" exposes the instability of patriarchal masculinity through grotesque exaggeration, while "Da bog da crk'o rock'n'roll" offers a reflexive and parodic commentary on rock culture itself. Together, these examples demonstrate how musical form, humor, and performance function as interconnected strategies of social critique.

In this perspective, the New Primitives scene can be understood not simply as a peripheral cultural phenomenon but as an active site of cultural production that challenged dominant hierarchies within Yugoslavia. By re-signifying marginality as a source of creativity, it contributed to the articulation of alternative forms of modernity rooted in local experience.

More broadly, this study highlights the importance of integrating musicological and cultural analysis in the study of Yugoslav popular music. By focusing on the interaction between sound, language, and performance, it demonstrates how popular music functioned as a key medium for negotiating identity, social norms, and cultural positioning in late socialist contexts.

Notes

1. Many of the “classic” titles on *Novi val* or *Novi talas* date back several decades, so the landscape of more recent publications is not very rich, at least regarding books strictly devoted to the movement. Among the latest publications are Vladimir Đurić, *Vodič kroz Novi talas u SFRJ* (Belgrade: Službeni Glasnik, 2016); Dušan Vesić, *Bunt dece socijalizma* (Belgrade: Laguna, 2020); and Edi Jurković, *Kad je život bio Novi val* (Rijeka: Naklada Val, 2021).
2. Katherine Turner, ed., *This Is the Sound of Irony: Music, Politics and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2015).
3. See Aleksandar Žikić, “Belgrade Rock Experience: From Sixties Innocence to Eighties Relevance,” in *Made in Yugoslavia: Studies in Popular Music*, ed. Danijela Beard and Ljerka V. Rasmussen (New York: Routledge, 2020), 12–20.
4. Dalibor Mišina, *Shake, Rattle and Roll: Yugoslav Rock Music and the Poetics of Social Critique* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 161–81.
5. One of the most important ideological works on this subject is Edvard Kardelj, *Pravci razvoja političkog sistema socijalističkog samoupravljanja* (Belgrade: Izdavački Centar Komunist, 1977).
6. Branko Kostelnik, “Jugoton, from state recording giant to alternative producer of Yugoslav New Wave,” in *Made in Yugoslavia*, 75–88.
7. On the socio-political context in the last decade of Yugoslavia, see also Dejan Jović, *Yugoslavia: A State that Withered Away* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2009), 101–30; and Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia, 1962–1991*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).
8. According to Todorova, the Balkans have historically been constructed by Europe as an “internal other,” neither East nor West. From this perspective, Bosnia, and Sarajevo in particular, not only suffer geographic marginalization but are also subject to a negative discursive construction that defines their cultural identity as ‘primitive’. This external perception has had profound implications for the development of the local cultural scene, prompting artists to respond both ironically and creatively to such stereotypes. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, updated ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
9. Although Catherine Baker does not specifically address the Yugoslav New Wave movement, she implicitly applies the concept of “sub-periphery” to ex-Yugoslav popular culture, describing the region, from a post-socialist studies perspective, as semi-peripheral in relation to Europe and hierarchically organized internally, with urban music scenes occupying sub-peripheral positions yet remaining culturally productive. See Catherine Baker, “The Politics of Performance: Transnationalism and Its Limits in Former Yugoslav Popular Music, 1999–2004,” *Ethnopolitics* 7, no. 3 (2008): 319–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449050600911075>; Catherine Baker, “‘Death to Fascism Isn’t in the Catechism’: Legacies of Socialism in Croatian Popular Music after the Fall of Yugoslavia,” *Narodna umjetnost* 47, no. 1 (2010): 5–30, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/60108>; and Catherine Baker, *Race and the Yugoslav Region: Postsocialist, Post-Conflict, Postcolonial?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).
10. Here, the term “scene” refers to the concept proposed by Will Straw and further developed by other musicologists, including Georgina Born, which emphasizes how local musical communities are defined by places, shared practices, and social networks among musicians,

audiences, media, and technologies. Will Straw, "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music," *Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (1991): 368–88.

11. The protagonists of the New Primitives movement developed a kind of ethical code and proclamation of their aesthetics; see Boro Kontić and Sejo Sexon, *Pamtim to kao da je bilo danas* (Sarajevo: Buybook, 2025), 69–76.
12. Mišina, *Shake, Rattle and Roll*, 162.
13. The New Primitives received attention from various Yugoslav music magazines from the very beginning, including *Džuboks* (Belgrade), *Rock* (Zagreb), and *Start* (Sarajevo), which contributed to the dissemination of the movement and to building its visibility both locally and across Yugoslavia.
14. On authenticity as a socially and performatively constructed category in popular music, see Allan F. Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," *Popular Music* 21, no. 2 (2002): 209–23.
15. Here, the term "screwed" is chosen for its colloquial register, sufficiently vulgar to convey the intended meaning and representing the closest equivalent to the original language: the expression *kreč'o* is a colloquial form from the Sarajevo urban dialect which, in the youth language of the 1980s, was used idiomatically to indicate sexual intercourse. It represents a highly local and socially marked usage, now largely obsolete and recognizable primarily as a linguistic marker of Sarajevo's urban culture of the time.
16. *Hajji* (Arabic *hajjī*) refers to someone who has completed the spiritual pilgrimage to Mecca and visited the Honored Ka'ba; in Bosnia, it is often used colloquially to refer to a respectable, well-off, or elderly person.
17. Bare is a neighborhood in Sarajevo known for its multi-religious cemetery (the largest in the city), where Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim burials coexist.
18. Zabranjeno Pušenje, "Zenica Blues," YouTube video, accessed May 15, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6YjGldSD8A>. It should be noted that the translation of all the lyrics was done by the author. There exists an English version of "Zenica Blues" translated by Dalibor Mišina in the aforementioned book, but since Mišina's aim is not a detailed textual analysis or a musicological approach, local dialectal variants and Turkisms present in the song—elements that give it a specific culturally marked tone—are disregarded in the text.
19. In socialist Yugoslavia, the *kafana* maintained the same traditional functions as a café-inn: a place for meeting, socializing, and live music, often associated with urban stories, everyday life, and popular culture, while also serving as a reference space for the musical and satirical narratives of groups such as the New Primitives.
20. On humor in popular music as a culturally situated practice and a vehicle for social commentary, see Thomas M. Kitts and Nick Baxter-Moore, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music and Humor* (New York: Routledge, 2019).
21. Kontić and Sexon, *Pamtim to kao da je bilo danas*, 73–77, my translation.
22. *Babo* is a Turkism denoting the word "father," primarily used by Bosniaks.
23. *Zijan* is also a Turkism, denoting "damage" or "trouble."

24. Here, instead of the imperative “don’t,” a very popular Sarajevo slang expression is used, which reverses the letters of the verb “nemoj” to form “mojne.”
25. *Birtija* is a Turkism denoting a traditional public establishment in the Balkans, similar to a tavern or bar, where men predominantly gather to drink and socialize, often associated with alcohol consumption and male-only interactions.
26. To refer to a dog, the standard word *pas*, common across all republics, is not used. Instead, the word *cuko* is employed, which is still primarily used in the spoken language of the Sarajevo metropolitan area.
27. Elvis J. Kurtović & His Meteors, “Kad se babo vrati kući pijan,” YouTube video, accessed May 15, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YrO7LIMSGM>.
28. See C. J. Pascoe, *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); and R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
29. A reference to Jimmy Page.
30. *Crknuti* means “to die,” but in a vulgar, very colloquial way. It is often used for animals, machines, or even people, with a tone of anger, contempt, or joking, and it is also used as a curse.
31. Elvis J. Kurtović & His Meteors, “Da Bog da crk’o rock’n’roll,” YouTube video, accessed May 15, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9t1G85SGJoU>
32. Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 42–45.
33. Rory Archer, *Masculinity in the Balkans* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).