



**Philip Knox, Nathaniel Morris**

## "O father, what have you done?"

*Recovering the golden age of Yugoslavia's Roma music*

Researching Yugoslav Roma music, Philip Knox and Nat Morris tour the Balkans in search of the real thing. They find it in Skopje, in the person of Esmá Redžepova — the self-styled Queen of Gypsy music. From the ghetto to a Nobel prize nomination, Esmá claims never to have produced "anything but Roma music of the utmost purity".

The wedding that night would be in Topana, the oldest Roma settlement in Skopje — a collection of low, crumbling, whitewashed houses and colourful mansions jostling for space on the way up the hill towards the fortress of the American Embassy. The vibrant chaos of Topana's streets couldn't be more different to the blank grey grids of the Embassy, which is rumoured to run seven stories underground. But tonight all eyes were towards Topana: Erdzan would be singing at this wedding and Roma were flocking from all over Skopje for the event.

Erdzan, the latest star in a musical dynasty of Macedonian Roma, had travelled specially from the northern town of Kumanovo to sing, a sure sign that this wedding would be one of the biggest of the post-Ramadan season. Our taxi pulled up on a nondescript road, and we followed our friends and a small group of stragglers over a mound of cement and around the back of a building, towards the faint sounds of music and the buzz of the crowd that grew louder with every step. We turned the last corner and collided with the noise and colour of a Roma wedding in full swing. The bride and groom and their guests were dancing in the centre of the rough concrete plaza — they held hands in graceful interlocking spirals as they moved their feet to the delicate steps of an *horo*, the women in their glamorous six-inch heels effortlessly picking their way over the fissures and dribbles of run-off that laced the ground. Some women wore traditional Roma wedding costume, with elaborately embroidered velvet waistcoats and pantaloons, while girls wearing high-fashion cocktail dresses danced hand-in-hand with women in diamante-encrusted headscarves, covered from wrists to ankles.

At Roma weddings there is a strict divide between guests and spectators, and although the crowd was continuing to grow, it remained outwardly impassive as we elbowed our way through the static bodies to a good vantage point. There is a strange tension that exists between the family's desire to publicly display their wealth and popularity, whilst preserving the exclusivity of such an important household event. But the boundaries between public and private are policed by the community, and for the most part people know and respect their roles.

Although decorum places the spectators outside the heart of the wedding, everyone is unified by the music. Its sheer volume makes it all-enveloping, blasting out of a soundsystem that saturates the whole square. The musicians themselves, with portable microphones, range around the core of the wedding, pursued by a group of male family-members waving wads of cash — the musicians' *baksheesh*. The more money that was shoved into Erdzan's hands or under the collar of his shirt, the more passionately he would sing, signalling sudden switches in tempo to his high-octane rhythm section — drums, synthesizer and bass guitar. Meanwhile, the saxophone player paced around the arena formed by lines of dancers, trading riffs with Erdzan, and leading the band himself, in sometimes unexpected new directions. Banknotes were stuffed into his pockets, clothes and saxophone, plastered to his face with sweat, and fluttering in the band he wore around his forehead like the feathers of a headdress. As the melodies snaked out of the saxophone, shrill and raw, the lines of dancers fragmented — the bride appeared on a low roof, dancing the sinuous *cocek* as we edged our way out of the wall of spectators, the music fading back into the warm foreign darkness of our second night in Macedonia.

We had come to the Balkans in search of the missing pieces of a puzzle that combined a unique culture, a language, Cold War politics, and a beautiful music that encapsulated the hopes and desires of a people whose thousand-year journey had yet to bring them acceptance. The popular music produced by the Roma during the heyday of Tito's Yugoslavia was the music of urbane, cosmopolitan artists who represented a newly invigorated culture, and who were inspired by the spectacular array of influences available in the Yugoslav melting pot. Living in the UK, we had only glimpsed fragments of this culture, as we tried to reach back to the early careers of the few artists whose fame had endured and had crossed borders. We had begun to unearth pieces of their stories, but they would remain vague and somehow mysterious until we had seen for ourselves the places where the music lived.



Source: <http://www.esma.com.mk>

Our journey had started accidentally, and with one song — a bootleg of an early 1960s release by Esma Redzepova, the self-styled "Queen of the Gypsies". "Romano Horo" ("Roma Dance") is a rhythmically infectious invocation to dance, which on the back of the 60's fad for exotic steps combines western pop sensibilities with a gloriously confident reassertion of pride in Roma

tradition. Startled and excited by this music, so unfamiliar and yet so compelling, we tried to find more. Building our haphazard collection by trawling internet marketplaces in the lunch-hours of our day-jobs, we sifted through piles of generic Yugoslav folk music, only rarely stumbling across what we wanted. It was soon clear that there was something unique about Esma and her circle — artists like Medo Cun, Enver Rasimov, and Muharem Serbezovski. In a band with her husband Stevo Teodosievksi, an ethnically Macedonian accordianist and composer, Esma became the first proudly Roma musician with mainstream success. She and Stevo, through their patronage of talented young Roma, were the central figures in a vibrant Macedonian Roma cultural movement and many of their protégés went on to build successful solo careers. We soon realised that if we really wanted to understand this music, we would have to speak to Esma herself.

Esma's house is on a hill on the outskirts of Skopje, overlooking her childhood neighbourhood of Topana. She and Stevo moved there from Belgrade as Yugoslavia began to collapse in the early 1990s, and it was Stevo's final home

before his death in 1997. Esma now shares it with her adopted family (all of whom she trained as musicians), and she still performs with them most nights of the year, both in Macedonia and abroad. We had made contact with Esma the day before she began a US tour, and, not quite able to believe our luck, dashed across town only to arrive at her house far too early. Killing time on a public bench nearby, we looked out over Skopje as the uneven chorus of the mosques announced the call to prayer. When the time came, we went inside and paced silently as we waited for Esma to finish the TV interview which our arrival had loudly interrupted. On the walls, endless awards, trophies, and medals competed for space beside huge portraits and photographs of Esma herself, Esma and Indira Gandhi, Esma and Stevo, Esma and Tito. But despite the intimidating set-up, Esma was kindness itself, and made it clear that regardless of her great success, she was still filled with the deep generosity that characterises Roma all across the Balkans, plying us with fruit, sweets, mineral water and thick black coffee.

She was equally generous with her time, and in the course of our interview we discussed everything from her travels with Stevo to her strong sense of Macedonian patriotism, her humanitarian work and Nobel Peace Prize nomination. Naturally, we also wanted to hear about her early career, and the evolution of the music that had drawn us to Macedonia. Born in 1943 in the Topana slums, in a house shared by Roma and Albanian families, Esma helped her father carry his bootblack's box into town every morning. She showed early promise as a singer and dancer, but her parents, though loving, were hostile to the idea of a singing career, particularly since their estranged eldest daughter had fled an arranged marriage and now scraped a living as a *kafana* singer in Ohrid. At the age of thirteen Esma herself was already showing the wilful independence that would shape her career, fending off her mother's pressure to get married by threatening suicide. It is perhaps no coincidence that when the turning point of Esma's career arrived soon after, it was marked by a song whose theme was the grief of arranged and premature marriage. One evening, unknown to her parents, Esma snuck out to perform at the Radio Skopje talent show. Her chosen piece was the traditional Roma song "Abre, Babi, So Kerdzan?" ("O Father, what have you done?") — a song in which a young girl mourns her father forcing her into marriage. Although only a child — not to mention a Roma who was singing in Romani — Esma was the uncontested winner that night. Among the impressed audience-members was a successful young accordionist, Stevo Teodosievski. An ambitious and far-sighted musician, Stevo had already been experimenting with Roma music in his folk band. Indeed, the first Roma folk music to be broadcast for a popular audience in Yugoslavia was the Teodosievski ensemble's "Basal, Basal" in the late 1950s. Stevo's folk ensemble, not unusually for a Yugoslav group, already included many Roma instrumentalists. But the Romani lyrics of "Basal, Basal", even though sung by an ethnic Macedonian, still managed to surprise — even shock — the mainstream. Daringly, Stevo decided to go one step further: he would ask a Roma girl to be the lead singer of his band. That girl would be the newly discovered Esma Redzepova. Stevo asked his clarinetist, Medo Cun, about the young singer he'd seen at the talent show. Medo, himself a Roma, knew Esma from the neighbourhood, and set off at once on his bicycle to invite her to meet with Stevo. With some difficulty, he convinced Esma's father to allow her join the ensemble and learn to sing formally. A crucial chapter in the history of popular music in Yugoslavia had begun.

Medo brought Stevo and Esma together, and throughout the 1960s he would continue to be a pivotal figure in the Ansambl Teodosievski, giving their

recordings a raw soulfulness with his wild but virtuosic clarinet solos and the skills he had developed as a player of Calgija — a sophisticated urban Muslim music. Originally from a Kosovan Roma family, he would later become one of the most important figures in Yugoslav Roma music, crafting rhythmically restless compositions and arrangements which often tended towards an Eastern or Turkish tradition.

When we met Esma, we showed her our small but precious collection of vinyls by Yugoslav Roma singers. She was surprised to find among them her first big hit, the 1961 single featuring "Abre, Babi, Sokerdzan?" (the title's spelling corrupted by the record label's poor transcription) and "Caje Sukarije", a traditional song first popularised by Esma which can still be heard playing on hi-fis across Skopje, and especially the Suto Orizari district. This early version of "Caje Sukarije" opens with Medo's clarinet and Stevo's accordion dancing delicately and mournfully over Turkish-sounding scales, before a driving rhythm erupts from the tarabuka. Esma's voice is at its strongest and most rich, weaving an expressive texture of ornaments, her throat catching on the most impassioned notes. Esma's singing style seems designed to emphasise the resonances between the Romani language and Hindi, both derived from a common ancestor, Sanskrit. Appearing on a record that includes the "Bojate Bane Buski", an "indijska narodna" song in what Esma claims is an Indian language (although we have been unable to identify it), "Caje Sukarije" reveals the preoccupation with India that would follow Esma throughout her career, both as the cultural homeland of the Roma people and as a political ally of Tito's Yugoslavia. Like so much of the best pop music, "Caje Sukarije" is a love song — but a complex love song, often bitterly ironic in tone. Usually translated as "Beautiful Girl", the title also carries the sense of "Good Girl", telling the story of a demure young woman who through her innocence or propriety — her "goodness" — ignores her lovesick admirer as he begs her with trancelike repetitions to turn and face him:

Little girl, beautiful and good,  
 don't slip by me, behind my back.  
 Don't slip by me, behind my back, girl.  
 You've roasted and eaten me,  
 you've burgled my soul —  
 turn around and look at me, girl.  
 You avert your eyes while my soul's burning —  
 bring water, little girl, beautiful and good,  
 don't slip by me, behind my back, girl.

Esma herself couldn't be more different to the demure "good girl" of "Caje Sukarije". Now living with Stevo and the rest of the Teodosievski group, she waited impatiently for him to ask the obvious question and propose marriage to her. Again violating Roma tradition, she took matters into her own hands, and gave her band-leader an ultimatum: either he marry her, or face her departure from the ensemble. Within months Stevo had returned to his native Skopje, to begin the elaborate sequence of formalities that lead up to a traditional Roma wedding.

Although this was the beginning of a devoted companionship on which they built their professional life, not all Roma marriages were so successful. The experience of Enver Rasimov, the Ansambl Teodosievski's precocious young tarabuka player, shows how the sad situation described in the song "Abre Babi, So Kerdzan" could apply to young boys as much as girls in the Roma community. At the moment when his career as a drummer and singer was

taking off, carefully fostered by Stevo and Esma, his father brought him back to Skopje and arranged his marriage to a local girl at the age of 13. Although, much later, Enver would begin a successful solo career as a singer, he would never again achieve the huge popularity he found as a member of the Teodosievski Ensemble.

Clutching the CDs she had given us as gifts, we left Esma's house with the dizzying sense that, for all we had learned, we had gathered more questions than answers. Our taxi ride took us back past the hulking American Embassy towards our temporary home in Suto Orizari on the outskirts of town. Built in the aftermath of Skopje's 1963 earthquake, which flattened much of the Topana quarter, Suto Orizari — or Sutka as it is affectionately known — is the largest Roma community in Europe. Its population consisting of Macedonian Roma and Albanians, along with Kosovan Roma refugees and even a small number South Asian and Middle Eastern migrants, Sutka is thought of as inaccessible and even dangerous by many Macedonians. Often, when we told the wealthy young Macedonians we met that we were staying in Sutka, their reaction was disbelief or concern. But despite these warnings, from the moment of stepping into Sutka we felt the infectious excitement that animated its living streets, and we enjoyed the warmest welcome and most profound hospitality of our trip. Everywhere in Sutka, music pours out of car windows, gardens, and the heavy sound systems of the wedding bands that appear suddenly and without warning across the neighbourhood. The beautiful and delicate Romani language, which is in danger of extinction in other parts of the former Yugoslavia, can be heard everywhere. Some Roma still follow tradition and work with horses, and ponies pulling ramshackle carts jostle for space with rusting Tito-era Yugos and brand-new BMWs. We were overwhelmed by the generosity of the Roma of Sutka, and their refusal to be defeated by the difficult circumstances that surround them. And it's easy to see that living is hard there. Still struggling against the deeply ingrained discrimination of Macedonian society, Roma struggle to find work, and when they do, wages are low. The infrastructure is inadequate, with occasional blackouts, water shortages, and drainage problems. The older generation are still striving to come to terms with a health and social system that has lost the egalitarianism of Tito's socialism, but has only intensified its impenetrable bureaucracy. And Roma children, who must learn Macedonian as a second language, fall behind in primary schools staffed by teachers who are often unsympathetic if not openly racist. For Roma, the situation is worse now than it ever was before Yugoslavia's split, as the Balkan fixation with ethnicity has pushed them further towards the margins of society. But although the political situation has worsened, there has always been a layer of prejudice against Roma. In his memoir, co-written with Esma, Stevo describes the ugly examples institutional racism he came across in the early 1960s at Radio Skopje, "comments that I find painful to repeat, to the effect that Esma was not a 'real' Macedonian". Esma herself denies any knowledge of this, and her friends and colleagues that we spoke to during our travels always seemed to surprised to hear it. Stevo suggests that experiences like this are part of what influenced his decision, in the early 1960s, to load Esma and the Ansambl Teodosievski onto a bus to pursue their ambitions in the beating heart of Yugoslavia's cultural life: Belgrade.

The Belgrade Esma and Stevo migrated to in the early 1960s was a vibrant and inclusive cultural hub. As our friend Milos drove us through Belgrade of today, he lamented the physical destruction and cultural decline that nationalism has brought with it. The skeletal bombed-out ministries of central Belgrade are an insistent reminder that old wounds have yet to heal, and that despite the

western-leaning governments of recent years, Serbia remains a country hypnotised by the idea of its own beleaguered status. But despite the social and economic difficulties that affect the country, Milos and his father, the prominent Roma scholar Dragoljub Ackovic, are working hard to reverse the marginalisation of Roma that has only deepened since the fall of Tito's regime. Their Museum of Roma Culture, the only institution of its kind in the Balkans, presents the Roma's rich heritage in a positive and intelligent way. Funding cuts, however, have driven them from their original central-Belgrade premises, and the museum is about to reopen on the outskirts of the city. In some ways this is a good thing: the new area is home to more Roma, and it will offer the local community the space in which to explore its own culture. The building housing the new museum has been donated by a colourful local character, a Montenegrin hero of WWII who, like Stevo Teodosievski, was deeply involved in Tito's Partisan resistance movement. Despite Britain's role in the NATO bombing campaign in 1999, he declared that he had a soft spot for the British: he himself had helped to rescue dozens of the RAF pilots who went down over the Partisan mountain strongholds during the Second World War. His missing arm with its three fingers testifies to the intensity of the struggle.

As we trawled the fleamarkets and record shops of endlessly sprawling Belgrade, from the chic boulevards of the city centre to narrow alleys of Zemun, we were struck by the absence of that proud and powerful expression of Roma culture found in Sutka. For many Roma, life in Belgrade is easier than that faced by the Roma of Macedonia. Serbian Roma are, for the most part, more assimilated into mainstream culture; the discrimination against them, while still strong, is diluted by the simple fact that they are scattered across the city and harder to identify. But assimilation is not the same as integration — often a community's attempts to go unnoticed are bought at the price of their culture. It is important to remember that Sutka, with its poor infrastructure and the deep social exclusion that affects its residents, nevertheless plays a vital role in ensuring the survival of the Roma culture. Its status as a closed community at once limits the opportunities of those born there, and protects the incredibly valuable language and traditions which are in danger of being lost in other parts of the Balkans. Our bad attempts to speak Romani, cheerfully tolerated in Sutka, were met with confusion if not outright suspicion in Belgrade, where the majority of Roma were unable to speak their ancestral language. Even in Crni Panter, a heaving bar on the River Sava where Roma musicians play late into the night, people clearly felt uncomfortable at our bungled efforts to speak their language in public.

The musicians of Crni Panter, all impressive virtuosos, switch effortlessly between Roma songs and Serbian folk classics, matching the expectations of their audience. On the weekends, when the bar is flooded with young and old Belgraders, the repertoire is dominated by conventional Serbian folk music. But on another night, mid-week, we caught a glimpse of something different: with an audience made up mostly of Belgrade Roma, the Crni Panter band played more and more Roma songs, with a contagious energy and irreverence. They were surprised that we, as foreigners, knew a little about the music, and could even sometimes sing along (albeit badly). On that night, we tore ourselves away from our new friends in the small hours of the morning, just as a pleasure-boat was emerging from the darkness of the River Sava to moor up alongside the bar and supply the players with a fresh batch of revellers who would enjoy the music there late into the night. The musical code-switching that we saw in Crni Panter, with players seamlessly shifting into different styles depending on their audience, mirrors the linguistic code-switching that

the Roma manage so effortlessly across the Balkans. This willingness to adapt to the needs of the listeners is part of what made popular Roma music so successful in its Yugoslav heyday.

To speak of Roma music in Yugoslavia is to embrace in one phrase a richly complex spectrum of styles and approaches. In Serbia, we immediately heard the fundamental differences that marked out the Roma music of Belgrade from what we had experienced in Skopje. Historically, these differences are due to the migration of the ever-adaptable Roma as they encounter and assimilate the cultures they have been exposed to over the course of centuries. Whether in the Balkans, Russia, or Spain, the Roma have consistently appropriated and transformed each region's folk traditions, often shirking local instruments in favour of more versatile classical ones like accordion, clarinet, or guitar. In the Eastern Balkans, Roma play a music that shows the influence of complex rhythms and elaborate ornamentation associated with "oriental" music, perpetuated by the strong Ottoman presence in the region. In the Western Balkans, Roma music is closer to the square rhythms and subtly shifting tonalities of the Serbian folk tradition. Naturally, there is no solid border that exists between these two modes of Roma music; Yugoslav musicians freely borrowed from both styles as they pleased. It is in Southern Serbia, however, that we find the sharpest shift from the rhythmically elaborate and percussion-dominated eastern style to the more stable western style. An almost forgotten singer of the early 1970s, Trajko Ajdarevic Tahir from Lescovac in Southern Serbia, occupies the mid-point in the spectrum between these two styles, his voice picking out beautifully controlled melodies while the rhythms of his music drive restlessly underneath. Muja Alijevic, an important figure in Roma music in Southern Serbia during the Tito era, shifted even within a single record between the so-called "eastern" and "western" styles. At the same time, musicians like Dusko Petrovic and Aleksander Sisic from the more northerly parts of Serbia were gaining great popularity through their driving, violin-driven style of Roma music, playing virtuosic melodies that danced up and down the whole range of their instruments. We were excited to learn in Belgrade that Aleksander Sisic was in fact a relative of our friend and guide Milos — although he has been embraced by the Serbian folk scene, Sisic's Roma heritage is often ignored or denied by those who continue to be moved by his music.

Of the Serbian Roma musicians, Saban Bajramovic was king, and the least bound by the constraints of tradition. Born in 1936, as far as anyone can tell, he was a child of the Second World War. His parents, like so many Yugoslav Roma, were killed in the round-ups and bloody fighting brought by the Nazi invasion, and the young Saban grew up wild on the bombed-out streets of his native Nis, a formative experience that no doubt played a part in his later fast-living rejection of authority. Conscripted into the army, at the age of nineteen he deserted and fled in search of the girl he loved. As a punishment he was sentenced to three years of hard labour on the prison island of Goli Otok, a sentence raised to five years after he told the court that the barren penal colony would never be able to hold him. However, despite horrific conditions and violent confrontations with other prisoners, he managed to survive and even to flourish, and it was there that he learned to read, formed his first band — the Black Mambas — and was inspired to write the song that started his career, "Pelno Me Sam" ("I Am Imprisoned").

In his music, Saban incorporated elements of the jazz pieces favoured by the prison orchestra, of the Mexican music that was then so popular in Yugoslavia, and of both Serbian popular folk music and the more "oriental" styles favoured

by southern Serbian Roma musicians that he had picked up as a child on the streets of Nis. Saban's smokey, soulful voice and leering, effortless cool assured his rapid rise to stardom throughout Yugoslavia — no mean feat for a battle-scarred ex-convict and all the more remarkable for the fact that the majority of his compositions were in the Romani language. Over the course of more than forty years, Saban's Romani lyric poetry expressed to a multi-ethnic Yugoslav audience traditional themes of love, loss, hope and desire, and eloquently conveyed the melancholy of the Roma experience. However, he never descended into "gypsy" pastiche, and his powerful and yearning music constantly defied both "folk" and "pop" conventions, his atmospheric verses breathing cigarette smoke over an instrumental moodiness borrowed from jazz and flamenco.

In our conversation with Esma Redzepova — the "Queen of the Gypsies" to Saban's "King" — one issue we kept returning to was the amazing hybridity that seemed characteristic of the best Roma music, hers included. Esma couldn't have disagreed more, claiming that she herself had never produced anything but Roma music of the utmost purity, uncontaminated, as it were, by any outside influence. The essential Roma nature of her music is, she claims, what makes it unique, and she portrays her whole career as one long expression of Roma purity. When we pressed her to explain the huge array of influences that we heard in the music, some of them explicitly announced on the record sleeves themselves ("indijska narodna", "hebrejska narodna", "turska narodna"), she rationalised them as either individual exceptions to the rule, or expressions of a deeper Roma-ness that stemmed from the culture's eastern roots.

But despite Esma's claims about her own music, she didn't hesitate to point to the influence of "foreign" traditions on other Yugoslav Roma musicians. In particular she singled out Muharem Serbezovski, one of Yugoslavia's biggest Roma stars in the 1970s and 80s, who, she claims, makes music that is "more Turkish than Roma" — a sentiment shared by various other Roma we met on our travels, despite their more general appreciation for his music.

Born in Sutka, Muharem was a protégé of Esma and Stevo's academy for talented young Roma musicians. In 1968, at the age of eighteen, Muharem released his first hit single, which contains one of his rare songs in Romani, "Gili E Halisake", an upbeat "ciganska pesma" for which Muharem shares a composition credit. Frantic accordion lines accompany his passionate, ornamented delivery, suddenly giving way to a heavily syncopated rhythmic break which leaves space for another of Medo Cun's roaring clarinet solos. Meanwhile, the title track, "Dzemile", the anguished tones of a man's appeal to his lover float over a lolling tarabuka beat until the clarinet solo — once again the unmistakable work of Medo Cun — kicks in and transports the mournful pop-song to a different level. The song lacks the energy characteristic of much of Muharem's later — and better — work, but it does demonstrate the first hints of the Turkish influences that would come to dominate successive releases, particular "Sta Ce Mi Bogatstvo", an early record consisting entirely of Turkish folk songs translated into Serbian.

From the start, then, Muharem was careful to appeal to the widest possible range of listeners, without sacrificing his own idiosyncratic style. Like many other Macedonian musicians, Muharem left his native Skopje in order to carry his career forward; but unlike Esma and Stevo, he chose to settle not in Belgrade but in that other Yugoslav cultural hub, Sarajevo. As the old Ottoman heart of the Balkans, Sarajevo was home to a uniquely cosmopolitan,

multi-ethnic culture, and this must have helped to shape Muharem's music — although perhaps, it was suggested to us, both the move to Sarajevo and his mining of Turkish pop songs for inspiration were part of an attempt to break free from Esma's influence, turning east in the search for a unique sound just as Esma (going even further) had looked to India.

But to define Muharem through the use of Turkish elements in his music would be unwise; his range of influences, like that of all the other Roma musicians of the time, was hugely complex. His music also reveals that Esma was not the only Roma singer to explore her ancestral link to India — one of his most famous songs, 1974's "Ramu, Ramu", was named after a character in the Indian film *Remember My Song* that so captivated Yugoslav audiences that year, the Roma in particular. Bollywood movies had been flooding into Yugoslavia for years as a cheap alternative to Hollywood, thanks in part to the close political links between Tito and Nehru's Non-aligned India. At the same time, an emerging awareness of their Indian origins was captivating Roma across Yugoslavia, while the fact that Roma audiences could understand much of the Hindi language of Bollywood films further increased the power of this newly consolidated idea of Indian ancestry. Soon Yugoslavs of all ethnicities were singing along to Muharem Serbezovski's Serbian-language tribute to an Indian film character, the music itself mixing "oriental" Roma tarabuka rhythms, popular Yugoslav folk instrumentation and a "modern" electric guitar line. It was "Ramu, Ramu", with its complex web of cultural interchanges, that cemented Muharem's place in the hearts and music collections of Roma to this day. Indeed, Muharem was so acknowledged as a "legenda" by our friends in Sutka, we felt we had to try to track him down; the last we had heard, he was still in Bosnia, where he had spent the war years and was now a (somewhat controversial) political figure. Muharem's adopted home of Sarajevo, after the sprawling concrete grandeur of Belgrade and Skopje's dusty provincial charm, was a different world. For the first time on our journey through the region we saw significant numbers of tourists, and it was hard to find a quiet corner of the Bascarsija in which to collect our thoughts that wasn't swamped by souvenir-hunters in search of copper coffee-pots and pens made of old bullet casings. A newly invigorated Islamic influence was clear to see across the city, from the vast cemetery on the hills overlooking the city, all the more tragic for their untarnished white gravestones, to the beautiful new Islamic University on the outskirts of the old town. And so it is perhaps appropriate that, although we were unable to meet with Muharem, who was at that time abroad visiting his brother Ajnur — another great Roma singer — we did manage to locate a copy of his Romani translation of the Qu'ran in the Medrasa bookshop opposite the Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque. Although a beautiful object, Muharem's huge, richly decorated book is perhaps more expensive than what the average Roma could afford, and our Macedonian Roma friends, while admitting they had never seen a copy, were sceptical of the project. But it remains, nonetheless, an interesting addition to the complex religious life of the Romani people, which is characterised by allegiance to the dominant local faith mixed with a joyously syncretic attitude. Redzep and Izmeta, our hosts in Sutka, identify as Muslim — but although Izmeta doesn't eat pork, Redzep confesses to a weakness for sausages, and their house is equally decorated with Islamic and Orthodox Christian images. The deep spirituality of the Roma is not so much rooted in theology as household and community-based ritual, epitomised by Ederlez, the most important festival in the Roma calendar. Celebrated by Roma populations across Europe and the Middle East, Ederlez is neither Muslim nor Christian and is linked to Kurdish and Iranian new year rituals. Perhaps the best known modern expression of this synthesising approach to religion was the funeral of Saban in 2008, which was presided over by representatives of both

the Muslim and Christian faiths. Although very unusual for Orthodox Serbia, this kind of practice matches the inclusive approach of the Roma, and was a fitting tribute to the great singer. However, Muharem's devout Islamic scholarship shows that many Roma embrace the religious mainstream, be it Christian or Muslim.

Putting Muharem's fascinating book back on its shelf in the Medrasa, we struck out into Sarajevo in search of the local Roma music scene. To our surprise, despite the city's strong musical tradition, this was hard, if not impossible, to find. In fact, even though Sarajevo is home to several hardworking Roma organisations, the Roma are far less culturally visible in Bosnia than in either Serbia or Macedonia — or even, one senses, Kosovo — despite the extreme difficulties they face there. During the recent war in Bosnia, many Roma fled as refugees, as part of a more general Bosnian exodus. But it is perhaps an older war that explains the invisibility of the Roma in Bosnia — specifically the ruthless efficiency with which the Croatian fascists of World War II acted against the country's Roma population. Anyone overheard using the Romani language was murdered on the spot, and whole Roma settlements were rounded up and their inhabitants systematically killed. A generation of Roma were too traumatised by their experiences to want to pass on such potentially dangerous knowledge as the Romani language, and tens of thousands of Roma children were taught that their very survival hinged on shedding all signs of a distinct Roma identity.

Although we can be fairly sure that a good portion of the best Bosnian *sevdah* musicians were probably of Roma origin, it was painfully obvious that no distinctly Roma music had been produced by Bosnian Roma musicians for quite some time, except perhaps at intimate gatherings of friends and family. Muharem seemed to have been the only popular (and proudly self-identifying) Roma singer in Sarajevo for decades — although groups like Sar-E-Roma, who played in an affected Russian "Gypsy" style, were based in the city. The adopted anthem of the Balkan Roma, immortalized by Saban Bajramovic, is "Djelem, Djelem", a haunting elegiac Romani song that describes the suffering experienced under the mysterious "Black Legions", who represent, some suggest, the Ustasi of the 1940s. Perhaps, in Bosnia, these black legions had done their gruesome work all too well.

I've been wandering and wandering over long roads —  
 I've even met happy Roma.  
 O my people, where could you be coming from  
 with your tents down these happy roads?

O, my people,  
 O, my children!

I used to have a big family  
 until the Black Legion murdered them.  
 Come with me my people, wherever you are,  
 for our Roma paths have opened.  
 The time has come: stand up, people.  
 We make ourselves rise high.

O, my people,  
 O, my children!

Of course, "Djelem, Djelem" does not just focus on the persecution and physical destruction of Roma communities; but while the narrator of that song also meets "happy" and "lucky" Roma, it is clear that even today the sentiment of this anthemic song is in many ways still true. For while the vast majority of Yugoslav Roma have lived for generations in settled communities, they are in some ways still a nomadic people, driven by political and economic forces to keep wandering in search of freedom, safety, and the opportunity to make a better life. Sadly, this is also true for many of those musicians who had defined the golden age of Yugoslav popular music in the 1960s and 1970s.

For every artist we tracked down, there were many others who were impossible to trace, who had left only echoes and rumours behind them. But Esmā's story of continued success, it seemed, was rare indeed. Muharem Kruezi and Bedrije Misin of the Orkestar Brace Koko, who in 1970s Kosovo produced some of the most beautiful Roma music, are now scattered across Europe from Belgrade to Belgium. Medo Cun, having years ago left his family home in Sutka, a few streets from where we stayed, is living out his old age in Brussels, and it is well known that his rewards have not equalled the contribution he made to the cultural life of Yugoslavia. Trajko Ajdarević Tahir released a handful of successful records, died young and sank into obscurity. The few people we met who remember him suggested alcoholism was to blame. Neat Gashi, a Northern Macedonian pioneer of Romani-language music, is largely forgotten, though his legacy lives on through his son Djemail, one of the most popular Roma wedding singers of recent years.

The story of the flowering of musical creativity among Roma in Tito's Yugoslavia is a story that touches the deep social and political problems still plaguing the region. But more than anything, it is the story of a moving and beautiful music, imbued with the optimistic hope of a people whose dreams were never fulfilled. With more work, we hope that we can take the music we found, the histories we learnt, and, with the help of the friends we made, find a way to restore all of these artists, obscure and well-known alike, to the central place they deserve in the history of Yugoslav music.

Phil and Nat, together with the Belgrade Museum of Roma Culture (Serbia) and the National Roma Centrum (Macedonia), are currently developing a touring multimedia exhibition on the history of Yugoslav Roma music 1960–1980, to be supplemented with an audio release documenting and exploring the key songs of the period.

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