Female Balkan Romani Singers: Charting Innovative Performance Paths

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Abstract: *This chapter unpacks the intersectional dimensions of the innovative paths crafted by female Romani performers. Focusing on three case studies from Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Serbia, I explore how vocalists from three different generations challenged, resisted or reframed the historical stereotype of Romani women as dangerous, exotic, emotional, and sexual. Not only is the "Gypsy seductress" an iconic figure in literature, folklore and visual culture, but also "Gypsy sexuality and emotion" is often precisely located in the female voice and the body. How did these women negotiate these discursive challenges to establish their individual artistry and their signature genres? How did they overcome the patriarchal structures of their families and communities to carve out creative space in the public sphere while becoming economically independent? My analysis intertwines issues of gender, ethnicity, race, and representation. Nadka Petrova's life history illustrates how a Bulgarian wedding singer born from humble origins during late socialism achieved superb technical mastery while carving out independence in a competitive genre. Macedonian superstar Esma Redžepova, born during World War II, is perhaps the most famous Romani singer in the world. As she bridged the musical worlds of Roma and non-Roma to attract a transnational Balkan audience, her iconic image and sound drew on historical stereotypes, but she re-fashioned them as respectable. Pretty Loud (Serbia) recently emerged as the first Romani female rap band. Their songs expose racism against Roma as well as critique sexism within their communities.*

Keywords: *Roma, gender, sexuality, Balkans, representation.*

While all over the Balkans Romani men are well known as expert musicians, female artists have received less attention. Considering that there are few female Balkan Romani professional singers due to cultural constraints on women's bodies and their mobility in the public sphere, how did successful performers overcome challenges? To understand their paths, I take an intersectional approach addressing ethnicity, race, gender, class and age. Focusing on case studies from Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Serbia, I examine how three vocalists from three different generations challenged, resisted or reframed the historical stereotype of women as emotional, sexual and needing protection, and specifically Romani women as dangerous and exotic. In the Balkans

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generally, and especially in Romani communities, women are expected to care for home and children, thus constraining their occupational choices. How did these artists overcome patriarchal structures to carve out creative professional space in the public sphere while becoming economically independent?

Not only is the "Gypsy seductress" an iconic figure in literature, folklore and visual culture, but also "sexuality and emotion" is often framed as precisely located in the female voice and the body. How did these women negotiate these discursive and bodily tropes to establish their individual artistry and their signature genres? Noting that images and sounds of "Gypsies" are racially coded, I highlight issues of representation. My analysis is informed by interdisciplinary theoretical frames encompassing performance studies, emotion/affect studies, gender and sexuality studies and critical Romani studies. Professional music has been an important medium of exchange between Roma and non-Roma for centuries, and the musical marketplace has been the site where emotions and images are exchanged. In addition, the association of women's voices with authenticity, emotion and sexuality provides symbolic capital for the marketplace. Inspired by Ruth Hellier's list of themes (2013: 26), I examine life histories, genre and repertoire choices, texts, sound aesthetics and the uses of body via dance and costume.

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Roma as Professional Musicians, "Gypsies" as "Others"

Linguistic evidence shows that Roma are a diasporic ethnic group that migrated from northwest India to the Balkans by the fourteenth century. Initial curiosity about Roma by Europeans quickly gave way to discrimination, a legacy that has continued until today. Roma were viewed as intruders probably because of their dark skin, their non-European physical features, their foreign customs, and their association with magic (Petrova 2003). Stereotypes about Roma abound, encompassing the romantic (musical, sexual, artistic) along with the criminal (dangerous). Roma are racialized in these stereotypes, and are often referred to as blacks: dirty, untrustworthy, thieving.

1 Fieldwork with these female performers included interviews, informal conversations and participant observation at performances and at home. I began conversations with Esma in 1996 in her home and on several tours until her death in 2016; I also consulted her two published autobiographies. I met Nadya Petrova in 2014 and interviewed her several times; there are no published sources about her. I met and interviewed Pretty Loud members in 2021 in Belgrade and 2022 via Zoom and consulted many published interviews.

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Roma inspired fear and were expelled from many European territories. Bounties were paid for their capture and repressive measures included confiscation of property and children, forced labor, branding, etc. (Petrova 2003). In Romania Roma were slaves from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Perhaps the most tragic period in Romani history was the Holocaust when over 500,000 Roma were murdered. The communist regimes in Eastern Europe defined Roma as a social problem. They were targeted for integration into the planned economy, forced to give up their traditional occupations, and assigned to the lowest skilled and lowest paid state jobs. Today European Roma face inferior and segregated housing and education, poor health conditions, and shorter life expectancy. Discrimination is widespread in employment and the legal system, and even educated people routinely express disdain for "Gypsies". Hate speech and racial profiling are common in the media. Perhaps most troubling are the hundreds of incidences of physical violence against Roma perpetrated by ordinary citizens and also by the police (FRA 2018). Due to these prejudices, many Roma pass as other ethnic groups.

Balkan Roma have been professional musicians for centuries, playing for peasants and urbanites of many classes and ethnicities in cafes and family celebrations, but excluded from elite concert stages. This professional niche is primarily male and instrumental, and requires knowledge of the co-territorial repertoire manner. Roma became multi-musical as well as multi-lingual and developed an openness to innovation. Yet their artistry in music does not erase their rejection; they are revered as musicians and reviled as people (Silverman 2012). The positive yet dangerous coding of Roma hinges on their romanticization by non-Roma as free souls, their association with the arts, especially music, and their proximity to nature and sexuality. Gay y Blasco claims (2008: 297): "Gypsies/Roma occupy a central place in the collective imagination of the West. They are objects of both revulsion and fascination…". Using Edwards Said's concept, we can claim that Roma are "orientalized". Lee (2000: 132) extends Said's argument: "Whilst Orientalism is the discursive construction of the exotic Other *outside* Europe, Gypsylorism is the construction of the exotic Other *within* Europe—Romanies are the Orientals within". Roma, then, serve as one of Europe's quintessential others.

Roma are historically associated with emotional expression. Van de Port (1998: 205), who observed Serbian bars, claimed that the Gypsy musician unlocks the soul. More than just a "safety valve" for pent up emotions, the Gypsy bar gives rein to the emotional imagination. Malvinni represents the centrality of emotion in Romani music with an equation: $I + V = E$, where I is improvisation, V is virtuosity and E is emotion (2004). Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990) show how emotions, despite appearing to be innate, universal, and essential, are embedded in specific cultural contexts that are often tied to inequality. For Roma, music has been one of the positively coded arenas in a long history of exclusion. Indeed, Roma have carved out a traditional performance niche from their historical association with emotion.

Within Balkan communities, Romani performances are often evaluated by patrons for their affective impact. Markovic (2017: 164) notes that "music is closely associated with celebratory culture… because music is believed to be inherently emotional. Good musicians are appreciated for their ability to act as catalysts for celebrants' emotional expression through their musical services". Moreover, Van de Port (1998: 182), among many

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authors, claims that Romani musicians are masters of transmuting the emotions of patrons, divining their requests, and accessing their souls. In Eastern Europe we hear of the virtuosic performances of Roma that move people to tears, of the seemingly endless variations in melody, of the capturing of emotion in music. Proverbs similarly attest that "a wedding without a Gypsy isn't worth anything" (Bulgarian). Musicians delicately refine how to produce these affective experiences that seem "natural" but are actually highly coordinated. Moreover, Romani music performance provides a useful case to examine the "affective turn in ethnomusicology"; which, according to Hofman (2015a), is related to sensory (emotion) and embodiment more than discourse. The embodied and gendered nature of affect is a resource that Romani singers often use.

Gender, Sexuality and the Female Voice

Due to the pioneering work of feminist music scholars, gender has become a primary analytic in understanding musical performance (Dunn and Jones 1994; Hellier 2013; Magowan and Wrazen 2013). The "Gypsy seductress" is an iconic figure in literature, folklore and visual culture, e.g., Carmen and Esmeralda. Radulescu (2008: 195) points out that Gypsy women in the Middle Ages were both feared and admired as entertainers (palm readers, dancers, musicians). Their supposed sexual freedom caused them to be labeled as witches at the same tie that their freedom was admired. Romani women iconically fulfill the fantasies of non-Roma as wild creatures given to their emotions. Moreover, sexual prowess is commonly attributed to marginal people of color, often to control them and criminalize them (Hancock 2008). Note also that marginalized ethnic groups have little control over how they are depicted. Moreover, Romani performers may strategically embrace stereotypes to create various musical niches.[2] Labels such as exotic, passionate, genetically talented, and soulful, for example, are not only found in marketing but also defended by some Romani performers; they may self-stereotype because it can be the only branding available. Yet, as we will see below, Esma Redžepova cleverly re-worked this stereotype, and thus produced new subjectivities.

The gendered profile of Romani women is located in both the female body and the female voice. As Dunn and Jones point out (1994: 1), feminists use voice, as in "giving voice", to refer to empowerment as well as to the "literal audible voice" that has often been silenced. Both dimensions of voice involve hierarchal power dynamics. In addition, the voice in often associated with subjectivity, emotions, privacy, authenticity and vulnerability, which in turn are often gendered as female (Hellier 2013: 5). Along with the voice, the female body is an affective tool. "Emotional efficacy resides in the way in which sounds and movements are cognitively and affectively integrated" (Magowan and Wrazen 2013: 4). For the three artists I discuss, the double association of women and Roma with sexuality was powerful raw material that needed to be reframed.

Stoever's work claims that although "difference" is usually highlighted visually, it is also heard (2015). Writing about the "Sonic Color Line" in connection with African Amer-

2 See Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism" whereby powerless groups adopt essential traits attributed to them in order to accomplish specific goals, see Silverman 2012: 52.

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ican music, she states (2015: 4): "Listening operates as an organ of racial discernment, categorization, and resistance in the shadow of vision's alleged cultural dominance". Sound is thus a "critical modality through which subjects (re)produce, apprehend, and resist imposed racial identities". This is highly relevant for Roma, who have been excluded from dominant visual and auditory regimes categories and are expected to have "marked" bodies and voices. Thus, there is a form of collusion between the producers of sound (Roma) and listeners (non-Roma) to produce voices that sound "Gypsy". Hierarchal powers relations are embedded in this process of "auditory profiling" (Stoever 2015: 20). We will see below how Esma took the emotional, passionate historical formula of the "Gypsy singer" as raw material and reworked it. She neither dismantled the sonic color line nor the racialized listening practices associated with it, rather, she elevated them to respectability and debuted them on elite stages. Nadya Petrova, on the other hand, de-emphasized her Romani heritage to perform in Bulgarian genres; and Pretty Loud choose a new genre, rap, so as to decouple the historic association of Roma with traditional genres.

Note also that in contrast to the stereotype described above, the display of female sexuality in Balkan Romani communities is actually very regulated. Female professional singing and dancing are frowned upon because both are associated with sexuality: the voice and body are displayed for men for remuneration. Historically this ideology existed among all ethnicities and religions in the Balkans, but today it is strongest among Muslims and Roma (Silverman 2003). Thus, there are very few female professional Romani vocalists. One way to circumvent public disapproval is to marry a musician; one's husband (or father or brother) then serves as the protector of his wife's honor. Indeed, this is a path both Esma Redžepova and Nadya Petrova followed.

Bulgarian Wedding Singer: Nadya Petrova

As mentioned above, females (whether Romani or not) have always faced the problem of reputation: despite the female voice being desirable and valued, female singers have traced a difficult path to public performance. Women artists need to actively counteract both the assumption of their loose sexuality (Hofman 2015b) and the assumption of females needing to be "protected". Indeed, my interviews with many Bulgarian village singers revealed that in the 1950s-1970s, their families refused to let them move to the large cities to join national choirs. The elder generation (both males and females) could neither envision nor condone an unmarried woman living on her own in an unsupervised manner. Even going to school in a neighboring city was often rejected. Such was the case with Nadya Petrova.

Petrova's vocal talent was noticed in school, and, in seventh grade, she was selected to audition for the selective Folk Music High School in Kotel, a city several hours north from her hometown of Sopot. Her mother refused to give permission for Petrova to audition stating, "No, Roma might abduct her from school. She needs to stay home with me". Her mother was not referring to the false stereotype of Roma kidnapping children, but rather to the well documented Bulgarian custom of young men grabbing desirable girls from village dances and marketplaces. Until the 1950s there were cases of abducted

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girls forcibly taken to men's homes. Theoretically, the girls were supposed to be given the choice to leave and go back to their own homes, but some were raped, and were forced to marry their rapists (Forsyth 1996: 65–69).

Clearly Petrova's mother was trying to protect her daughter, but she was also supporting patriarchal principles limiting women's freedom and individual choices. Note also that men's behavior was not criticized. The fact that Petrova was an only child also contributed to her parents' fears. She was born to a poor Eastern Orthodox family; her mother married young and waited fourteen years for a child before Nadya was born; thus she was treasured. Nadya's mother's family were all singers, performing mostly Bulgarian repertoire, and Petrova learned many songs from her. Her talent "stood out like a pearl". She started singing professionally with local bands at the age of thirteen, for weddings, baptisms, and soldier send-off celebrations. She also worked for many years at an arms factory in Sopot.

Petrova's talent lies in *svatbarska muzika* (wedding music), a genre of Bulgarian folk music that arose in the 1970s (Silverman 2007, 2015, 2021). The instrumental part of this genre features fast tempos, stunning improvisations, dense ornamentation, chromatic passages, and innovative modulations. Bridging folk, jazz, and rock sensibilities, wedding music was a countercultural phenomenon in the 1970s-80s but during post-socialism it was reclaimed as folk music. Wedding songs are either traditional or composed by singers. The vocal style emphasizes rhythmic vibrato and extensive ornamentation, imitating the melodic instruments; it is based on eastern Thracian models and was codified by singers such as Nedyalka Keranova, Maria Karafezieva, and Dinka Ruseva. Indeed, these three singers are Petrova's idols, one of whom, Keranova, was also Romani. Like her idols, Petrova's forte is *bavni pesni* (slow songs) that showcase her superb technical abilities in long ornamented phrases.[3] Like, Keranova, Petrova does not advertise her Romani ethnicity; in fact, many fans do not know she is Romani. She speaks Romani, is proud of her ethnicity, and can sing Romani songs, but does not highlight this, as it is a stigma. Note that although wedding style was created mostly by Roma, both Roma and ethnic Bulgarians had and still have decisive roles in wedding music, and bands are often mixed (Silverman 2021).

At a young age Nadya eloped with a local Romani clarinetist, Dimitŭr Petrov, and joined his band. Marrying a musician was the typical solution to a female singer's dilemma of building a professional career while appearing modest. Petrova's parents were against this union, and she had no contact with them for several years; but after her two sons were born, they reconciled. Nadya established her reputation as a singer because of her immense talent and technique, and her huge repertoire, but she established her reputation as a respectable woman because she worked with her husband and was a good mother. Dimitŭr, however, soon suffered a heart attack, gave up performing, and became an *uredbadzhiya*, a person who owns and operates a sound system with wedding bands. When Nadya and Dimitŭr were hired together they made decent money; however, she began to be hired more often than him, and often without him. She earned respect and established an independent career. From 1990s-2000s she was a "guest"

3 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jd1DlSJjLpI, https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100000972912937&sk=about&section=year-overviews and other YouTube clips.

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singer with several top bands: Ork. Folk Palitra (Folk Palette), Ork. Rodopi, Ork. Slavej (Nightingale), Ork. Brestovitsa and Ork. Biser (Pearl, led by Mladen Malakov). Being independent means that you set your own fees, which are higher than other musicians.

Despite good income, females building independent career face myriad problems. Nadya had to learn how to advocate for herself and how to navigate the music business. During one post-wedding 3 AM band meeting, the band leader refused to give her the predetermined soloist fee. She argued and threatened not to show up at their gig the next day. When he wouldn't budge, she defiantly did not show up at the gig! This was a rare display of female power and financial acuity. A few weeks later he was forced to reconcile with her because his clients demanded her as the vocalist. Another problem for females was transportation; many of Nadya's gigs were hours away from her home. Her husband would not let her drive alone to performances, as this could be dangerous (due to theft and sexual assault late at night) plus a threat to her reputation. Thus Nadya needed to find rides with male band members, or Dimitŭr or their sons would drive her and wait around for hours. This publicly displayed Dimitŭr's lack of work, and marital strife ensued.

Eventually Nadya separated from Dimitŭr, bought a car, and drove herself to gigs, displaying a public measure of freedom. She joined Makalov's band and then married Malakov. Dimitŭr died of COVID in November 2020. Now that Nadya is a member of Malakov's band, her reputation and financial security are assured. Again, Malakov (like most traditional men) does not want her to drive alone. She quoted him: "people look down on a woman alone; this is not the kind of life I want for you". There are some female singers who do drive alone and manage to retain their reputations. Some wealthy singers hire male drivers. In general, however, female performers still gain security mostly through men, even today.

Another challenge facing female singers is the need to balance the male gaze favoring sexual allure in costuming with the desire to appear modest. Wedding singers are affected by the huge market for *chalga* (pop-folk fusion, also known as turbo-folk) that arose in the late 1980s. Chalga singers tend to dress scantily and dance sexually (Silverman 2012, chapter 9). Singers like Petrova seek to distinguish themselves from "crude" chalga singers – thus, they may wear folk costumes for video clips (Silverman 2007, 2015). But the boundary between folk and chalga is not always sharp. Although Petrova insists that she is a folk singer, still she keeps abreast of chalga hits in case they are requested at weddings. Below we will explore how Esma, too, needed to negotiate her costuming and her complex image.

Esma Redžepova: Icon of Romani Song

Esma Redžepova (1943–2016) is perhaps the most famous Romani singer in the world but faced multiple challenges to stardom. She not only wrote songs that are still sung today, but she also created a niche for Roma on concert stages plus served as a model for female vocalists. One of National Public Radio's 50 Great Voices, Esma (as she is known to her fans) emerged as a teenage star, toured internationally for over 50 years, won numerous prizes, gave over 10,000 concerts (including many benefits), recorded hundreds

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of albums, and mentored and fostered forty-seven children. Esma strategically used her voice, her body, her costumes, and her stagings to craft a signature gendered style. Her image drew on historical stereotypes of Romani women as exotic, emotional, sexual, and musical, yet she re-made them as respectable and rooted in families. Like Petrova, she overcame the stigma of females risking their reputations when performing professionally.

Esma was born in Skopje, North Macedonia to a poor Muslim family. Her talent was noticed in school productions, and she won an amateur radio competition. However, she feared her parents' wrath because it was considered shameful for women to perform outside the family for strangers. She said: "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). Singing was an especially sensitive topic in her household because Esma's sister Sajka rejected an arranged marriage, ran away, became a café (*kafana*) singer, and was disowned. But Esma managed to resist her parents' attempts to marry her off in her teens. As a result of the competition, she was brought to the attention of Stevo Teodosievski (1934–1997), an ethnic Macedonian arranger at Radio Skopje who later became her husband. Stevo wanted to train her. Facing her parents' disapproval, he promised that he would make Esma into a stage artist, not a *kafana* singer.

Esma's career with *Ansambl Teodosievski* was characterized by instantaneous success and daring innovations. She was the first Balkan Romani musician to achieve commercial success on elite stages; she was the first female Romani artist to record in Yugoslavia; and she was the first woman in Macedonia to sing on (the new medium of) television. Esma gives credit for her success to Stevo, but Esma herself composed many of her songs, choreographed her performances, and provided her talent. On the other hand, Stevo planned her career carefully – Esma performed only at concerts and for radio and television recordings, creating a new category of female concert artist that didn't have the stigma of a *kafana* singer (Silverman 2003, 2012, chapter 10).

In the early 1970s, Roma in Macedonia were beginning to develop pride via their historical ties to India as part of a larger politicization process. Esma and Stevo made their first trip to India in 1969, followed by two invited trips in 1976 and 1983. In 1976 Esma and Stevo drove from Skopje to India by car; and they were crowned "King and Queen of Romani Music" at the First World Festival of Romani Songs and Music in Chandigarh. Esma also displayed her pride in her Romani heritage through language: "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". Despite its official policy of multi-culturalism, Yugoslav music producers openly discriminated against Roma. According to Esma, "many singers passed [as other ethnic groups] because there was an embargo on Romani singers…. I risked a great deal when I said I was Romani and I want to sing in my own language…. Romani women were afraid at the time to say they were Roma. – they said they were Turkish, Macedonian, Albanian, anything but Roma…. I opened the way for Roma, in the first place, to admit that they are Roma, and not to be ashamed they are Roma" (interview, 20 June 1996, New York City). At Radio Skopje Stevo was repeatedly told: "Take… other singers – why a Gypsy?" His colleagues said, "Stevo why have you brought this Gypsy to disgrace us" (Teodosievski and Redže-

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pova 1984: 95). The taunts became so stifling that in the 1960s Stevo and Esma moved to Belgrade, Serbia, the capital of Yugoslavia, where they had less harassment and more opportunities.

Yugoslavia's ethnic policy of "brotherhood and unity" supported the cultures and languages of official minorities (Albanians, Turks and Hungarians) but Roma were not recognized as a *narodnost* (nationality, minority). In addition, each Yugoslav republic had its own policy. For example, Romani radio and music received state support in Kosovo in the 1970s. In contrast, in Macedonia, exclusion was so virulent that Esma's songs were not played on radio and television for 25 years. Esma bitterly recalled: "Two or three persons had closed the doors of Radio Skopje for us" (Katin 2015: 257).[4] But eventually her fame did overcome her exclusion in Macedonia. Esma moved back to Skopje in 1990 when war in Serbia was imminent, and the city government leased her prime land to build a home and museum of her life. After her death, unfortunately, there has been no official commemoration. Her legacy has been ignored, and her home is in ruins.

Esma's display of her Romani ethnicity resonated with historic tropes of the iconic "Gypsy" entertainer who was born to perform. Her characteristic use of emotional vocal styling echoed the stereotype of how "Gypsies unlock the soul of their patrons". Press reviews during Esma's early years reveal stark gendered, racialized, and bodily terms. Critics described Esma as dark-skinned, hot-blooded, happy-go-lucky, and genetically talented: "Esma has a lovely dark complexion, it would be a wonderful advertisement for suntan creams and lotion; it has the shade of well-baked bread. She has large, almond shaped eyes, the color of shiny coal, slightly prominent cheekbones and shiny pearly teeth" (Teodosievski and Redžepova 1984: 141).

Stevo and Esma cultivated these stereotypes as long as they were positive. Vulnerable groups may self-stereotype when necessary for marketing purposes, echoing Spivak's "strategic essentialism". Historically, Roma have had few opportunities to alter their imagery because they have never been in control of their representations. Esma and Stevo strategically crafted an image that retained the allure of the "Gypsy" woman as beautiful, sensual and fiery, but made her respectable. One route to respectability was through staging scenarios of a wholesome family, with a maturing Esma as a maternal symbol. All ensemble members came from the school for poor musical children that Stevo established in their Belgrade home; all received lodging, meals, and clothing free of charge; and their music instruction launched their careers. Reflecting their "family", Esma's songs were staged as dramatic performances with the whole group dancing and swaying. The youngest boy, often barefoot, drummed on a *tarabuka* (hand drum), evoking humble poverty. Not only did young drummers provide charismatic visual and

4 Note that according to Rasmussen, in the early 1980s the Serbian/Bosnian band Južni Vetar (composed of non-Roma) pioneered an "eastern/oriental" pan-Yugoslav sound that drew on Romani styles and was widely popular. They too were boycotted by television and radio media although they sold millions of records (2002: 123–4). Note that Serbian and Macedonian state media did produce some Romani music in the 1970s-1990s but it was not easy for Romani musicians to secure state work (Silverman 2012: 10). In contrast, in Bulgaria 1984–1989 Romani music was labeled corrupt and impure and was prohibited by the socialist government; musicians were harassed, fined and sent to jail (Silverman 2021). Post-socialist Serbia, Macedonia, and Bulgaria have healthy Romani music markets but racism in general has increased.

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aural interest, but their participation also created a wholesome image, defusing the sexuality of a Romani woman. It also created intimacy with the audience and a safe window into the "authentic" Romani world.

Esma embraced her Romani ethnicity, but not exclusively; she broadened her appeal to Yugoslav multi-culturalism via repertoire and costuming. Thus, dressed in six folk costumes, she performed songs from all six Yugoslav republics, in every language in Yugoslavia. She further broadened to songs of neighboring Balkan countries, and also songs in German, Hebrew, Russian, and Hindi. In addition, she toured to countries with a significant Yugoslav migrant population (such as Australia, Austria, Canada, and the US). Thus, she became a global singer. She was also a global humanitarian, organizing numerous benefit concerts for orphanages, hospitals, disabled people, etc. She had a special interest in women's issues and in 1995 the Macedonian Association of Romani Women incorporated her name in its title. In 2002 she won the Woman of the Year title from the magazine *Žena* (Woman) and in 2010 she took part in a United Nations conference on women as part of the Macedonian delegation. Although she eschewed activism specifically for Roma (and was criticized by Romani activists for this stance), Esma was a universal humanist, stressing pacificism and cross-cultural understanding. She paved the way for female performers, and she remains a music icon for Roma around the world.

Pretty Loud: Pioneering Female Romani Rap

As the first female Romani band in Europe, Pretty Loud has achieved remarkable recent success by rapping about women's empowerment issues that apply to both to the Romani community and the wider non-Romani society. Arranged marriage, domestic violence, and discrimination are all targeted in their lyrics. According to band member Silvia Sinani: "We want to stop the early marriages … we want the girls themselves, and not their parents, to decide whether they want to marry or not. We want every woman to have the right to be heard, to have her dreams and to be able to fulfil them, to be equal" (Gec 2021). The band promotes the economic independence of women through education. Band member Živka Ferhatović stated: "be educated, make your own salary… so you don't depend on your husband or anyone else – fight for your yourself… This is your life lesson".[5] They said in their speech accepting the 2021 Elle Magazine Style Award for activism: "… We are here for the girls who want to make their own decisions…today 'the day against violence against women,' we present our song because assault has to stop". They have been profiled in dozens of international news outlets (including the *New York Times* and *Deutsche Welle*), on social media, and on numerous talk shows.[6]

To understand the genesis of Pretty Loud it is necessary to delve into its sponsoring NGO GRUBB (Gypsy Roma Urban Balkan Beats, formerly called R-Point). GRUBB was founded in 2006 by non-Roma in the UK and runs after-school centers in Belgrade and Niš (previously in Novi Sad) that combine academic tutoring with training in the arts.

5 Posle Ručka. 2021. Television Interview with Pretty Loud. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xI-vonGj04E (accessed 4 July 2022).

6 See https://www.wearegrubb.com/news.

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Children up to high school age attend after-school classes in Serbian and English languages, literature, history, and mathematics. The arts program encompasses visual arts, theatre, photography as well as music and dance. Their website states: "We run educational and artistic programmes, working predominantly in Serbia with Roma children and young people. GRUBB's aim is to further their education in order that they may access mainstream employment, thereby facilitating their long-term social integration".[7] Most GRUBB employees are Serbs, but recently several Roma have become teachers.

From the beginning, the music/dance genre that GRUBB introduced to Roma was rap/hip hop. It is possible that rap was chosen by non-Romani administrators because it was new, global, and marketable for performances. It is also possible that the children themselves requested it, although the hip hop scene was still underground in Belgrade in the 2000s.[8] But the association of poor/oppressed racialized Roma with Black Americans living in ghettos surely played a role. Hip hop culture is often interpreted as a form of expression coming from people of color in ghettos; it often relates to youth rebellion and addresses injustice. African American rap and hip hop have, indeed, been reinterpreted by many minoritized groups around the world as part of a broader process of claiming a public identity (Banić-Grubišić 2010). Regarding R-Point's Belgrade rap classes, Banić-Grubišić insightfully asks to what extent do "Romani people as our Blacks in their Hip hop music borrow basic patterns of an Afro-American cultural idiom? Does it mean some kind of symbolical identification between 'colored people' with 'colored people'? Is there some sort of imagined concurrence in struggles to the 'achieved' emancipation of Afro-American brothers?" (2010: 89).

Unlike Pretty Loud, other Balkan rap groups have arisen in a grassroots manner, for example, Gypsy Mafia, which formed in Serbia and migrated to Austria, (Banić-Grubišić, interview, 12 January 2021). Schoon (2014) writes about rap in Istanbul Romani neighborhoods emerging in times of crisis. In North Macedonia, Šutka Roma Rap raps in Romani about the hard life in the sprawling Romani neighborhood of Šutka. In contrast, rap in GRUBB, originated in a "top down" manner, i.e., "hip hop created from above" (Banić-Grubišić 2010: 86). Yet during the last fifteen years, GRUBB has created a culture where younger children actively want to learn rap to emulate the now-famous elders.

The production of shows and videos, however, is enacted "top-down" by teams. The first level of supervision includes the male rappers who were the former stars (such the band Roma Sijam - I am Roma) before women took the spotlight. Pretty Loud members insist that this process is a "collaboration" whereby they bring their lyrics to their experienced male Romani colleagues, who help reformulate their ideas into more professional lyrics and dance moves. Indeed, videos of their work sessions reveal Pretty Loud members performing in front of male mentors. I inquired if their feminist messages also get reworked by their male mentors, and they said yes. Silvia Sinani explained that these male colleagues are close friends with whom they have grown up, and that they too have a feminist sensibility: "They have sisters, mothers – all of them all have the same problems as we women" (interview, February 17, 2022). She expanded: "In our neighborhood

7 See https://www.wearegrubb.com.

8 Neither the administrators nor the teachers I interviewed knew anything about this history, but I am still investigating.

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we have male colleagues who help us. I grew up with them and I watched how they had more rights. Now we work as equals with men".[9]

A higher level of supervision involves GRUBB inviting international guests to teach workshops, including Guillaume Doubet (music producer, Paris and Los Angeles), Raul Guevera (b boy dancer and hip-hop choreographer), Serge Denoncourt (Canadian director and choreographer), and Nico Archambault and Wynn Holmes (So You Think You Can Dance, Canada). Although professional training is certainly valuable, some patronizing statements regarding Roma are voiced by Denoncourt on the GRUBB website; "Education is not in their culture… we give them a sense of responsibility… and an opportunity…with the possibility of a show at the end". My analysis of multiple levels of production (lyrics, choreography, staging and costuming) reveals that Pretty Loud's branding and media presence are also supervised by GRUBB.

Pretty Loud coalesced in 2014 when several women attending GRUBB advocated for their own group. GRUBB's early shows that toured Canada and western Europe featured only male rappers; females merely danced behind the rappers. Silvia recalled: "We knew we wanted to talk about women's rights – because there was this male group – the emphasis was always on the men – let the men rap and the girls can dance. Why, when we can rap!"[10] GRUBB founders/donors in UK supported the idea of a female group.

Although they are all Romani women from working class families, Pretty Loud members have differing life stories that offer intersectional insights into gender, class, and age. Silvia Sinani, 24, one of the oldest members, grew up in an activist family; her father helped found the Romani organization Vakti, and her mother, living in Germany, is also an activist. Her dancing was noticed at a Romani wedding by a GRUBB teacher and she was invited to dance classes where she learned hip hop; eventually she was promoted to teach hip hop. Zlata Ristić, the eldest, is a single mother of a son, who married willingly at 16 years of age, but now realizes she was too young: "I got married and gave birth when I was 17… It was my own choice, but I made a mistake. That's why we aim to encourage other young girls not to let their parents arrange a marriage they don't want". (Jovanovic 2021). Zlata now also teaches dance. Živka Ferhatović and her sister Dijana were raised by their grandparents when their parents moved to western Europe for work; they are still in high school. Sisters Selma and Elma Dalipi are the only two members who sing in addition to rapping. Like the male rap group Roma Sijam that preceded them, Pretty Loud combines Romani vocal styles and melodies with rap. Silvia recruited the sisters.

Pretty Loud's artistic trajectory is truly revolutionary considering the conservatism of their community. Like Esma in Macedonia and Nadya in Bulgaria, Pretty Loud members faced severe restrictions while growing up not only on public performance but also on mobility and socializing. Female wedding singers similarly face accusations of lewdness and lose morals, and their family members often prevent them from assuming professional roles. Zlata Ristić articulated the barriers to becoming a performer: "Why wouldn't I do it—just because my neighbors or the community might think it's wrong or hate it?"[11]

9 Posle Ručka. 2021. Television Interview with Pretty Loud. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xI-vonGj04E (accessed 4 July 2022).

10 Jovanovich, Joey. 2022. *Pretty Loud*, documentary film in progress.

11 Jovanovich, Joey. 2022. *Pretty Loud*, documentary film in progress.

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On the other hand, members cite support from select relatives. Some had to earn from the elders the right to attend GRUBB by getting good grades in school (note that this dispels the common stereotype that Roma do not support institutional education). Others simply defied family expectations and boldly claimed their independence.

Pretty Loud members have faced prejudice from the wider Serbian society not only for being Roma, but also for being female public performers. In an interview they stated that although they were recognized in their community and had street credibility, they still experience discrimination (VoxFemiae 2021). Dijana recounted a disturbing incident of harassment while performing: "Three men pointed fingers at us… I don't know why they were laughing—was it because we were Roma or because we were talking about women, but I think that kind of prejudice should not exist". Silvia then expressed her panic at having to participate in panel discussion with these three in the audience: "Imaging staying to talk about Roma and them laughing at me" (Jovanovich 2022).

Pretty Loud's 2020 breakout hit, 'Pretty Loud Mashup', which was created through teamwork from several rap fragments that the members wrote, tells about Samantha's dilemma of arranged marriage. But it also deals with empowering women's voices and addresses discrimination against Roma. Filmed in Zemun, and featuring locals of all ages, it projects a strong sense of pride in their Romani neighborhood:[12]

(Romani) …..Don't give me away, dad
I'm too young for marriage
Her life's already been decided
Samantha had to put up with abuse
It's hard for her to leave home
But she has to do it
To obey her father's word…
(English) …. Stand proud and fighting for our races today
For tomorrow for women standing equal to men
…. My skin is different, so they always want me out
… (Romani) Because of who I am and where I'm from, I have to prove myself
… So what if I'm a woman, I have the same strength
I'm smart so why would I stay quiet?
…My dreams are big but I will make them come true
Our voices brought us to where we are now.

In 2021 Pretty Loud released 'Ravnopravno' (Equally) on International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, produced in cooperation with the United Nations and the Coordination Body for Gender Equality of the Republic of Serbia. With a more disturbing message than 'Mashup', the text cites high statistical high rates of domestic violence, offers personal testimony, and delivers a clear message both to men and women:[13]

12 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-ezaPqeWwQ. They gained international visibility at the Women of the World festival in London in 2020. In 2021 they won an award from the BeFem feminist center in Belgrade.

13 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85uoOsHFpaM.

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….(Serbian) None of us should have to watch or suffer violence. Bruises are not our makeup!
(Romani) Don't pretend to be smart
Don't raise your hand against me because I'm a woman
I will fight with you for equal rights….
I had no voice, only pain in my heart from seeing the violence inflicted on women.
My father beating up my mother right in front of me….
Violence does not make you powerful…
…I call to all women sharing my destiny to unify our strength to fight for a better tomorrow.
…Let's stop the violence against women…

Pretty Loud has seized the spotlight and they have bold plans for the future. They are working on a song about Romani history; they recently performed for the Obama foundation; they are the focus of a new documentary film (Jovanovich 2022); they qualified for the semi-finals of Croatia's 2021 Supertalent show; and they won the 2022 Muzzik Video Awards 2k21 in the category Video With a Message. They are also becoming bolder in their interviews: "… We fight against discrimination against both women and Roma people because we felt it as Roma and women" (Živka Ferhatović, 2022, Kosovo Trust Building). And finally, they take their roles as public models seriously. Zlata Ristić explained: "I am delighted when women of different ages, who do not know us, … send us messages of support… They motivate us. Our grandmothers and mothers did not have the opportunity to talk about these topics, and some women do not have it still at this very moment. … It is a big responsibility to give someone a good example" (2022, Kosovo Trust Building).

Conclusion

Comparing the three generations from which these female artists come, we can see that while some patriarchal restrictions have eased, most persist; in addition, stereotypes about "Gypsy women" also persist. In the oldest generation, Esma, with a male mentor/husband but no female mentors, pioneered a new respectable female niche in Romani music. Nadya, a generation later, had female singer models (though few of Romani descent) but no mentors and faced a family crisis plus a hugely competitive music scene. The young members of Pretty Loud have benefited from both feminist advances and assigned male mentors, but still face the double discrimination of being Roma and being women.

These artists illustrate bold leadership roles of Romani women in vocal music. They were motivated to expand both women's expressive choices and their economic independence. Some had institutional support while others did not. Pretty Loud is the product of a well-funded non-Romani institution; how much independence members will have in the future remains to be seen. Esma was initially shunned by established institutions, but later was embraced by them; her husband/mentor initially made artistic choices for her but later she determined her own artistic choices. Nadka had neither institutions nor mentors to help her – she was completely on her own, and thus vulnerable.

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Although following very different paths all of the women profiled came from poor families to forge creative ways of dealing with patriarchal constraints against female public performance. While downplaying her Romani ethnicity, Nadya became a star of Bulgarian wedding singing and established a remarkable level of independence. Esma became a global superstar and ambassador of Romani music. And Pretty Loud is emerging as a beam of innovation, boldly delivering pointed messages about female empowerment and Romani pride.

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