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## Frontier Internship in Mission

### “Singing, dancing and playing together”

*By Victoria Tevis*

I arrived in Sarajevo this past November to begin my work with the non-governmental organization, *Musicians without Borders Bosnia and Herzegovina* (MwB BiH). Everything since then has been a learning experience: how MwB and its projects are structured, regional culture and history, the local language, and attempting to keep my life running smoothly on a daily basis.

The first step to adapting to life in Bosnia and Herzegovina is to learn about its history. And it is complicated - the country lies in the Balkans which is a cross-road between eastern and western culture. The Roman and Byzantine Empires, Christianity and Islam, capitalism and communism - a myriad of ideologies have met here, to mesh or to clash. The event which dominates Bosnia's recent history is the war which erupted during the dissolution of the former-Yugoslavia from 1992-1995. Events leading up to the conflicts were complex enough that it is impossible to generalize or cite only one factor as its cause. Many still attempt to do so though and often cite religion as the issue which ignited violence. While each cultural group does identify itself with a different religion —Bosnians as Muslim, Croats as Catholic, Serbs as Orthodox— it is only a characteristic that people of the region have chosen to emphasize as a difference among them. It was this active focus on small disparities which helped to catalyze war and still divide the people of the region today, fifteen years later.

In this post-conflict environment, many NGOs operate, performing different types of work. MwB BiH has a special focus on cultural activities. The organization was started in 2005 with the support of *Musicians without Borders International* (MwB Int) based in the Netherlands. They had hosted an International Music Conference in Sarajevo and were also encouraged by the success of one project in BiH. MwB Int recognized how much Bosnia and Herzegovina could contribute to and gain from additional music-based projects. Their first project in BiH was the Srebrenica-based *Music Bus*. The bus traveled around to different refugee settlements in the Srebrenica and Tuzla regions bringing music, rhythm and dance activities to displaced children of both Serb and Bosnian families.

Since the start of MwB BiH in 2005, the new local organization has supported and developed several other projects including the *Sarajevo Drum Orchestra*, workshops

with international musicians, the expansion of *Music Bus* activities, *Mostar Sinfonietta*, the *Winds of Change*, and more. All of MwB's projects are based on the belief that musical and cultural exchanges bring people together in a meaningful, personal way, breaking down divisions and creating lasting relationships. Additionally, the cultures of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans have deeply rooted musical traditions which make music a particularly effective tool because these traditions cross ethnic divisions. Dampening the musical heritage though is the Balkan brand of brainless pop music, Turbo Folk. This, in combination with a continuing lack of resources in the region, makes opportunities to experience high quality music, whether traditional, classical, or contemporary, rare and in need of support.

Music and other arts-based activities also create excellent, neutral zones for exchange. Since the war many people have lived their daily lives separated from members of other cultural groups. Bosnians, Croats and Serbs may live in the same towns, but chose to primarily interact only with others of the same group. Musicians without Borders strives to bring together members of all these groups when organizing any project. Once people have spent time singing, playing, dancing, or acting together, it is much harder to see members of another group as drastically different or as enemies.

The Music Bus, MwB BiH's first project, is still a very important part of our work here in the region. It is run by a staff of three, based in an office in Srebrenica and so much of what I do is not directly related to Music Bus activities. The program has expanded to include a Music Theater which is based out of the Srebrenica Cultural Center and also runs various camps and workshops. It is an extremely important program though and gives the children of the region a chance to come together, dance, sing, and act regardless of their cultural background. This is a unique opportunity for them both because of the lack of extracurricular activities and because Serb and Bosnian children do not often socially come together. I hope to attend either a performance of the Music Theater or a few days of Summer Camp in the near future to experience more of the Music Bus's work first hand.

MwB's other current major project, which I spend a lot of my time working on, is the *Winds of Change*. It is a wind ensemble composed of primarily young Bosnian musicians led by the extremely talented Dutch musician and composer, Willem van Merwijk. *Winds of Change* had its first concert tour in April 2007, and has continued to perform and expand its repertoire ever since. The Bosnian classical music scene lacks innovation and quality, so it is a rare and special opportunity for young musicians to work with an eminent European professional. Additionally, the group draws members from all three of Bosnia and Herzegovina's primary ethnic groups and the music schools not only in Sarajevo, but also Banja Luka and Mostar. Having members from various parts of the country is a key element of the vision of *Winds of Change* and *Musicians without Borders*. This past May, the ensemble was able to travel to the Netherlands to perform with the *Netherlands Blazers Ensemble* for their concert entitled *Balkan Wedding*, which was a major step in the growth of the group.

Amidst the various projects and activities of MwB BiH, my daily activities are constantly in fluctuation as I figure out new ways I can contribute. I have taught myself how to add to, edit, and generally fool around with the content on our website. It was slow going at first, and I am not always sure I am doing things quite properly, but I am pleased with what I have learned and can now contribute in that vein. Editing our

project proposals which are usually to be completed in English is also another task I have taken on; I hope this will soon expand to the actual writing of proposals. Running basic errands is also a need I have been able to fill —mail this, deliver that, fax this, copy that. It is not glamorous but someone must do it. I have also helped to facilitate much of the communication which takes place between our office, the international office, the USA office, and other potential partners. For Winds of Change concerts, I am responsible for communicating with the musicians, developing the programs, taking pictures, selling tickets, arranging the logistics for our international musicians, and once again —any other tasks which might arise.

That said, the trip to the Netherlands was a particularly rewarding, but also challenging experience in my time here. The young Winds of Change musicians learned so much and experienced so many new things that it was impossible not to be thrilled for them. They performed on stage in the *Concertgebouw* in Amsterdam (one of the top concert halls in the world) with the Netherlands Blazers Ensemble. They saw what kind of hard work is required to put together a performance like this, and to do it well. After one night of rehearsing with the NBE, we got back to the house very late. However, the musicians were determined to keep practicing on their own in order to play their absolute best for the concert. It was also obvious how much energy and inspiration they derived just from being in the presence of the Dutch musicians. The experience to travel at all was also a rare one for many of them because Bosnians need visas to travel to the majority of countries outside their own region. Visiting a new place and experiencing the traditions and customs of different people, offers the students the opportunity to see another way of doing things beyond what they have grown up with. The experiences of the trip encouraged the formation of solid friendships and the breaking down of divisions.

This summer holds more opportunities for musicians to travel and establish new relationships because of Musicians without Borders. There will be a music workshop and festival hosted in Macedonia the first week of July. Six young Bosnian musicians will attend and work with other performers from all over Europe. In August, I will travel to Serbia and Montenegro to work with the U.S.-based organization, *Ambassadors for Children* (AFC). There we will interact with at-risk children and youth who attend AFC's Music School in Belgrade. We will also consider how AFC and MwB can collaborate in the future on additional projects in the region.

It is very exciting to be a part of the work of Musicians without Borders, both here in Bosnia and Herzegovina and internationally. Opportunities for people to travel, participate in the creation of music, and make new friends are important all over the world but are particularly crucial in the Balkans. I am pleased to be working for an organization with such a positive and constructive vision for bringing people together. After the Winds of Change traveled to the Netherlands, one of the musicians summed up her feelings by saying what I hope others will continue to find in the future: "This was the most beautiful experience I have ever had, I am thrilled by the work of Musicians without Borders."