



# Esma Redžepova

Garth Cartwright reflects on the colourful life and recording legacy of the Macedonian Roma singer

Esma Redžepova, the undisputed 'Queen of the Gypsies,' has had an extraordinary life; one in which she has achieved great things – both as an artist and humanitarian. She remains active, despite being in her 70s, still performing, recording and speaking out on matters that concern her. Oddly, for someone so famous – and Esma enjoys the kind of first name recognition that is only allocated to a handful of world music stars – she has recorded little of note across the past two decades. This understandably reflects the fact that Esma's achievements from 1957 through to the 90s are so momentous that, inevitably, as her pace has slowed and the Balkan music scene changed radically (the collapse of Yugoslavia dealing an awful blow to the singer who so believed in Tito's 'One State, Many Different People'), she has settled foremost into her role as an icon of both her

home country Macedonia (where she is a national hero) and the Roma people. Born on August 8 1943, to Ibrahim and Canija Redžepova, Esma was the second youngest of six children. "My father was a shoeshine man and he lost a leg when the Nazis bombed Skopje," Esma says. "This did not stop him working and he never begged." Aged nine, Esma was introduced by her brother Fari to Skopje Romaines Pralipe, which is a local Roma music organisation. "I was quick to pick up even the most complicated rhythms." In the summer of 1957 she was invited to sing at a talent contest and won. Stevo Teodosievski, a noted accordionist, composer and bandleader, was in the audience and so impressed, he approached Ibrahim about letting Esma join his ensemble. Fifty-six years on and Esma has given over 8,000 concerts, written and recorded hundreds of



songs, released dozens of albums, shifted countless units. In the Balkans during the 50s Roma girls were often married at 12 or 13. How had Esma escaped this fate? "I was dedicated to being an artist and singer, not the wife," says Esma with evident pride. "At the age of nine I realised I was different; I had something special. At age of ten I started to compose, 'Tuzbalica' was my first. At 12 I had composed 'Chaje Shukarije' (Beautiful Girl), the most popular song amongst my peers. By 13-14, I had already composed 30 Roma and Macedonian songs."



Teodosievski guaranteed Esma would be trained as a singer, paid well and treated with utmost respect. For his part, her father, Ibrahim, had to promise not to arrange a marriage for Esma before she turned 18. Initially uncertain, Ibrahim realised there was no restraining his tiny songbird. Contract signed, Esma became Ensemble Teodosievski's vocalist. They scored their first hit in 1959 with 'Chaje Shukarije.'

Esma and Ensemble Teodosievski shifted to Belgrade, "where the media and music industry was based," says Esma. Although only in her teens, Esma's powerful voice ensured her early recordings possess remarkable energy and spirit; the Ensemble's fervour across fast, complex rhythms matches the infectious excitement of Esma's voice. In 1960 president Tito, recognising in Esma something of the hummingbird's beauty and energy, began employing the Ensemble for state and international occasions.

In 1961 Esma and Ensemble Teodosievski first appeared on Yugoslav TV and began touring beyond Balkan borders, in Berlin, Vienna, Paris and the US. Long before 'world music' existed, there was Esma, a 'folk' singer from an obscure corner of Europe who was winning a wide following. Esma and Teodosievski finally married in 1968.

The couple returned from Belgrade to Skopje in 1989, the rise of Slobodan Milošević hurrying them home. The 90s were Esma's years of pain: Teodosievski succumbed to pancreatic cancer and his death in 1997, alongside the destruction of Yugoslavia, left their mark on Esma. Long before Esma and Teodosievski were married, they began adopting Roma boys, often discovering gifted

children at weddings or in *mahalas* (Balkan neighbourhoods). Of the 47 children given a musical training, only five became legal wards of Esma and Teodosievski.

Beyond music and family, there's also Esma the activist – she actively helped Roma fleeing ethnic cleansing in Kosovo; has campaigned for more women politicians and supported charities for children and women. Her humanitarian efforts have led to Esma receiving many awards, among them two

Nobel Peace Prize nominations. "My message would be that the Roma people never fought anyone, never engaged in wars or occupied any other nation. The Roma have no country of their own and everyone should look up to them because they are cosmopolitan people."

She's normally a very positive person but mention of Goran Bregović – who has often recorded her song 'Chaje Shukarije' while claiming the publishing for himself – makes Esma wince. "That's my song. You know I composed it," she says. "Goran Bregović is a man who materialised the music, who took from everybody something and put it in his music. He took 30% of my music and then some of Šaban Bajramović and other Roma musicians. So he made music for business. There's no quality in it."

Esma is also critical of Emir Kusturica's Gypsy films, noting that they provide a distorted caricature of Roma life. Rumour had it that when 'Chaje Shukarije' appeared in the opening of the movie *Borat* – so providing Esma with a huge youth audience – she was never paid and so sued Sacha Baron Cohen. Not true. It appears the recording was licenced from the label World Connection and she has received royalties.

Inevitably age has forced Esma to slow down her performances, yet she now leads a big band called Esma & Amazing Roma from Macedonia. She essentially hosts the show, singing a few hits while letting three young Macedonian Roma singers perform the bulk of the material.

"I have had a rich life," says Esma, "and feel very fortunate. It makes me sad when I see suffering in the world. But music is a force for good and I will keep singing as long as I can." ♦

## BEST ALBUMS

**Queen of the Gypsies** (World Connection, 2001)  
This is a superb double album that gathers 24 of Esma's prime Yugoslav-era recordings together with her husband Stevo Teodosievski and his ensemble.

**Gypsy Carpet** (Network, 2007)  
This is a specially-recorded collection with fellow Macedonian and accordionist Simeon Atanasov taking over the band duties and arrangements. *Gypsy Carpet* also includes the autobiographical track, 'Moite Zlatni 50' (My Golden 50s). Reviewed in #45.

**Mon Histoire** (Accords Croisés, 2007)  
This is a strong album that finds Esma and the band joined by the excellent French guitarist Titi Robin. A warm, enjoyable collaboration. Reviewed in #45.

## BEST COMPILATION

**Various Artists**  
**Flammes du Coeur: Gypsy Queens** (Network Medien, 1992)  
This excellent double-CD compilation contains six original recordings of Esma – including her best recording of 'Dzelem', the Roma anthem. Alongside Esma, there is excellent music from Dzansver, Gabi Lunčá, Romica Puceanu, Mitsou and La Macanita setting the context of women in Gypsy music.

## IF YOU LIKE ESMA REDŽEPOVA, THEN TRY:

**Šaban Bajramović**  
**Mostar Sevdah Reunion Presents: A Gypsy Legend** (World Connection, 2002)

The late singer Šaban Bajramović was the King to Esma's Queen during Yugoslavia's heyday. A magnificent singer-songwriter, this album captures Bajramović at his best, backed by the musicians of Mostar Sevdah Reunion in the Pavarotti Studios in Mostar.