



# THE ALBANIAN TRAILBLAZER

January 2025

Njeriu pa shokë, si muri pa tokë.



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The Albanian Trailblazer is an initiative led by the Albanian Trailblazers team. We are a nonprofit organization founded to empower Albanian students and young professionals through mentorship, workshops, and community projects.

This publication is intended to serve as a source of inspiration and a platform to celebrate the achievements and talents within the Albanian community.



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# Dr. Eni Halilaj - Advancing Human Mobility Through Biomechanics and AI

by Arlind Kacirani



At the intersection of engineering, medicine, and artificial intelligence, Dr. Eni Halilaj is pioneering innovative approaches to improve human mobility. An Associate Professor of Mechanical Engineering at Carnegie Mellon University, Dr. Halilaj directs the CMU Musculoskeletal Biomechanics Lab, where her team explores how biomechanics, machine learning, and wearable sensors can enhance rehabilitation strategies for individuals with movement impairments. Her group's interdisciplinary research focuses on understanding and optimizing movement mechanics in individuals with mobility impairments.

Dr. Halilaj's research focuses on understanding musculoskeletal disorders, such as osteoarthritis and mobility deficits after injury, by integrating computational modeling with real-world human movement data. Her work leverages AI-driven analysis to extract meaningful insights from motion capture, imaging, and sensor data, with the goal of developing personalized interventions that optimize mobility and prevent long-term disability. Through a National Science Foundation (NSF) CAREER Award, she is pioneering the use of wearable electronics (sensors and smartphone cameras) to democratize gait analysis, making it more accessible for both research and therapeutic applications. By bridging engineering with translational medicine, Dr. Halilaj is shaping the future of biomechanics-driven healthcare, offering new hope for individuals facing movement challenges.

Through her work, Dr. Halilaj not only advances fundamental research but also fosters interdisciplinary collaboration between engineers, physicians, and computer scientists. In collaboration with the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, her project "DeepGaitLab" aims to interface computer vision tools with open-source biomechanical modeling software, facilitating markerless motion tracking. This approach has the potential to revolutionize how clinicians assess and monitor patient movement in natural environments. Additionally, Dr. Halilaj is working with UPMC to predict the onset of post-traumatic osteoarthritis following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction surgery. By analyzing patient-specific data, this research seeks to develop predictive models that can inform personalized rehabilitation strategies.

She is the recipient of numerous awards including the NSF CAREER Award, American Society of Biomechanics Early Career Achievement Award, NIH K12 Career Development Scholarship, George Tallman Ladd Research Award, and College of Engineering Dean's Early Career Faculty Fellowship. Prior to joining the CMU faculty, Dr. Halilaj was a Distinguished Postdoctoral Fellow at Stanford University. She obtained her Ph.D. and B.A. degrees from Brown University.

# Simaku and the Order of the Albanian Audience

by Uljad Berdica

In recent months, the Albanian universe has been saturated with nostalgia and contemplations of ethnic pride, legacy, and representation. As we process the aftermath of what was arguably the first musically accomplished national festival in recent memory, it's imperative to examine the broader landscape of the Albanian audience, especially in light of recent revelations regarding the lifestyle of beloved music icons. Since the thoughts on my favorite Post-Immigrant Pop duo can marinate for future issues, we must address a more perpetual matter.

The recent discovery of beloved star Parashqevi Simaku living unhoused in Manhattan sparked various reactions - genuine concern for her health, deliberations about her cultural legacy, and inevitably, opportunistic agenda-pushing, limelight-seeking, half-baked articles by journalists that think visiting New York on a tourist visa with a camera operator qualifies them as diaspora experts. Through this cascade of reactions and commentary, familiar patterns that I had previously dismissed as personal biases re-emerged: Albanian journalists display an extraordinary sense of entitlement, and more critically, the Albanian audience diminishes and belittles performers in a unique way.

Despite the possibility of excellent journalism, most Albanian outlets prioritize shock-value over integrity. I am baffled at the outrageous demand for interviewees to adopt perfect literary Albanian, as asked of Simaku in the early 2000s. This linguistic tall order is presumptuous and disrespectful - no one owes such 'code-switching' accommodation to anyone, especially during the time they are exercising their professional duties. I 'perceive' all the journalists making fun of immigrants as having the same rhyming first name and voice. The more complex issue lies in how Albanian audiences interact with performers. While international audiences - be they intoxicated lads in the UK or culturally myopic New Yorkers - present their own challenges, they generally maintain a baseline respect for the performer's craft and time.

In contrast, the Albanian audience operates on a distorted economic model of enjoyment - performers are expected to show gratitude merely for the opportunity to perform, creating an inverted power dynamic that they cannot possibly break even from. The standard entertainment contract is straightforward: patrons pay for entertainment, receive it, and the transaction concludes. Performers may offer free promotional content to drive engagement, but the audience's investment remains their personal choice: to promote, support financially, or disengage.

In the Albanian context, however, the audience's attention creates perceived entitlements. Their emotional investment is viewed as equal to financial support, placing the artist in perpetual debt to the public sentiment. Performers often find themselves responsible for managing the audience's feelings and sense of pride. This parasocial dynamic limits the freedom to make good art.

In a society where emotional expression was long suppressed, the mere act of expressing feelings has become a form of currency. This creates a dynamic where entertainers are expected to subsist on emotional currency alone. When feelings compete with entertainment economics, it generates a cognitive dissonance that feeds our cynical tendencies, resulting in a landscape populated by affluent people we cannot stand and beloved artists that starve - a fundamental misalignment.

This arrangement mirrors a toxic relationship where emotional currency is expected to sustain material needs. The intoxicating love, admiration and infringement of privacy is expected to sufficiently sustain someone already scarred by them. As we consider mental well-being in our cultural sphere, let's agree that it is not healthy to use the cause of your illness to pay for its remedy. To end on a happier note, I've finally found an Albanian I may get to understand: Parashqevi Simaku. If a twenty something failed part-time comedian and engineering researcher can find understanding through an eternal diva and legendary performer like Simaku, maybe there is some hope of figuring each-other out. One down, about 8.5 mln to go. Baby steps.



## Trailblazer of the Month: Erblin Ribari

by Stivi Canka

This month, we are proud to spotlight Erblin Ribari, an Albanian entrepreneur making significant strides in finance, technology, and social impact. As recognized on Forbes Europe's 30 Under 30, Erblin's career has been an impressive journey filled with perseverance and success.

Erblin's journey in finance and economics began with a Bachelor of Business Administration in Finance & Economics from Texas Lutheran University. His later academic pursuits included a Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Quantitative Finance at the Rochester Institute of Technology and a Master of Science in Investment & Wealth Management from Imperial College London. Most recently, he earned a Master of Public Administration in Financial Markets & Economic Quantitative Analysis from Harvard University.

As the Chief Financial Officer of dua.com, Erblin plays a pivotal role in shaping the platform's success. Valued at \$53 million and boasting over six million users, dua.com started as a matchmaking platform connecting the Albanian diaspora but has since evolved into a global digital ecosystem.

Expanding beyond Albanians, dua.com now serves diverse communities in Poland, Turkey, Morocco, Germany, and Switzerland, bridging the gap between people through innovative digital solutions. Moreover, in addition to his desire to bring together Albanian communities abroad, one of Erblin's most ambitious projects is his mission to establish Kosovo's first stock exchange.

Recognizing the country's lack of foreign investment due to weak investor protections, he has been in discussions with the Kosovo government to launch an initiative that would provide businesses with access to capital and investment opportunities. His goal is not just to build infrastructure but to create a sustainable financial ecosystem that fosters economic growth and financial literacy.

At his core, Erblin Ribari is driven by a belief in the power of innovation and community-building. What began as a mission to reconnect the Albanian diaspora has evolved into a movement that strengthens global communities. His journey serves as an inspiration to young Albanians everywhere—proving that with vision and determination, they too can break barriers and create lasting impact.

# Vallja e Tropojës: A Symbol of Albanian Pride

by Serena Canka



Nestled in the heart of the Albanian Alps, Tropojë is a region where nature and tradition blend seamlessly. Among its rich cultural expressions, Vallja e Tropojës (The Dance of Tropojë) stands out—a captivating dance that symbolizes the resilience and spirit of the Albanian people. Recently inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, this dance is a powerful testament to the nation’s cultural identity.

Traditionally performed during spring celebrations, Vallja e Tropojës mirrors the rejuvenation of nature and community. Its dynamic movements evoke the rugged landscapes of Tropojë and the flight of eagles, symbols of freedom and strength. Dancers, adorned in traditional attire, form harmonious circles, their synchronized steps reflecting unity and collective pride.

The path to UNESCO recognition was paved by the dedication of the Tropojë community and cultural advocates. In December 2024, during the 19th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Asunción, Paraguay, Vallja e Tropojës earned its place on UNESCO’s prestigious list.

This recognition not only honors Tropojë but also instills pride among Albanians worldwide. It safeguards the dance for future generations, ensuring its vibrant rhythms and symbolic movements continue to resonate globally. For Albanians, Vallja e Tropojës is more than a dance—it is a living testament to their heritage, strength, and unity. As its rhythms echo through the mountains and beyond, they celebrate a history deeply rooted in tradition and the unyielding spirit of a people who proudly preserve their identity.

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