STANDUP, PEOPLE

GYPSY POP SONGS FROM TITO'S YUGOSLAVIA 1964-1980



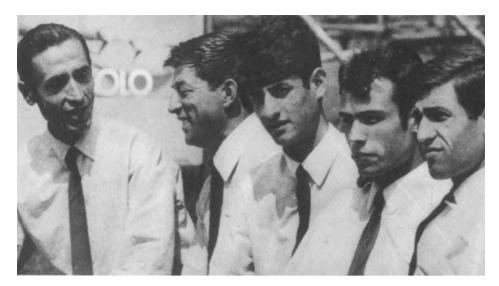


Gypsy Pop Music in Yugoslavia

The Balkans are a notoriously complex part of the world, and Josip Broz Tito, leader from 1953 until his death in 1980 of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – now the independent states of Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro and (sort-of) Kosovo – was an appropriately complex figure. While Tito's Yugoslavia was a venue for purges and prison camps and often far from the glorious 'Worker's Paradise' proclaimed by his government, its non-confessional and multiethnic character also gave Yugoslav Roma Gypsies – long the region's poorest and most marginalised group – a platform and a voice.

In stark contrast to the anti-Roma policies applied across Europe throughout the twentieth century, and to the situation in the former Yugo-slavia today, under Tito the Roma were recognised as an 'official' minority and the Socialist government promoted their language and culture. Theirs was the music of urbane, cosmopolitan artists, reflecting a culture newly invigorated by its state-level acceptance, and influenced by the amazing array of influences available at the cultural crossroads of 'non-aligned' socialist Yugoslavia: their native folk rhythms, inherited from India, a host of local Slavic folk musics, together with Turkish songs, British and American pop and rock, and even the music of modern India – the songs of the Bollywood films cheaply imported from Nehru's fellow non-aligned state. The airwaves were suddenly filled with songs in the lilting Romani language that paid tribute to love, loss, tradition, modernity, and the joys and trials of life on the road.

The size and diversity of the former Yugoslavia, and the scattered and heterogeneous nature of its Roma population, means this story is not the only one worth telling. The Roma music of northern Serbia's Vojvodina region – a thumping, foursquare style that found perhaps its most skilled exponent in the great violinist Aleksandr Šišić – was loved all over Yugoslavia and remains popular in the region today. However, on this record we have chosen to focus on the music made by the predominantly Muslim, Ottoman-influenced Roma of Macedonia, Kosovo and southern Serbia as they explored modern pop and Eastern sounds – a music that, after decades of war, is in danger of being forgotten.



Hajra Sučurija and Ansambl Kud Ibar

Macedonia

Esma Redžepova – 'Queen of the Gypsies' – was born in 1943 in the Topana district of Skopje, the traditional heart of Roma life in the Macedonian capital until an earthquake flattened it twenty years later, forcing many Roma to move to the new settlement of 'Šutka' (Today the world's single largest Roma community and the only municipality where Romani is recognised as an official language). Esma showed early promise as a singer and dancer, but her parents, like many conservative Roma at the time, were hostile to the idea of their daughter singing in public, particularly in the sometimes disreputable kafanas of Skopje. Even today, many Roma women are expected to stay at home and manage the household. But for a young girl of that era, Esma was incredibly willful. At the age of thirteen her parents attempted to press her into an arranged marriage – which she resisted by threatening to kill herself. So it seems fitting that the turning point of Esma's career, which arrived soon after, was marked by her performance of a traditional Roma song called 'Abre, Babi, So Kerdžan?'

('O Father, What Have You Done?', 15), in which a young girl weeps over the marriage she has been forced into by her father. Sneaking out of the family home to perform the piece at the Radio Skopje talent show, Esma won hands-down, despite being only a child – not to mention a child from a marginalised community singing in a marginalised language.

The Roma have always been excellent musicians - not just because music is a central part of their lives and rituals, but also because they were historically excluded from conventional jobs (still the case for many Roma today). Yugoslav folk orchestras thus tended to include Roma members but in the early 1960s it was still unheard of to have an openly declared Rom fronting a mainstream band, let alone singing in Romani. However, Esma so impressed a young accordionist in the audience, Stevo Teodosievski, that he chose her to be the lead singer of his locally successful group. the Ansambl Teodosievski. With the addition of Esma they exploded in popularity almost overnight, and soon the Ansambl Teodosievski became a sort of academy for young Roma musicians who passed through the group as instrumentalists or backing vocalists. After a few years the band moved to Belgrade, where Stevo and Esma eventually married, and their fame and success continued to grow. They would go on to produce rootsy synth pop celebrating Ederlezi (the Roma Gypsy feast day of St George, or 'Đurđevdan', 4), as well as writing odes to Yugoslavia's beautiful old centre of Muslim culture, Sarajevo ('Pesma Šeher Sarajevu', 9).

Usnija Redžepova – née Jašarova, and no relation to Esma – was another Macedonian-born singer who made a name for herself in Belgrade. Half Turkish and half Roma and a few years younger than Esma, Usnija grew up in Skopje and, after finishing school, moved to Belgrade to study Arabic. Singing to support herself through University, she was equally confident with both Roma, Macedonian and Serbian folk styles. Usnija's sweet yet mournful voice, always totally in control, is distinctive even in her earliest singles, like 1968's 'Selime Ternie' ('Beautiful Selimi', 7); it is not surprising that she reached stardom soon after, performing with Esma on a Teodosievski Ansambl album for the American market in 1970, appearing in the prominent Yugoslav film Dervis i Smrt, ('Death and the Dervish') in 1974, and singing for an apparently besotted Fidel Castro at Tito's Croatian island hideaway on Brioni in 1976.

Medo & Muharem

The man who introduced Esma to Stevo the day after the Radio Skopje talent show was Medo Čun, clarinetist and long-time collaborator with Stevo. A Rom himself, he knew Esma from the neighbourhood, and went to fetch her on his bicycle at Stevo's request. Having brought them together, he would continue to be a pivotal figure in the Ansambl Teodosievski throughout the 1960s, bringing a chaotic energy to their recordings with his wild and virtuoso clarinet solos. He came from a family of Kosovan Roma that had moved to Macedonia, and grew up playing čalgija, a kind of urban Muslim music - one of the many important aspects of Balkan culture that evolved under the influence of the Ottoman Empire. It's hard to exaggerate the importance of Medo to the Yugoslav Roma music of the sixties and seventies. He went on to become one of the scene's most prolific composers and arrangers, working with countless musicians and crafting rhythmically restless compositions that leaned towards an Eastern or Turkish style. He also released at least one single as frontman of his own group, the Ansambl Mede Čuna, the astonishing 'Žanino Kolo' (18). When we dug out this incredible piece of work from a little record shop in Belgrade and dropped it on the turntable, a blind Turkish man who happened to be there started crying because it was so beautiful.



Muharem's style changed in the 1970s as he began to experiment with more contemporary sounds, perhaps influenced by the Turkish psych-folk scene. We can hear hints of this in his amped-up Romani-language folk-song 'Ramajana' (1). 'Ramu, Ramu' (6), meanwhile, directly explores the Roma-Indian connection.

One of Medo's big early collaborations outside his work with Esma was with another young Rom from Skopje, Muharem Serbezovski. Born in Šutka, Muharem was a protégé of Esma and Stevo. In 1968, at the age of eighteen, he embarked on his solo career, releasing croony, melodic pop smashes with a distinctive Turkish folk influence. However, Muharem was by no means a simple recycler of Turkish material; like all Roma muscians. his range of influences was hugely complex. Perhaps most famously, he also explored his ancestral link to India with the 1974 hit 'Ramu, Ramu', (6) a song named after a character from the Bollywood smash hit Dosti (Friendship), released in Yugoslavia as Prijateljstvo. Bollywood movies had been flooding into Yugoslavia for years as a cheap alternative to Hollywood, thanks mainly to the close political links between Yugoslavia and 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 increased the power of this newly promoted idea of Indian ancestry. Soon Yugoslavs of all ethnicities were singing along to Muharem Serbezovski's Indian tribute, the music itself mixing 'oriental' Roma tarabuka rhythms, popular Yugoslav folk instrumentation and a 'modern' electric guitar line. A Macedonian Rom singing in Serbian about a fictional character from an Indian film: only in Yugoslavia.

Šaban Bajramović

If Esma is the queen of Yugoslav Roma music, then Šaban Bajramović is unquestionably the king. 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 Šaban fought to survive on the bombed-out streets of his native Niš, an 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 sent to the penal colony of Goli Otok (which literally means 'Barren Island') for three years of hard labour – a sentence raised to five years after



Šaban Bajramović (with bass, centre) and the Muharem-Muja Alijević Ansambl.

he told the court that not even a penal colony could hold him. And there, despite horrific conditions and violent confrontations with other prisoners, he learned to read, played in goal for the prison football team, and formed his first band – the Black Mambas – which inspired him to write the song that started his career, 'Pelno Me Sam' ('I Am Imprisoned'). Themes of crime and imprisonment would continue to haunt his compositions, like the menacing 'Umirem, Umirem' ('I'm Dying', 16). Šaban's 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. Šaban never gave up his badboy lifestyle, but as his fame increased over the years his music grew more melodic and borrowed increasingly from jazz and flamenco.

Trajko Ajdarević Tahir, a fellow southern-Serbian from the town of Leskovac, never enjoyed the afterglow of fame that surrounded Šaban's last years. We think he died in relative obscurity. 'Mangala' (11) is an ode to a traditional Roma string instrument. The Duet Durić-Runjaić(5), unusual in being a Roma female double-act, went on to become stalwarts of straight Serbian folk music.



Kosovo

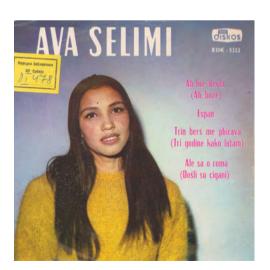
During the same period, the Roma in Kosovo were playing a style quite distinct from that of their southern Serbian and Macedonian neighbours. Kosovo was officially an 'autonomous province' of Serbia, but in practice, especially from 1974 onwards, it functioned almost as a separate Federal unit of Yugoslavia. Each Kosovan ethnic group, whether Albanian, Serbian, Slav Muslim, Turk or Roma, had its own state-sponsored cultural organisations, set up to preserve and promote local musical traditions (as well as to link the population with the local Communist Party). However, the 'traditional' repertoires of the ever-versatile Roma were characteristically diverse, with top Roma musicians exposed to the music of all their ethnic neighbours through their work as session musicians and their performances at weddings, religious ceremonies and local community festivals.

It was through the Roma cultural group in their home-town of Prizren, in the south of Kosovo, that the Koko Brothers – both trained since child-hood, like Medo Čun, in the classical Turkish čalgija tradition – came into contact with local singers Muharem Kruezi and Bedrije Misin. Featured here, their super-rare one-off single 'Mo Vogi Dukala,' (10) with its open chords and soaring vocal lines, seems to reference the soundtracks of spaghetti westerns that were becoming increasingly popular all over Yugoslavia.

Around the same time, Ava Selimi (13) was making a name for herself as a singer in the Kosovan capital, Priština. Young, beautiful, and with an incredible voice, Ava could have been a Yugoslav star – but unlike Esma, she wasn't able to overcome the cultural conservatism of her community. She eventually gave up her career as a musician to live the 'honourable' life of a housewife, depriving the local scene of one of its greatest talents. Selimi Bajrami, another female Kosovan Roma singer, has left us songs that celebrate the arrival of modernity and technology (14); while Hajra Sučurija, again from Kosovo, sings about the dangers lying in wait for those who embrace new affectations too quickly (3). We have been unable to learn anything more about these last two singers.

Nehat Gaši was another big figure of the Priština music scene, but unlike Ava managed to find more widespread and lasting success. He gained legions of devotees through his passionate delivery and his skill at improvising lyrics about members of the audience. On this record you can hear some of his hypnotic riff-based wedding music, filled with pounding rhythms and wry humour (12, 17). He was a wedding favourite in Roma communities across Yugoslavia and is still regarded as a 'legenda' by those most reliable of Roma music critics – the taxi drivers of Šutka.

Ansambl Montenegro, the final group featured here, present an interesting contrast to the rest of the musicians on this album. They hailed of course from Montenegro and, as far as we know, were not Roma – or at least not publically so. Popular throughout the sixties, they had hits with covers of the Beegees' 'Massachusets' and Mungo Jerry's 'In The Summertime'; but they also released this version of 'Djelem, Djelem' ('Wandering, Wandering', 19). In its best-known form, this folk song, adopted by the Roma as a national anthem, describes the Nazi genocide in which up to 90,000 Roma were murdered in Yugoslavia alone. It is from this classic version that we took the title of our own release: 'Ušti Rom Akana', or 'Stand Up, People'. But the variation presented here is a love song, and as well being a wonderful slice of organ-driven beat-combo pop, helps demonstrate just how far the Romani-language music that flourished under Tito was had, by 1968, become an integral part of the pop landscape.



Ava Selimi's only known release (1969). Neighbourhood gossips, no doubt jealous of her beauty and success, claimed her absences on tour were really the wanderings of a 'loose woman', causing the collapse of one marriage and many problems in the second.



1

Muharem Serbezovski & Ansambl Crni Diamante RAMAJANA

(M. Serbezovski) RTB-PGP, S-10470 (1977)

Ramajana

Soon after you were born, You were taken away. Three years later, my sister, You came back – You brought huge happiness, It's good to see you again.

Ramajana, Ramajana, Do you speak Romani? I don't know, I don't know.

One morning, she ran to us.
Crying sadly because of what
Our people had said.
She told me and our mother
That they scold her because
She can't speak Romani.

2 Šaban Bajramović & Ansambl Miodraga Mitrovića-Bate KADA ZVONA ZVONE

(S. Bajramović) Diskos, EDK-5319 (1970)

Bells are Ringing

The bells are ringing.
They are coming for my sister.
They are burying my sister
while the music plays.
People, don't cry
Don't regret my sister's going.
She left this life,
And you will come to her grave
To cover it with flowers.

3 Hajra Sučurija & Amsambl Kud Ibar PE ROMNASA O MIRO TURISTI ĐELO

(H. Sućurija) Jugoton, EPY-4091 (1968)

Miro Went on a Tourist Holiday

O, Roma! Miro went with Rahba On holiday like a tourist. Two weeks later a letter arrives, Telling us that Miro is dead. He crashed his car On the highway and died. But Rahba, mother. Is coming back alone. All the Roma are gathering And asking her where is Miro And crying bitterly -Why did Miro have to die? Rizo is going with Rahba down The black road, to bring home His dead brother Miro, And poor Rahba sells her house So as to not leave Miro Dead on the roadside, And now poor Rabha Lives on the street.

4

Esma Redžepova &
Ansambl Teodosievski
ĐURĐEVDAN, ĐURĐEVDAN
(trad./S. Teodosievski)
RTB PGP, EP 12726 (1969)

St George's Day

In the springtime
One day
In my hometown
Song and dance could be heard
On Đurđevdan, on Đurđevdan

Why should I hide my love?
I love to dance, I love your song
On Đurđevdan, on Đurđevdan
Play, Gypsies
On Đurđevdan, on Đurđevdan

5 Duet Đurić-Runjaić & Sekstet Dušana Radalića AMEN SAMA BUT ROMA (trad.)

RTB PGP, EP-16271 (1964)

Amen Sama But Roma

There are many of us Roma.

We travel on the roads,
We gather together,
Young and old;
Young and old people,
We gather together.
My wife is old,
But to me she is the youngest.

6

Muharem Serbezovski & Ansambl Meda Čuna RAMU, RAMU (trad./B. Milivojević) RTB PGP, EP 16306 (1964)

Ramu, Ramu

When I met my friend. My only friend, It was the happiest day. I wasn't alone anymore. The song was comforting us, Fate was smiling on us But the whirlwind of doom Took him away from me. Hey, Ramu, Ramu, my friend Do you hear my moan? Now I live alone In the darkness. Like dead sunlight, Because you have gone And found a better life. But I still have hope. And call out 'Come back'.

8

7

Usnija Redžepova & Narodni Ansambl Nasko Džorlev SELIME TERNIE

(trad./N. Džorlev) Jugoton, EPY-4041 (1968)

Beautiful Selima

Young Selima,
Beutiful Selima,
Wherever you walk
You burn my soul.
Playing and singing
Gypsy songs,
Making Gypsies dance.

I sit in the street And sing songs And play for you.

8

Šaban Bajramović & Ansambl Muharema-Muje Aliejvića DŽEMILA

(M. Alijević) Diskos, EDK-5182 (1969)

Džemila

I'm standing, watching the girls As they dance: Džemila is dancing at the front. Džemila, beautiful, Bright and young, I'm dying because of you. When Džemila dances She moves the ground. And in my soul, mother, A big fire falls.

Džemila, beautiful, Bright and young, I'm dying because of you.

Either I'll have you, or I'll die I'll not give you to another.

9

Esma Redžepova & Ansambl Teodosievski PESMA ŠEHER SARAJEVU

(S. Teodosievski/S. Kafedžić) Jugoton LPY S-61023 (1974)

Song of Sarajevo Town

Fly my dear song,
Raise your wings
To the bright sun.
Let this beautiful song be heard
About the beauty of Sarajevo.

The one who wants to be Forever young with love,
Let him come to Bosnia,
Into the town.
The one who wants to be forever young with love,
Let him come to the beautiful
Saraievo town.

There are no roses, nor lilac, There is no song, nor longing, Neither revelers, nor lovers Without Sarajevo boys.

Sarajevo girls are beautiful Like golden bracelets. Mouths of honey, Teeth of pearls: Lucky is the one Who kisses them

10

Bedrije Misin & Ansambl Braće Koko MO VOGI DUKALLA

(trad.) RTB PGP. EP 16300 (1974)

My Heart's Hurting

My heart's hurting.
Understand me, love,
That's why I call you,
Because I don't have
What I need.

My heart's hurting. Understand me, love.

I'm going to cut my hair.
I'll never let you go
Out of my heart.
You will not go out.

11

Trajko Ajdarević Tahir & Orkestar Krune Simonovića MANGALA

(trad./B. Milivojević) Jugoton, SY-22699 (1974)

Mangala

Do you hear, mother, The song in the air? Mother, It's the fire Caressing my soul.

Mangala, the whole neighborhood For your song Would give everything. Fire is nothing Compared to that song. It beats stronger than a heart. It is my life.

12

Nehat Gaši & Ansambl Rom NAŠTI TADAV KI ŠUTKA TEDIKAV

(N. Gaši) Jugoton, EPY-4285 (1970)

Mother, I Can't Go to See Šutka

Mother, I can't go To see Šutka. All of Šutka is like A little Paris. All night and day, They are drinking And throwing a big party. Šutka women are big lovers.

Let's go there boys and girls, To listen to Nehat's song. Let's dance boys and girls, I'm singing good songs, This song is for the girls, For the girls to dance, For the girls to celebrate.

13

Ava Selimi & Ansambl Dobrivoja Baskića A BRE DEVLA

(D. Baskić/U. Brizani) Diskos, EDK-5222 (1969)

Oh My God

Days are going by, The children are growing. Oh, my mother, Elmaz is crying.

Oh God, Why did you leave me Living without you, Walking without you?

Elmaz is almost three years old He doesn't know His father's name. Sabedin, just take a look, Are you thinking About your Elmaz?

14

Selime Bajrami & Ansambl Rasima Saliha GILAVA AMARE ROMENGE

(M. Durmiš) Jugoton EPY-4085 (1969)

I'm Singing For Us Roma

For you, dear girls, I'm singing this new song. Do you want to know What am I singing about?

I am she, I am she,
The one making a new song.
Roma are walking around,
Carrying pocket radios
They want to listen
To this Roma song.
That's why you listen
To this song.
It's you I'm singing for,
I'm singing for you girls,
I'm singing for you men.

15

Esma Redžepova & Ansambl Teodosievski ABRE BABI SOKERDŽAN

(trad.) Jugoton, EPY-3112 (1964)

Oh Father, What Have You Done?

I am young and will not marry, I won't fetch cold water.

Oh young and beautiful girl Do not tell me that.

Oh Father, what have you done? You have sold me off too soon. Oh Father, what have you done? You give me away too soon.

I am too young to marry, And will not take a poor man.

16

Šaban Bajramović & Ansambl UMIREM, UMIREM

(S. Bajramović/Z. Jocić) Diskos, EDK, 5361 (1971)

I'm Dying, I'm Dying

I can't sleep all night, I can't eat anymore.

I went out
And looked into the distance,
Saw you passing
Even though you
Didn't want to look.

I'll die, I'll die, girl.
I'll die, mother,

Because of you, girl, I knifed my father, Because of you, girl, I killed your brothers,

And now I'm running away
And all I want is you.
Now I'm in a jail.
I can't eat.
I ask my mother
What you're doing,
She says you're marrying
Another man.

I'll die, I'll die, girl.

17

Nehat Gaši & Ansambl Rom ALO DIVE ME ROMJA TE MUKAV

(N. Gaši) Jugoton, EPY-4285 (1970)

The Day has Come to Leave my Wife

The day has come
To leave my wife
And make my children poor.

On my wedding I went To buy wedding dresses.

'Oh father, I don't want this, I love my mother so much,' My daughter cries.

'Father, you will find

Yourself a wife
But not a mother for me.
Why did you bring me to this
Kosovan woman?
She will beat me,
She will hit me.
This stepmother will come
And pull my hair.'

18 Medo Čun & Ansambl ŽANINO KOLO (M. Čun) RTB PGP, 1110349 (1980)

19 Ansambl Montenegro DJELEM, DJELEM (trad.) Jugoton, EPY-3955 (1968)

Wandering, Wandering

I have travelled over long roads, I have met fortunate Roma. I have travelled far and wide, I have met lucky Roma.

O, my Roma people! O, my Roma children!

How I love her two black eyes, Black as two black grapes. I bought her a nice red mirror. I love her like no-one else.











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This album is dedicated to the memory of Sam Watkins, a great friend and music-lover, and Ismeta Musa, kindest of hosts.

Further reading: Garth Cartwright, Princes Amongst Men: Journeys with Gyspy Musicians (2005).











ESMA ansambl TEODOSIEVSKI

11.030 Beograd P. Spasića i Mašere 51 Telefon: (011) 554-888