

OBJEKTIV

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“Serbia is my second home!” American musician blew the world away with Serbian songs.

Kimberly Townsend became an internet sensation after she covered songs by Bajaga and EKV, and she revealed to Objektiv that she also wrote an original Serbian song.

How did you get into music? How did you know that it was a career for you?

I grew up performing in Musical Theatre. It was a massive part of my life. I studied it in college and planned to pursue a Broadway career, but accidentally ended up falling in love with writing my own songs, so for now I am following this path. I've journaled my whole life, and at some point while I was in college that turned into songwriting.

I started by writing songs just for myself, as a cathartic way to process my feelings. Years later, after playing small shows here and there but mostly singing at home, I started sharing them on Instagram, where my music started to spread around the yoga community. I got really encouraging feedback and for the first time in my life, fans. That led me into the studio to create professional recordings and share them on streaming platforms, and after I went on tour. I was overwhelmed to learn that the songs I'd written to help myself grow and feel were helping others in the same way. That public support and encouragement is what pushed me to pursue songwriting as a career - feeling like I had something unique to share, and learning that people agreed and not only that, but that the songs helped them.

People here love your covers of Serbian songs, how did that start? I know that your husband is from Serbia, so can you tell us how big of an influence he is on your song choices? Why Bajaga and EKV?

Thank you so much! At the end of 2019, I planned out a yearlong project to film and record one cover every week on YouTube for all of 2020. I had just come home from tour and loved the idea of getting to create at home again after so much travel. I knew I wanted one of the covers to be a Serbian song. Serbia is a big part of my home, life, and heart. Through my husband, I have heard so many amazing Serbian artists over the years that span many genres. I like to listen to and cover songs with emotive lyrics that make me feel things. I connect with both Bajaga and EKV's work on an emotional level, which is what made me choose these two songs.

What were the first reactions when you started covering these songs? People here love them, did you expect that kind of a reaction?

No, I'm in shock, truly! My American fanbase thought it was cool hearing me sing in a new language and liked the songs, but my shock comes from how much amazing feedback I have heard from the Serbian community. It's a

real honor to have this kind of support. I'm overwhelmed, filled with gratitude. I feel this deep want to thank each commenter on YouTube, respond to every comment and DM on Instagram, write back to every email. I know most artists don't respond to everyone, but I have to tell you it fills me with joy to hear from you, and means a lot to me that someone would take the time to reach out, so I feel like responding is something I *get* to do, not *have* to do. At first I was able to write back to everyone, but at this point I can't keep up! Please know I'm seeing everything though and it means more to me than I can articulate. My heart is full.

Your pronunciation of Serbian is great, how much time does it take for you to perfect a song? Does your husband help you with it?

Thank you so much, that's really generous! It takes about a week or two to really get comfortable with each word and the phrases as a whole. Ogi totally helps! After I practice a bit, I sing the song for him - we go line by line and he helps me correct any pronunciation or inflection mistakes. And as I get closer and closer to being ready to film, he will let me know if he hears any mistakes as I'm practicing. He's a data analyst but at this point should also be adding part-time translator and pronunciation coach to his resume, haha!

What Serbian songs or artists do you like, and which songs would you like to cover next?

This is a great but hard question, because we listen to such a wide variety that it's hard to choose. We more listen to playlists rather than one specific artist. Bajaga and Đorđe Balašević are the first two that come to mind. I know my next three Serbian covers but I'd like to keep them a surprise for now - one is the second Serbian song I ever heard. I fell in love with it the summer Ogi and I first met when living and working on Martha's Vineyard. I'll share snippets of each song on Instagram (@kimblyy) as I work on them!

Who were your musical inspirations growing up, and who is it now?

Through my parents, I grew up listening to and loving Joni Mitchell, Tracy Chapman, Billie Holiday, Shawn Colvin, Miles Davis. I also had an endless rotation of Musical Theatre shows in my headphones and blasting through my speakers. As I got a little older, I fell in love with Regina Spektor, Fiona Apple, Bright Eyes, Atmosphere, Girl Talk, Arcade Fire, Dodie Clark, Brandi Carlile. The list goes on. My favorite music though, and what I listen to most often, are singer/songwriters. I love lyric heavy songs that

talk about how it feels to live this life. Finding cathartic music to feel through it all is my favorite.

How did YouTube help you to reach a broader audience? Do you think it has the potential to change the music industry?

Yes! The YouTube algorithms are so very powerful. I promote each song I upload the same exact way on both YouTube and Instagram, but I have no control over whether my fanbase will like it and pass it on. As a YouTube creator I have access to the analytics and performance data of each song. Some songs are picked up by the algorithms faster than others. Some don't get picked up at all. Each member of the YouTube community has real power in helping artists they like reach new eyes and ears - every comment, like, share, and subscription helps the song tick higher and higher in the algorithms, which then kind of lights a spark that enables it to be suggested to more and more people. It's amazing to witness.

I don't know how Novosti found out about my Bajaga cover (they were the first publication, I believe), but I know that in the days right before it happened, I could see from the algorithm analytics that the video was really starting to pick up speed - it was getting recommended to strangers, they were watching it, liking it, commenting, subscribing, and sharing. It has a snowball effect. The more people that interact with the video, the bigger the snowball gets. After Novosti's article came out, it felt like it lit this spark and many other publications picked up the story as well. That press brought thousands of new views to the video, which then signaled YouTube's algorithms again. So yes, YouTube has absolutely helped me reach a broader audience, and yes, definitely has the power to change the music industry. YouTube is giving power to the people, to every single individual person. Their interests and actions decide what gets recommended to others.

How would you describe the music you typically create?

It's a blend of American folk and indie pop. My songs are lyric driven. They are emotive, contemplative, introspective. I write about the journey of reaching towards your highest version of self, and the messiness of being human. How does it feel to get stuck, to feel lost or low? How does it feel to step out of your comfort zone and grow? How does it feel to try to stay true to yourself in a world that's asking you to conform? I think vulnerability is a superpower. My songs are about living a life of vulnerability, feeling it all, and coming back home to yourself after you get lost in the noise.

What is the best advice you've been given?

"Shake away the comfort." My husband said it once years ago and it hit me so deeply I got up mid conversation and wrote it down. It's been taped to our fridge ever since. It's easy for all of us to settle, to live a small life instead of pursuing real joy. We wake up, we go to work, we come home, we go to sleep. So much of the human experience often becomes about watching the days pass us by rather

than truly living. We turn off. We avoid. We settle. It's so human. Life is hard, and there are endless ways to cope that slowly but surely extinguish that fire inside all of us. We as a society habitually turn off through too much TV, internet, social media, alcohol, drugs, food. Those temporary dopamine hits keep us comfortable and feeling safe, but it's not real. Stepping out of our comfort zone, shaking it away, facing and feeling through our fears and insecurities, is the only way we really get to grow and thrive and come alive. So much of my original music explores this experience and topic.

Have you ever visited Serbia, and would you like to?

Yes! Ogi's whole family lives in Serbia. I have visited many times! Half our heart and family live there! I love Serbia. Getting to visit feels like coming home because it is my second home. Your culture is so very warm and welcoming. And when I'm there the language becomes easier and easier to understand and also speak. It's amazing, my brain kind of shifts when I'm surrounded by your beautiful language in terms of its ability to soak it up. I feel like if we moved there I'd be fluent within a year.

What's next for you?

I just wrapped up my 52 cover campaign, so I'm planning to take a short break in February after a busy year of recording and filming. I definitely want to continue to share Serbian covers, and have new original songs coming starting this summer! I'll start releasing news about that on Instagram over the next few months. I'd also love to write original Serbian music. I wrote a Serbian song years ago, it would be fun to record that and share it.