



## Esma Redžepova

---

*"Queen of Gypsy Music"*

All over the Balkans, Romani men are known as expert musicians; Romani women and their participation in musical arts have only recently been the focus of scholarly attention (Seeman 2002, 2007; Sugarman 2003; Pettan 1996a, b, and c, and 2003; Potuoğlu-Cook 2007; Silverman 1996b, 2000b, 2003). Building on Chapter 6, which examined dance in terms of gender and sexuality, this chapter looks at the history of Romani female singers and concretizes one performer's strategy. Esma Redžepova is perhaps the most famous Romani singer in the world. Though atypical, Esma's life illuminates how and why she resisted norms and became a star.<sup>1</sup> Esma was proclaimed "Queen of Romani Music" in India in 1976, European Primadonna in 1995, and Romani Millennium Singer in 2000; she has toured internationally for more than fifty years, has given some 10,000 concerts, and has recorded hundreds of albums ([www.esma.com.mk](http://www.esma.com.mk)).

I argue that Esma's success was built on a number of paradoxes: she succeeded in part because of her non-Romani mentor/husband's marketing ability; her image drew on sanitized stereotypes of Romani women as exotic, nubile, emotional, and musical on the one hand, yet rooted in families on the other; and finally, she bridged the ambivalent Romani attitude of requiring, aestheticizing, and respecting female musical performances in nonprofessional realms while stigmatizing them in professional settings. Professional music has been an important medium of exchange between Roma and non-Roma, and the musical marketplace has been the site where gendered images are exchanged. As I emphasized in Chapter 6, the association of women with sexuality is symbolic capital to use in the marketplace and negotiate in Romani contexts.

## Romani Female Music Making in Historical Perspective

The history of Romani female musicians and the relationship between singing and sexuality are discussed in text supplement 10.1. Given the stigma of loss of modesty and reputation associated with singing in public for strangers, it is not surprising that among Balkan Muslim Roma there are very few female professional vocalists in comparison with male professional vocalists. A cursory review of Šutkafest 1993 (see Chapter 8) reveals that out of some seventeen Romani groups, only four or five singers were females, and of those, two had husbands also performing. Similarly, at the 1998 Romska Vasilica singing contest held in Macedonia, out of nine singers there was only one woman, Esma Redžepova. According to the 1997 Albanian Romani CD *Rromano Dives* (Romani Day), in the past women did not sing professionally at weddings. This situation also seems to be true for non-Romani Balkan Muslims and for Roma from other areas of Europe.<sup>2</sup>

Those women who defy convention are subject to ridicule and charges of immorality.<sup>3</sup> Salif Ali, a Bulgarian Romani drummer, explained that it was totally unacceptable for his daughter to become a singer. When the rare set of parents do agree to a daughter's singing, the career often ends with marriage if the husband is not a musician. Pettan writes of a young Kosovo Romani woman who was a wedding singer and became a recording artist: "After she married, her husband strongly opposed the continuation of her musical career, so now she sings only in a private setting for family and friends" (1996a:316–317).<sup>4</sup> One way to circumvent public disapproval is to marry a musician. This mitigates the professional's immodesty because one's husband (or father or brother) serves as the protector of the wife's honor. Indeed, many female Balkan Romani vocalists today perform with family members.<sup>5</sup> Given these restrictions, Esma Redžepova's life is quite extraordinary.

### Esma Redžepova: Early Years

Esma was born in 1943 in Skopje, Macedonia, to a poor Muslim family. Her mother, Čanija, was from a village near Skopje and a seamstress who sewed šalvari for Romani patrons. Her father, Ibrahim, was a boot-black; as a child, Esma carried his shoe shining supplies for him. He lost a leg during World War II, was too poor to buy a prosthesis, and used crutches. In 1941 Ibrahim was wounded in a Nazi bombardment of Skopje; of about 400 people injured, only four survived. Esma recalled: "I was also a hardworking child. I delivered milk to households, and I cleaned windows in a four-story house for pocket money. I liked to go to the movies, the puppet theater; I was in love with all the arts. We all went to school and learned to read and write; one of my brothers went on to higher education."

Esma's father had a good voice and knew many songs but never performed professionally, and her older brother was a founding member of the Phralipe KUD (see Chapter 6). As a child, Esma sang and danced in school productions, and her talent was noticed by Pece Atanasovski, who worked for Radio Skopje; he invited her to sing for an amateur program called "The Microphone Is Yours." She feared her parents' wrath when they found out that she had sung over the radio:

This was in 1956. We were all sitting at home—we would listen to this program every Sunday. I knew I was going to be on the radio . . . so I suggested we take a nap, and I covered my head! On the radio [we heard]: "What's your name?" "Esma Redžepova." "How old are you?" "Eleven years old." "What will you sing?" "*A bre babi so kerdžan* [What did you do, father?]." I sang, and everybody hid their heads under the covers. Father said: "Is that our Esma? No it can't be, because our Esma is asleep under the covers . . . it must be another Esma. There are many Esma Redžepovas in Skopje. . . ." The next day when father went to work shining shoes, all his friends gathered around him and congratulated him for my performance. But he said, "No that was someone else, it wasn't my Esma. She was at home sleeping." His friends responded, "Don't you understand? That [program] was recorded earlier. It was Esma." I got a big slap when he got home!

Esma explained how her community was suspicious of a female singing in public: "A Gypsy girl, beautiful, who also sang—that would have been really dangerous. The family decided that I, like all other girls, I should marry early, and have children, and obey my husband without question, and work" (Teodosievski and Redžepova 1984:89).<sup>6</sup> Esma remembers, "I was a girl at the time, I wasn't yet married. . . . According to our tradition it was a shame to sing publicly." Singing was an especially sensitive topic in the Redžepova household because of the disgrace Esma's sister Sajka had brought on the family:

For Ibrahim, my father, himself a wonderful singer, really hated singing! Or at least singing in public. For him singing in public meant singing in low grade restaurants (kafanas), it meant drinking and carousing. And he had every reason to think that way. My sister Sajka, a pretty talented girl had brought disgrace on the family and become a singer in a kafana. Ibrahim couldn't get over it: his lovely Sajka singing to drunks who smashed glasses for kicks. For him, Sajka was "dead. . . ." I believe that had she kept on and had more luck, she would have become a great singer. . . . How beautifully she sang! I listened to her in wonder. My father and mother cursed her. If only Sajka had someone to lead her, to show her the way. But the kafana "ate her up. . . ." I remembered Sajka's fate, because something similar awaited me too. And it also helped me to understand why my parents would so bitterly resent me even thinking of becoming a singer [90–91].

Despite parental disapproval, Esma's brothers supported her first steps toward a singing career: "My brothers . . . never mentioned in front of my parents where and when they had seen me in town. . . . My brothers would say to our parents: 'Why do you worry so much about Esma, she is not Sajka! She has a will of her own and if she decides to sing she will sing! But she will be a real singer, an artist!'" (91). Similarly, Esma's teacher told her father: "Don't spoil your daughter's chances, Ibrahim! She is a great talent. Singing does not necessarily mean singing in a kafana" (93).

Esma was indeed strong-willed: "I became emancipated and stopped wearing dimije, which I thought clumsy and impractical, so I wore my shabby flowered dresses, handed down from my sister, but still, 'city-style'" (89). Esma also resisted her parents' marrying her off in her teens. When her mother mentioned marriage, Esma replied, "I tell you, I'll hang myself in the little square in front of the school, on the monument. . . . I don't know if my mother really believed my threats, but any way, they didn't manage to marry me off at the age of thirteen!" (92). She even had to fight off taunts from relatives. Her sister-in-law Veba often taunted her: "Ha! You want to be singer, do you? You'll wash windows and scrub floors as a married woman." "Hey, I will not, you know. I don't want to be a servant, I want to be an artist." "You can want all you want when your parents marry you off. They've already had offers" (91-92).

When she was eleven years old, Esma was brought to the attention of Stevo Teodosievski (1934-1997), an Eastern Orthodox ethnic Macedonian accordionist and folk music arranger who worked for Radio Skopje and later became her husband and mentor. The introduction was made by Medo Čun, a Romani clarinet player in Stevo's orchestra and a friend of Esma's brother's (see Chapter 2). According to Esma, Medo said to Stevo: "I have to show you this little girl because she is incredible when she sings and dances at weddings." Stevo was a self-taught musician from a poor Kočani family.

Esma was very intimidated during her first meeting with Stevo. His initial question to her was, "Do you smoke?" She answered negatively. He was struck by her talent and sparkle, and remarked: "You have some talent, but you really will have to work." Stevo wanted to take her on as a pupil and train her, but Esma's parents said no: "My father said, 'What? A singer? No, she's ready for marriage; people are already asking; she'll be married in a year or two. Why should singing break up my family?'" Her parents strongly opposed her singing career. They said: "She will not sing. She will listen to her mother and father." But Stevo managed to convince them that he would make her into an artist, not a cafe singer, if they would not marry her off until she was eighteen years old. "When Stevo promised him faithfully that he would help me to become a good and famous singer—not a singer in any old nightclub—when my father had reassured himself that Stevo's intentions were honest, that he would look after me, he finally agreed" (95).

However, the stigma of singing in public subtly undermined Esma's morality, and her parents faced many challenges. Esma asserted: "At that

time it was the easiest thing to offend my girlish pride, my purity. Especially as we Skopje Roma were very sensitive about such things. Some busybody would go up to my father . . . and tell him there was 'something going on' between me and Stevo, always together on trips, in hotels. 'Poor Ibrahim' they would say and my father would wish the ground could swallow him" (96-97). The couple eventually decided to marry, but because Esma's father had passed away they had to wait a respectable mourning period.

At that time, it was virtually unknown for Roma and Macedonians to intermarry; neither group desired it. Esma narrated: "We were the first mixed marriage! That was a big deal! Can you imagine how many people were at our wedding in 1968. Ten to fifteen thousand people came to see if it were true that the two of us were getting married." They first celebrated in Dračevo, a suburb of Skopje, and then provided free buses to transport people to the celebration in Belgrade (Cartwright 2005b:105-106). She recalled:

Even though Stevo was poor, the wedding arrangement was that he should provide new clothing for my mother and every single aunt—this was a great expense. We did all the Romani customs—henna, etc. Since my father had passed away, my brother defended me when Stevo came to get me. My brother demanded 10,000 dinars (\$10) for me. Stevo said, "I can't possibly pay that much—I have to drive Esma around to perform, and pay for gas, food, lodging. I can only give 1,000." So I was bought for \$1!

Esma's early career soared among Macedonian fans, but her relationship to Romani audiences was more ambivalent. According to Esma's cousin Šani Rifati, Roma at first rejected Esma not so much because she was a professional singer but because she spent time with, and married, a non-Romani man. For Roma, Stevo's Macedonian ancestry was even more important than any alleged indecent relationship. Eventually, after marriage and international stardom, Esma was accepted and embraced by her own Romani community.

### Esma's Style and Image

Under the banner *Esma—Ansambl Teodosievski*, Esma and Stevo launched a career in the 1960s characterized by instantaneous success and daring innovations. Esma was the first Balkan Romani musician (male or female) to achieve commercial success in the non-Romani world; she was the first openly identified Romani singer to perform in the Romani and Macedonian languages for non-Roma; she was the first female Romani artist to record in Yugoslavia; and she was the first Macedonian woman (Romani or non-Romani) to perform on television. Esma claims her success is due to Stevo: "What I am singing is only what Stevo taught me. He was wise,

about twenty years ahead of his time; He taught me how to understand music. . . . Whatever he promised to me came true."

Modesty aside, Esma herself composed many of her songs, choreographed her performances, and provided the talent propelling her success. On the other hand, Stevo planned Esma's career very carefully. One early strategy was not to allow Esma to perform at kafanas and weddings, but only at concerts and for radio and television recordings. In effect, Stevo created a new category of female concert artist that didn't have the stigma of cafe or wedding singer.<sup>7</sup> Today, Esma is very proud of the fact that she has not engaged in restaurant work and only sings at weddings of friends, for free.

Even before meeting Esma, Stevo was promoting Romani music at Radio Skopje, a radical move for which he was severely criticized. In 1956 he taught two Macedonian singers, Dragica and Dafinka Mavrovska, songs in the Romani language and arranged a performance in Belgrade (for which they wore *dimije*); later the songs were broadcast on Radio Skopje and recorded on Jugoton. Audiences were fascinated, and according to Stevo: "I knew that we had broken through a barrier" (Teodosievski and Redžepova 1984:30). Stevo remarked: "At that time it would have been impossible for a Romani woman to perform due to the racism." Esma, a child at the time, remembers thinking, "I can do better than that—Why don't I sing?" When Radio Skopje decided to make its first Romani records, director Blago Ivanovski substituted his girlfriend Anka Gieva for Dafinka. Thus the 1957 recording of Stevo's song "Bašal Seljadin" (Play Seljadin; Jugoton SY 1090) was sung by Anka Gieva and Dragica Mavrovska. This version seems tame and mild-mannered, hardly like a *čoček*, with a bland 2/4 rhythm and no syncopation (audio example 10.1 with text supplement). By contrast, Esma's version, recorded several years later, has a driving rhythm and gutsy vocals. The visuals in video example 10.1 with text supplement were filmed in 1988 (MP 31005), but the audio is Esma's recording from the 1960s (RTB SF 13085; I analyze the staging later in this chapter). The Romani text reflects the importance of music in the life of Roma.

Singing in the Romani language was Esma's statement of pride in her heritage: "I was the first Rom to sing in the Romani language. It was actually historical, that Yugoslavia was the first place to broadcast Romani songs on radio. It was kind of a shame to sing in Romani in my time; many singers hid the fact that they were Romani. When I came out singing my own songs in Romani, many came out after me." Note that Esma uses the phrase *come out*, to characterize the bravery a Romani artist needed to confront the prejudicial attitude of Yugoslav music production. For example, around 1967 two sisters, Živka and Jordana Runjaić, recorded singles in the Romani language. They said they were Serbs, but it was revealed they were Roma. According to Esma "many singers passed [as other ethnic groups] because there was an embargo on Romani singers. There was discrimination against them as performers. I risked a great deal when I said I was Romani and I want to sing in my own

language." She continued: "Our Romani women were afraid at the time to say they were Roma—they said they were Turkish, Macedonian, Albanian, anything but Roma. . . . After the cleansings of World War II, Roma were afraid for their lives and at no time would admit they were Roma." Stevo commented: "Esma was the first leader with the flag! All the other people looked at her to see if she was accepted. . . . On her first record . . . 'Gypsy music' was written. It was very clear! For the first time 'Gypsy Music' was written on a label." Esma: "I opened the way for Roma, in the first place, to admit that they are Roma, and not to be ashamed they are Roma."

Esma and Stevo endured the racism of Macedonian institutions and the gossip of the public. At Radio Skopje, Stevo was repeatedly told: "Take Vaska Ilieva, take other singers—why a Gypsy?" His colleagues said cruelly, "Stevo why have you brought this Gypsy to disgrace us?" (Teodosievski and Redžepova 1984:95). In the beginning of her career, they deliberately denied Esma opportunities. Stevo recalled: "They took from her the song she knew and did best and gave it to another girl" (38); later, one of their films, *Zapej Makedonijo* (1968), won prizes, but it was rarely shown in Macedonia (54).

Stevo commented: "Some of the top officials from Radio Skopje's communist party leadership thought they needed to let me know that it would be better for the show to have a participant of Macedonian nationality. I was then, just like now, devoid of any nationalistic preconceptions. I consider myself a cosmopolitan" (Mamut 1993:3). Stevo recalled: "They chased me out of Macedonia because of Esma—we had to move to Belgrade. They said 'Why do you play that Romani music? Let it go—you are not Romani.' I was a member of the communist party through Radio Skopje. The party objected, they threw me out. . . . The secretary of the party said, 'Why do you bother with Esma? Vaska Ilieva, Anka Gieva, they are Macedonians, Esma isn't!' From then on I had nothing to do with the party—it didn't interest me any more. I played what they told me at work, period." The taunts became so stifling that in the 1960s Stevo and Esma decided to move to Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia, where they would have more opportunities. Esma said: "People knew me too well, they were talking too much about us in Skopje, and we had to get out of that environment."

Stevo was very conscious about creating a specific Romani niche for Esma in the commercial world. Part of his genius was to craft a trademark image and staging for Esma that evoked the historical stereotypes of Gypsy women as sensual and fiery but that kept the pageant tasteful (see photographs 10.1, 10.2, and 10.3). A survey of Yugoslav press reviews during Esma's early years reveals that critics focused on her Romani heritage in stereotypical prose: she was described as dark-skinned, hot-blooded, happy-go-lucky, and genetically talented; she was even hailed as the new "Koštana," referring to the Serbian 1902 opera about a seductive Romani songstress.<sup>8</sup> Stevo and Esma cultivated these stereotypes as long as they were positive. This resonates with a point I make throughout this book:

that Roma orientalize themselves when necessary for marketing purposes. Furthermore, historically Roma have had few opportunities to alter their imagery and discourse because they have never been in control of their representations.<sup>9</sup>

The 1988 staging of the song "Bašal Seljadin" (from 1957, discussed earlier; video example 10.1 with text supplement) includes several stereotypical elements: a barefoot man in a Hungarian Gypsy costume strutting, female dancers in belly dance outfits with flimsy veils doing modern dance choreographies, and a background of tents. Other songs in this video series are set in a pseudo-Gypsy camp near a "stream" (actually a swimming pool) with a fire, a setting sun, and pseudo-Russian Gypsy dancers. These videos feature the ballet troupe of Macedonian National Television. When I asked Esma what she thought of these stagings, she said she thought they were artistic. I discuss this point again in Chapters 12 and 13.

Romantic stereotypes do sometimes help break barriers. Esma, for example, may have reinforced the female Gypsy sensual image, but she herself never wore immodest belly dance outfits. Rather, she was the first Romani performer to appear in Romani-style *dimije* for non-Romani audiences. "I was the only one, with Teodosievski's help, to jump up publicly on stage and wear *dimije*, and I wear them to this day. I am not ashamed to wear them and I am not ashamed to say I am Romani." *Dimije*, which emphasize hip movements, linked Esma specifically to Roma, to other Muslims all over the Balkans, and to tradition. Esma's *dimije* were fashioned from modern fabrics and colors, and she further innovated with accessories and headpieces, some evoking Eastern themes.

Emotion is perhaps Esma's trademark affect. I have pointed out that emotion is iconically associated with Roma in terms of unbridled passion (Silverman 2011 and in press). Esma capitalized on emotion in both her voice and her stagings. Her iconic song in terms of emotion is "Hajri Ma Te, Dikhe, Daje" (May you see no good, mother), where she enacts the lament of a young girl being married off to an older man. In the 1970s video of the song she is dressed in a white veil and virtually cries while she sings the song (video example 10.2 with text supplement). The sobs become part of the unmetered melody. This staging depicts an older Muslim husband who is served by a young wife. In later concert stagings of this song, Esma sings from beneath a black veil with her face totally obscured and her accompanying musicians bowing their heads in sympathy. At the end of the song, one of them lifts her veil, and in a dramatic shift the musicians begin a new and lively rhythmic song; she dramatically plays on the emotional shift from despair to joy.

Another trademark feature introduced by Stevo was that all the performers stood up, giving them unprecedented freedom of movement on stage. Typically, they swayed right and left with their instruments in rhythm, evoking the back-up singers in Western pop groups of the 1960s. And most daring, Esma danced during musical interludes (see Chapter 6). She explained:

I am a traditional woman—growing up, the women gathered inside. I adopted all the old ways. Stevo told me when I was young, "you will dance exactly how you danced inside with the women at a wedding." I answered "but that is shameful." He said "it is not shameful—it is your tradition—it is your national dance. Others dance differently, but you are dressed in *dimije*, it is not a shame, you have something to dance about! You aren't bare, you don't dance (with your hips) in a circle, you dance with your stomach." And he persuaded me that I don't need to feel ashamed of that—I have to show my culture—it is our national dance. I have accepted, embraced, exactly what Stevo taught me. After I got on the stage and danced, it was easier for other Romani women and girls.

Stevo staged Esma's performances as miniature dramatic scenes in which she enacted the story of the song. Her voice showcased emotions evoked in the text (often using cries and yelps), and her hand gestures referred to story themes. Similar to professional female Ottoman dancers (see Chapter 6) and to generations of male musicians, she masterfully played to audience sentiment. Esma continues stagings of this type to the present, even though some have criticized them as too clichéd. Stevo also introduced the *tarabuka* (hand drum) to concert performances; associated with Muslims, it had never before been used on a concert stage. Furthermore, he engaged uninhibited young Romani boys to play the *tarabuka* dramatically while they playfully danced with Esma.<sup>10</sup> Not only did young boys provide visual and emotional interest but their participation also created a wholesome family image for Ansambl Teodosievski, with Esma as a maternal symbol. Indeed, she did serve as a "mother" to many of Stevo's pupils.

Esma's trademark song of the mid-1960s, "Čhaje Šukarije" (Beautiful girl), showcased both her voice and Stevo's arrangements. Although Esma claims she wrote the melody and text, her clarinetist at the time, Medo Čun, also claims credit for the melody; Čun displays his masterful playing in the opening slow section and the instrumental solo (see Chapter 6). Video example 10.3 with text supplement is excerpted from the 1968 film *Zapej Makedonijo*. Note the pastoral setting, the text about love, and the fact that Esma is barefoot and wearing *šalvari*, the *čoček* rhythm (pattern number 1 in Figure 2.1), and the melody in phrygian mode. Esma's voice is focused and emotional, featuring delicate ornamentation, yelps and glottals, and a wide range of dynamics. The male instrumentalists engage in a question-and-answer dialogue with her and harmonize with her in the chorus, reminiscent of the "doo-wop" style of popular music of the 1960s.

Esma and Stevo were pioneers in producing music videos. They appeared on the Yugoslav music scene just when television was making inroads, and they correctly predicted that visuals would capture the public. Esma was involved in making four long films<sup>11</sup> and many short music videos. Video example 10.4, "Ciganski Čoček" is also from the film *Zapej Makedonijo* and features members of Esma's natal family dancing. This clip stands in marked contrast to the video example 10.1 of Bašal

Seljadin. Whereas Ciganski Čoček shows Roma of several generations dancing informally with no choreography, Bašal Seljadin show a non-Romani ballet troupe performing choreographies influenced by modern dance.

Video example 10.5 (with text supplement) of Čhaje Šukarije is part of a landmark 1965 Austrian television show. The staging embodies the classic Esma trademarks: dressed in šalvari, she emerges from behind the musicians' heads in an overhead shot; she playfully flirts with them, and she dances seductively but modestly. Another hit of this era, "Romano Horo" (Romani dance), about dancing among Roma, also appears on this show (video example 10.6 with text supplement). The song (in phrygian mode) features a male chorus and fade-out at the end, both reminiscent of pop music. Esma's voice demonstrates emotional variation, for example a breathy quality alternating with a throaty intensity. The rhythm is pseudo-Latin: a pseudo-clave (wooden sticks) and cow bell rhythmic pattern reflect the popularity of Cuban music in the 1960s.

This Austrian show encapsulates how Esma bridged the divide between East and West via music, language, costuming, and staging. In the first part of the show she wears a Romani costume, dances čoček, and stages her scenes in a "village." By contrast, in the second part of the show she wears a western cocktail dress and high heels, has short bobbed hair, and peeks through a curtain with a modern art design. To "Romano Horo" she dances the twist, the most popular dance in the west at the time. Esma ends her show with "Makedo," a pop song entirely in German, arranged by Stevo, and she encourages Germans to try Macedonian dances and songs. Esma composed a line dance in 7/8 (2+2+3) to this song and hoped it would catch on in Germany.

Stevo wanted Esma to appeal to wider Macedonian, Yugoslav, and international audiences, and so early in her career he broadened her repertoire and arranged tours. In 1960 Tito, the president of Yugoslavia, invited her to perform for a gathering of world leaders, and subsequently he sent her abroad to represent Yugoslavia (Cartwright 2003a). Her early repertoire included Macedonian folk songs, for which she dressed in traditional village costumes. For example, the video of the Macedonian song "Kolku e Mačno em Žalno" (How painful and sad it is) was filmed at the Sveti Naum monastery and shows close-ups of icons. This appealed to the visual and aural sense of nationalist pride (tied to religion and rural folklore) for Macedonian audiences. In addition, Stevo arranged concerts and recording sessions of duets with some of Macedonia's most famous vocalists, legitimating Esma's talent beyond the Romani sphere.

Vocal repertoire in other Yugoslav languages was added, including songs in Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Slovenian, Turkish, and Albanian. She embodied Tito's principle of *bratstvo i edinstvo* (brotherhood and unity) by performing the music of all the ethnic groups in Yugoslavia (see photograph 10.4). The video *Pesmom i Igrom Kroz Jugoslaviju* (With song and dance from across Yugoslavia; Serbian) features songs from all the republics with traditional regional costumes. Eventually songs of neighboring Balkan countries were incorporated (e.g., Bulgarian, Romanian, and

Greek), and then songs of far-flung ethnicities: Russian, Hebrew, German, and Hindi; again costumes reflected the region (see photograph 10.5). In publicity shots she is depicted as a performer of many ethnic musics and also a modern worldly citizen (photographs 10.6 and 10.7).

Perhaps the most important international tie in Esma's career was her link to India. In the early 1970s, Roma in Macedonia were beginning to develop a sense of their historical ties to India as part of a larger politicization process and a movement to define their identity.<sup>12</sup> Ensemble Teodosievski made its first (uninvited) trip to India in 1969, followed by two invited trips in 1976 and 1983. In 1976 Esma and Stevo were crowned "King and Queen of Romani Music" at the First World Festival of Romani Songs and Music in Chandigarh. A video of her 1983 trip documents Esma giving Indira Gandhi šalvari and showing her how to tie a Romani head scarf. As a result of her growing awareness of India and the pan-Romani identity movement, Esma incorporated a Hindi song into her repertoire; she also continued to perform the song "Dželem Dželem," which developed into the Romani anthem (see Chapter 3). Although Esma first recorded the song in Serbian (*Čerga Mala Luta Preko Sveta*, A small Gypsy tent wanders through the world; see video example 3.3), on video examples 3.2 and 3.4 she sings it in Romani (at Šutkafest in 1993 and in New Jersey at a Macedonian church in 2004; similar texts are in text supplement 3.1). This link between Romani identity politics and music helped to facilitate Esma's relationship to Roma.

### Stevo's School

In the late 1960s, Stevo and Esma founded a music school in their home to train young boys from disadvantaged homes. Virtually all of the members of the Teodosievski ensemble throughout the last fifty years have come from Stevo's school.<sup>13</sup> Many, such as Medo Čun, Enver Rasimov, Sami Zekirovski, Pero Teodosievski (Stevo's nephew), Zahir Ramadanov, Eljam Rašidov, Simeon Atanasov, Bilhan Mačev, Tunan Kurtiš, Saško Velkov, and Šadan Sakip, went on to become famous musicians in their own right (Teodosievski and Redžepova 1984:187). Sakip, one of the only vocalists, developed a singing career and won first prize at Šutkafest 1993; as a child he appeared in Esma's video playing tarabuka for "Kec" Ibro Demir's song "Aj Leno, Lenorije Čhaje" (Hey Lena, girl, 1979; video example 10.7 with text supplement). The song affirms that goodness and beauty exist in spite of poverty.

Many of Stevo's pupils came to the school at a young age from impoverished families; one was even rescued from abandonment. Although most of the boys were Romani, a few were not; Simeon, for example, became Romani by virtue of his upbringing with Esma and Stevo from the age of five. He was later officially adopted by them and became Esma's music arranger after Stevo's death in 1997. Both Esma and Stevo believed that anyone of any ethnicity could play Romani music well; Stevo said he was

proof of this. During two trips to the United States, Esma was thrilled to teach Americans at the East European Folklife Center's Balkan Music and Dance Workshops in 1997 and 1998.

In Stevo's school, all the children received instruction, lodging, meals, and clothing free of charge. Esma served as an adopted mother and vocal coach. Because she never had children of her own, she achieved the role of motherhood through these boys, who to this day call her "mama." Stevo was a strict teacher, notorious for rigor and sternness. Neither Esma nor Stevo believed in talent; they believed only in hard work. All the boys began with tarabuka in order to master Balkan and Romani rhythms; then they switched to various instruments. Simeon, for example, was, according to Esma, sickly as a boy and could not blow hard enough for a wind instrument, so he was given an accordion. Zahir was already playing the trumpet when he was recruited, after Stevo heard him play at a wedding in Kočani. Zahir narrated:

I was a young student of twelve years when I came to Stevo's school. I played the trumpet incorrectly, on the side of my mouth, and Stevo taught me to play correctly. He was very strict—we were up at 6:00 AM, then we went to school, then we played; on weekends it was eight to fourteen hours a day. Mama had the watch, and we had to practice a certain *oro* [dance], for example, twenty-five times! It was a great deal of work. There were no excuses like "I can't do it." If we played something wrong we had to stand on one foot and play it!

Musicians received not only a musical education but also valuable exposure to a wider world. As a twelve-year-old Romani boy living in a Romani neighborhood, Zahir spoke Turkish well and Macedonian poorly; when he moved to Belgrade he learned Serbo-Croatian in school and Macedonian and Romani from Esma and the other boys. He also learned the ropes of the music industry and had a chance to travel to many foreign countries. Note that Esma and Stevo had only boys in their school. They did not accept girls because of the close living quarters; she asserted: "Stevo and I realized that it would be asking for trouble to put boys and girls together at that age, at puberty." Since the 1990s, Esma has trained several female singers, including her protégée (Eleonora Mustafovska, discussed below). Esma considers these forty-nine protégés her living legacy.

### Esma, Politics, and Humanitarianism

Esma has always been vocal about her patriotism for Yugoslavia and Macedonia. These are her true personal beliefs, but this ideology also positions her as an ally of the nation/state rather than as an oppositional activist for a minority. She sees herself as an ambassador for Macedonia more than for Roma, and some Romani activists object to this. She and Stevo moved back to Macedonia in 1989, just before the outbreak of war.

In 2006 she said, "I represent Macedonia everywhere in the world and my ambassador mission is to present my country to my best [sic]" ([www.culture.in.mk](http://www.culture.in.mk)). The fact that this quote appeared on the country's website shows Esma's vision has a nationalist dimension rather than an ethnic one. Indeed she is an icon for many Macedonians. In 2007 she was awarded a diplomatic passport that allows her to travel without visas as a "cultural ambassador."<sup>14</sup>

Esma's patriotism extends to a defense of Macedonia as a haven for Roma. When I asked her in 1996 about problems Roma face in Macedonia, she answered:

Macedonia is the least oppressive place for Roma; it was one of the first countries in the world that early on had a radio show in the Romani language, with singing and music. One of the first Romani leaders was a mayor [of Šutka]. We have Romani members of parliament, we have two private Roma channels on TV and several radio stations in the Romani language, and on national TV, there are two half-hour weekly shows so all of Macedonia can watch us. Macedonia is definitely one of the most democratic and accepting places for Romani people.

As patriots, Esma and Simeon have often argued with her cousin Šani Rifati about their defense of Macedonia. Whereas Simeon pointed to his beautiful apartment and middle-class life as evidence that there is no prejudice in Macedonia, Šani pointed to the health crisis, police brutality, high unemployment, and squalor in Romani refugee shantytowns (European Roma Rights Centre 1998, 2006). Note that although Esma sponsored more than 2,000 benefit concerts for various causes throughout her career, it wasn't until 2002 that she sponsored a benefit specifically for Roma. This concert was organized by Šani as head of the NGO Voice of Roma and took place in Kosovo among refugees. I maintain that Esma has crafted a somewhat unthreatening profile. She stresses Macedonian patriotism in the realm of politics and Romani music in the realm of entertainment.

Proud of being middle-class, Simeon and Esma were critical of the documentary film on Romani music *When the Road Bends: Tales of a Gypsy Caravan* (2006) because it graphically showed the poverty of the native villages in Romania of the Romani bands Taraf de Haidouks and Fanfare Ciocarlia. They were afraid audiences would think all Roma lived in mud. Macedonian Roma in New York have expressed similar sentiments that international images of Roma focus on rural poverty and do not represent them. On the other hand, some activists thought that the film did not deal enough with prejudice. We may observe that both activists and musicians engage in "strategic essentialism" (Spivak 1988); the former essentialize Roma as victims and latter essentialize Roma as entertainers (see Chapter 3). This postcolonial concept helps us understand how subaltern activists reject some essentialized concepts of themselves

as codified by their oppressors (all Roma are musical) while they embrace other essentialized concepts of themselves for identity politics (they are all oppressed). Musicians often confound the stance of activists, and vice versa.

When Šani, for example, introduced concerts in Esma's 2004 American tour with lectures on discrimination, Simeon objected, saying it would alienate the audience. Šani also asked Esma to open her concert in Sebastopol, California, with a Romani song, because the city was the home of the sponsoring organization, Voice of Roma. Esma refused, insisting that she open the show with a Macedonian song and reminding Šani that her artistic decisions were paramount. In general, Esma resists artistic advice from activists, claiming they aren't performers. Simeon and Esma, then, are more interested in the artistic, entertainment, and commercial value of music whereas activists are more interested in the educational aspects of music—or are hostile to it. I explore this topic further in Chapter 12.

This brings up the question of resistance. Esma certainly resisted the exclusionary categories of institutions by her pioneering use of Romani language, dance, music, and costume, but she also resisted political agendas that might hurt her commercial success and infringe on her artistic decisions. In addition, she collaborated with the commercial establishment by endorsing positive Romani stereotypes; finally, she embraced a broadly humanitarian stance rather than a narrow Romani activist stance. Esma's image is that of a universal humanist; her public statements repeatedly stress pacifism and cross-cultural understanding. When she discusses Roma, she points out that they have never started a war: "We are born naked and we die naked and we don't carry anything with us to the next world. So fighting doesn't make sense. The greatest barrier to all people is war." When interviewed by the Serbian newspaper *Blic*, she said "We Roma don't like war. . . . It doesn't matter what nationality you are. What matters is if you are a good person."<sup>15</sup> Esma's commentary brings up a point that I stress in this book: Romani musicians have selectively resisted, on the basis of strategic decisions about what they could actually accomplish and how resistance would affect their careers; furthermore, resistance is always paired with collaboration (Ortner 1995, 1999).

Related to Esma's nationalist stance vis-à-vis Macedonia is her elevation of Macedonian Romani music to being the most "authentic" Romani music. In Chapter 12 I discuss how she defended her use of the synthesizer even though European audiences rejected it as nontraditional. Although she embraces modern instrumentation, Esma insists that her style of singing is old, classic, and traditional: "It's all traditional. I try to keep the style pure so I don't mix cultural influences" (Cartwright 2005:103). Similarly, Stevo elevated Macedonian Romani music by claiming that "in India in 1976, all of the presenters from twenty-three countries agreed that Macedonian Romani music would be the music of all Roma." He interpreted the fact that he and Esma were crowned King and Queen at the Chandigarh festival as an implicit affirmation that Macedonian Romani was superior to other Romani musics. Esma concurred: "In 1976

twenty-three representatives of Roma from many countries gathered. They wanted to see who had the most traditional Romani way of singing. From the twenty-three representatives, I won first place!" Stevo elaborated: "In India we were crowned because only we played true Romani music. The other Roma played Turkish, Spanish, etc., music."

Esma continues to criticize the hybrid nature of Romani music in other countries, such as Spain and Hungary, where she claims Romani music sounds like the local non-Romani music: "Macedonia did not persecute the Romani language, and therefore the language, music, and the culture and traditions have been best preserved." She does not see her defense of her "authenticity" as contradictory to innovations in her music. She readily admits that her vocal style has become technically advanced, with more dramatic timing and numerous, complicated ornamentation; and she also defends the use of synthesizer and her collaborations with pop stars (to be discussed shortly). I believe she valorizes the concept of tradition in part because the concept was so venerated in the Yugoslav period. She feels Romani music is worthy of that veneration, and so her patriotism and elevation of Romani music are intertwined.

Esma became directly involved in Macedonian politics in the 1990s after the formation of Romani political parties (see Chapter 1). For a period of time, she was aligned with the Romani leader Amdi Bajram, and her performance at his son's wedding was filmed for Macedonian Television (*Romska Svadba*, discussed in Chapter 5). She was also aligned with Macedonian politician Vasil Tupurkovski's Democratic Alternative, a multiethnic party. Now she is aligned with Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski's ruling party VMRO-DPMNE and still maintains a strong public profile, which includes her extraordinary commitment to causes of the needy. She has given thousands of benefit concerts for hospitals, orphanages, disaster victims, poor children, and so on; she continues to generously donate her time and talents to charity. She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 and 2005, is an Honorary president of the Red Cross, and received the 2000 Medal of Honor from the American Biographical Institute, the 2002 Mother Teresa Award, and several awards from UNICEF as well as from Tito. On International Roma Day in April 2010, she was awarded a Medal of Honor from the ruling government. She has a special interest in women's issues, and in 1995 the Macedonian Association of Romani Women took her name as its title. In 2002 she won the Woman of the Year from the Macedonian magazine *Žena* (Woman) and in 2010 she took part in a United Nations conference on women as part of the Macedonian delegation.

After Esma and Stevo returned to Skopje in 1989, they started work on a humanitarian and documentation project entitled the Home of Humanity and Museum of Music. This ambitious project includes construction of an outpatient clinic for underserved people, a recording studio, a performance space, and a museum and archive of Romani music. The economic crisis of the war years plus Stevo's death in 1997 have considerably slowed work on this project, but Esma is still committed to it. In 2010 the city of Skopje granted her land for the museum.



Esma briefly considered retiring after her husband's death, but instead she resumed her career, with renewed energy. She toured fairly regularly and has sought new international and local collaborations. She was offered a recording contract with the German label Asphalt Tango about ten years ago but declined in order to have more control over options in her career; in 2008, however, she accepted a contract with them and thus performs as a soloist in their "Queens and Kings" tours.<sup>16</sup> Her adopted son Simeon has assumed the role of her arranger, and several albums under his direction have been released.<sup>17</sup>

### Collaborations and Current Directions

Throughout her career, Esma has collaborated with many non-Romani musicians, which broadened her appeal. Her early album and video *Legendi na Makedonska Narodna Pesna* (Legends of Macedonian Songs), for example, featured her in solos and in duets with non-Romani Macedonian singers. After Stevo's death, she widened her circle of collaborators. In 2001, for example, she concertized with the Italian guitarist/mandolinist Aco Bocina, and in 2000 she collaborated with American klezmer trumpeter Frank London on the album *Chaje Shukarije* (Times Square), which features new versions of older songs. In 2000 she also collaborated with Macedonian composer Duke Bojadžiev (who lives in New York City and graduated from the Berklee College of Music) on the album *Esma's Dream: Esma and Duke*. The recording features her vocals over an electronic mix of synthesized arrangements, sometimes augmented by added bass lines and Indian drums. (This album prefigures the electronic remixes I discuss in Chapter 13.) In 2007 she collaborated with the French guitarist Thierry (Titi) Robin on three tracks of her album *Mon Histoire* (Accord-Croises).

In the realm of pop music, Esma collaborated with the Serbian rock group Magazin on the 2002 song "Dani Su Bez Broja" (Days are endless; Serbian), where she sings an introductory verse in Romani and a melismatic passage on the syllable "ah."<sup>18</sup> She sang with the Macedonian pop star Kaliopi on her 2004 hit "Bel Den" (Fair day; Macedonian) and was a guest at Kaliopi's thirtieth anniversary megaconcert in 2006. She also collaborated with the ethnic Albanian pop singer Adrian Gaxha on the song "Ljubov e" (Love is; Macedonian). The song was entered in the preselection competition for the 2006 Eurovision contest and came in second by approximately 100 votes, which caused some controversy. Although it was not discussed openly in the media, the national mood was that the country and Macedonian national television (which sponsored the contest) were not ready to have a Rom and an Albanian represent them at a prestigious pan-European event such as Eurovision.<sup>19</sup>

In 2009 Esma was featured in electronic and film music composer Kiril Džajkovski's (formerly of the band *Leb I Sol*) fusion song "Raise Up Your Hand" with the Jamaican rap/dub artist Ras Tweed.<sup>20</sup> Ras Tweed sings in English creole and Esma sings in Romani; the video was shot in Macedonian

Romani neighborhoods. In 2010 she began her retirement with the premiere of her female vocal protégée Eleonora Mustafovska and with a new name: Esma's Band (see [www.myspace.com/esmasbandskopje](http://www.myspace.com/esmasbandskopje)). The band's song "Džipsi Denz" qualified for Macedonia's 2010 Eurovision finals in tenth place. The band continues Esma's international humanitarian mission, according to leader Simeon Atanasov: "Our message is to fill our music as a bridge which connects the differences between the nations, because Roma (Gypsies) are living in every European country and feel themselves as cosmopolitans."<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps Esma's most famous, and most commercially successful, collaboration was with Toše Proeski in 2002, via the song titled "Magija" (Magic) in Macedonian and "Čini" (Spells) in Serbian. Toše (who died in an automobile crash in 2007) was one of the top young Macedonian pop singers and songwriters, with a huge following among Macedonian and Serbian youths; in 2004 he represented Macedonia at Eurovision (<http://www.myspace.com/inmemoryoftodorproeski>). The song won awards for best song and best video of 2002 at the 12 Veličanstveni (12 greatest) ceremony, Macedonia's version of the Grammy's. "Magija" is actually a combination of two songs, Toše's in Macedonian (or Serbian) and Esma's (in Romani). Esma's song "Naktareja mo Ilo Phanlja" (He closed my heart with a key) is a preexisting cut<sup>22</sup> that is inserted into Toše's song. Toše's song is about a love affair gone sour because of a magic spell, and Esma's is about a woman whose boyfriend deceived her and married her best friend. The Serbian version appears on video example 10.8 with text supplement.<sup>23</sup>

Although each of the songs has its own internal narrative, the pair seem to have few textual connections; they are combined for musical reasons rather than for narrative logic. Also remember that the intended audience is non-Romani, so the Romani text is irrelevant. The viewer, however, would immediately pick up on aural and visual cultural clues. The two songs contrast markedly in musical style: Toše's is in 2/4 rhythm in pop style, and Esma's is in 7/8 rhythm (number 10 in Figure 2.1), has a drone-based harmony, and has synthesized zurla and tapan accompaniment, this last a symbol of Roma.

In addition, the visuals portray two contrasting worlds: Toše's sunny daytime world of upper-class love and conviviality, and Esma's nighttime world of Gypsy magic, abandon, and the occult. Indeed, the text seems to suggest that Esma (and by extension all Gypsies) can cure Toše's despair (for perhaps she sent it as a spell) with music and dance. Esma is pictured in flowing dimije in the middle of a wild party on the beach, amidst tents, rusty cars, fire dancers, and couples who wear revealing clothes and sensuously belly-dance and kiss. All the elements of the standard Gypsy stereotype are here: sex, music, the occult—even a crystal ball, into which Toše gazes at the end of the video.

Why would Esma engage in such a stereotypical treatment of Roma? When her cousin, activist Šani Rifat of Voice of Roma, asked her this question, she replied, "It is an artistic staging. It is art." And when Garth Cartwright asked her about these images, she "insisted she liked the video

and enjoyed the pop spotlight" (2005:110). Esma's reasons for collaboration with Toše are complex: she may have had an affinity for him because he was from a minority ethnicity (Aromun/Vlach) or because, like her, he was involved in humanitarian work and received several humanitarian awards. Toše seems to have had an affinity for Romani music and can be seen on Skopje television station BTR in several YouTube clips performing Bregović's song "Erdelezi" (see Chapter 13) with the Macedonian Romani singer Erdžan (see Chapter 2).

Collaboration with a pop star was certainly one way of increasing Esma's visibility and expanding her audience. The song was clearly listed as his, and he was definitely a rising star; however, she claims that she was helping him with his career. In the end, Esma probably chooses to collaborate whenever a good opportunity presents itself. For a decade after Stevo's death, she refused to sign an exclusive Western contract in order to manage her own career (with Simeon as arranger); but in 2008 she signed a contract with Asphalt Tango in Berlin. Does she have choices in her artistic products? Theoretically yes, but in a tight musical market she has fewer choices. Esma has carved a viable musical niche, but as an aging Romani star she is vulnerable.

In surveying Esma's life, we can see just how innovative she was. Under the tutelage of non-Romani Stevo, she created an unprecedented niche for Romani music and dance. Moreover, she raised female arts to a level of respectability by playing with images of emotionality and sexuality in the framework of the elite concert and recording stage. By achieving success among non-Roma first, she legitimated her role as a professional among Roma. By displaying her patriotism to Yugoslavia and Macedonia and by supporting international rather than Romani humanitarian causes, she achieved an unprecedented level of legitimacy. Today Esma is a living legend for many Roma, and many Macedonians.

The constellation of Romani female performers, including professional singers such as Esma and professional and nonprofessional dancers (whom I discussed in Chapter 6), points to a delicate convergence of a set of historical, economic, political, social, and aesthetic factors. Within Romani communities, female musicality and dance, although tinged with sexuality, is valued, prized, and encouraged to flower in appropriate settings. Moreover, female artistry as an occupation has a long history, as witnessed by Ottoman professional dancers and early-twentieth-century frame drum players and singers. In spite of the economic necessity propelling professionals, female singers and dancers are still scrutinized as immoral, but at the same time they are in demand by non-Roma and Roma. Sexuality is dangerous, but necessary. The position of female Romani performers to Roma structurally mirrors the position of Romani male performers to non-Roma: they are marginal, sexual, and dangerous, yet they are necessary for celebrations because they embody artistry and musicality and they bring out the "soul of the patrons." Okely makes a parallel point about British Romani fortune tellers who mingle freely with

non-Roma for work but are ideally supposed to preserve modesty and reputation (1975).

Both fortune tellers and dancer/musicians have been stereotyped by non-Roma as quintessential images of Romani women. The marginal position of Roma, their lack of control over image making, and their role as service workers all contribute to the trafficking of their arts in the realm of the market. Females have a significant role in this market, as their talents, images, and bodies are a saleable commodity. Images of Romani women are rarely designed by women themselves; rather, they rely on patron fantasies that may be mimetically sold back. In all of these processes, female performers are not passive. Although they are rarely in charge of the institutions that shape their performances, Romani women have managed to exert control over certain realms of artistry and carve out new domains of performance. As Esma's case shows, they tailor their talents and sexuality to varying contexts. The nexus between in-group ideals of female modesty and the economic and aesthetic requirements of the marketplace has created a space for a variety of female performers. These women, like Esma, strategize to maximize both their commercial success and their reputation.