

## Sevdah

*Written by Tom Methans*

The melancholy songs could go on for hours as they remembered dead and distant relatives, heroes, Begs, Pashas, and prominent cities like Banja Luka, Sarajevo, and even Stambolu na Bosforu (Istanbul on the Bosphorus). The songs celebrated the ancient world and the recent past, reminding them of pain, ecstasy, and unrequited loves. Except for religion, reserved for the mosque, there was a song for everything – even one about making coffee! I understood a few words, but I could always identify “Majka moja!” It’s the Slavic version of *mamma mia*! Songs often involved mothers and the greater concept of Mother, the matriarch and hub of the family and your emotional, physical, and spiritual home. It’s the name you invoke when times are good or, more likely, bad. These threads make up the very essence of Sevdah music.

Named after the Turkish word for love, Sevdah is the traditional folk music of Bosnia-Herzegovina, based on poems by forgotten authors that survived through oral tradition, and provided inspiration for newer music. Sevdah had a big post-World War II resurgence and also attracted artists from other parts of Yugoslavia. Between the 1960s and 1980s, a score of singers dominated the airwaves, crossing borders to establish Yugoslav identity and unity. However, a Sevdah song (*Sevdalinka*) is not focused on the instrumental or vocal superiority of highly trained musicians – as evidenced by my family gatherings. It is neither an act nor a show: it’s about becoming the song by feeling the emotions, understanding the poet’s message, and experiencing the weight and texture of every word.

It is accepted that Sevdah began with the arrival of the Turks in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but its prior origins and development are as mysterious as its sound. One of the oldest Bosnian *Sevdalinkas* dates to 1475 and is about a man called Mujo, a typical Muslim name that occurs in many songs.

However, the Ottomans didn’t arrive in Bosnia-Herzegovina on the overnight train. It was a voyage of 300 years and thousands of miles starting in 1299, when the House of Osman expanded through the Middle East, across North Africa, Greece, and eventually most of Europe south of Austria and between the Adriatic and Russia. It’s fascinating to ponder what else influenced Turkish court musicians. Did they bring elements of Cairo, Damascus, and Athens to Bosnia-Herzegovina before encountering indigenous Christian Slavs who had their own music.

Add influences from Sephardic Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition, and Roma musicians, plus another 400 years of Slavic and Turkish intermingling, and we have the style of Sevdah I listened to in the heyday of 1974. I still prefer that era’s old-school vibrato-heavy female singers, like Nada Mamula und Beba Selimović.

We can be confident that lutes were Sevdah’s main instruments – possibly accompanied by other local archaic strings, percussion instruments, and woodwinds. Still, the sound of *Sevdalinka* changed forever when the Habsburg-era accordion replaced the Saz lute as the centerpiece, thus severing a significant link to antiquity. Fortunately, many current bands use traditional instruments together with modern ones and the ever-present accordion.

Along with a fresh crop of world music bands, I’m part of the next generation who is slowly finding new meaning and connections through folk music. As a child in America, I concealed my adopted family. I never let on that my stepfather’s real name was Hasan and not Hans, and I certainly never told anyone that he was born Beg Hasan. Unless my friends’ grandparents also drank muddy coffee and ate unpronounceable food, I never mentioned Bosnia or Turkey. The Ottoman Empire might not be in my genetic code, but it has imparted to me an incredibly rich heritage. As a result of the Turks’ long journey, Sevdah links me to cultures far beyond my birthplace in rural Slovenia. When I can recognize even a single common tone, word, or melody in another’s music, then we are automatically more connected than divided. Our shared experiences of pain, love, and joy go beyond religion, class, or nationality. And, that too is the essence of Sevdah.