

# Among the Gypsies

GARTH CARTWRIGHT



Romania's Fanfare Ciocarlia entertain at a village festival

All photos courtesy of the author

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ATURDAY NIGHT and I'm the guest on Charlie Gillett's BBC London radio show. Charlie's invited me along to discuss my book *Princes Amongst Men: Journeys with Gypsy Musicians*, which documents my travels among Romani communities in four Balkan nations. We're playing radio ping-pong, Charlie choosing the theme music to Emir Kusturica's film *Time of the Gypsies* while I opt for the high, haunted voice of Dona Dumitru Siminica, a Romanian Gypsy musician whose enigmatic music and life (and death) qualifies him as the Balkan equivalent to legendary Mississippi bluesman Robert Johnson. "These tunes we're spinning," I say to Charlie, "they're so eerie, quite otherworldly. Hard to believe they were created in Europe." Charlie nods and adds, "Yes, there's such a mystery to this music, isn't there?"

*Mystery.* This is, surely, what first hooked me on the Balkans in 1991. Initially, being a New Zealander who had just arrived in London, I wanted to race around Europe ticking off the great sites—Paris, Rome, Barcelona, Bucharest . . . Bucharest? That's right, Europe's ugliest capital, a city once famed as "the Paris of the East" yet transformed by Stalinist dictator Ceausescu into a bizarre amalgamation of Versailles and Pyongyang, inhabited by packs of feral dogs and wild orphans. Horrible? Sure. Yet fascinating. Romanians are friendly, the countryside lush, the medieval towns citadels of old European culture. And the music . . . if you haven't heard Romanian Gypsy music, then your sonic life is impoverished.

Romania wasn't the only Eastern nation I fell for—in Prague I met an elfin beauty who would follow me to London, while Budapest, with its gray skyline and public baths, conjured up the Europe of Graham Greene. Some travelers long for Ibiza hedonism or Tuscan luxury, yet I was haunted by the new democracies that were emerging out of these ancient, battered nations of the East.

Having made an acquaintance with Eastern Europe, I became fascinated by the region's greatest mystery: the Gypsies. *Gypsy* is a word that exists today in many languages (*Gitan*, *Gitano*, *Cikan*, *Cigani*, etc.) and can be employed as a positive or pejorative noun. Some use it to describe freedom, color, or dance, others for graft and

into several different directions: enclaves of these Asian communities can be found today in the Caucasus, Iran, Egypt and North Africa, Siberia, all over Europe, and North and South America (with Brazil appearing to have the largest Gypsy populace in the Americas).

If *Gypsy* is a mistaken title, then what should one call these people? *Rom/Roma*—the term many now employ to describe their ethnicity—is Sanskrit for “man” or “husband.” Writing *Princes*, I employed *Roma* for the community and *Gypsy* for the musicians, since that is how the music is marketed and consumed. Their tongue is Romani—rooted in Sanskrit yet decorated with words from the host nations they have resided in across the centuries (Greek words are especially prevalent)—and *Romani* is the term now employed in the UK to describe these people who, across the centuries, have managed to blend Asia and Europe in blood and culture.

All this was unknown to me during my initial travels in the 1990s. Back then I was conscious of these dark-skinned, brightly clothed people yet never encountered them individually. They didn't appear to be employed in shops or hotels or on trains or planes—a visible yet socially invisible presence. Asking East European acquaintances about their nations' Roma resulted, too often, in a litany of invective. “The Gypsies are dirty and dangerous,” the Czech elf told me. “Have you ever met one?” I enquired. “Noooooo,” she replied. “But I know.” *Princes Amongst Men* is then rooted in my desire also to “know.”

Where to begin? The only Gypsies I'd ever encountered were in movies, books, and music, characters often as rooted in reality as leprechauns or Golems. Thus, Gypsy women are always cast as tempestuous beauties. And if the women were hot, the men lived way, way outside the law. Cher sang “Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves.” Van Morrison wrote several songs about Gypsies. Blues and rock musicians often described themselves as “Gypsies”—all of which had me pondering, Could any people possess more bohemian cool? Also, beyond acting as mythic touchstones, what was the Gypsy existence? To answer these questions, I dived into the Balkans. One extremely steep learning curve lay ahead.

For *Princes Amongst Men*, I found the key to this curve in music, and this is why my book is subtitled *Journeys with Gypsy Musicians*. While there are very few Roma politicians or writers, music has always been the Roma area of absolute excellence, as essential as human speech and equally precious. To be a musician among the Roma is trade and calling, an initiation begun in childhood,

To hear the sounds of Gypsy musicians, visit our website ([www.worldliteraturetoday.com](http://www.worldliteraturetoday.com)) and click on the audio icons, or check out the following recordings:

Gipsy Kings, *Allegria*  
 Gypsy Queens, *Flammes du cœur*  
 Taraf De Haidouks, *Band of Gypsies*  
 Taraf De Haidouks, *Honourable Brigands*  
 Taraf De Haidouks, *Musique des Tziganes*  
 Esma Redzepova, *Queen of the Gypsies*  
 Esma Redzepova with the Ensemble  
 Teodosievski, *Romske Pesme*  
 Mostar Sevdah Reunion, *Saban Bajramovic: A Gypsy Legend*  
 Dona Dumitru Siminica, *Cine are fata mare*  
*World of Gypsies*, volumes 1, 2, and 3



disreputable behavior. Such a beautiful, loaded word. Jimi Hendrix formed the Band of Gypsies. Bob Dylan and Curtis Mayfield wrote songs celebrating Gypsies. The poet Pushkin claimed to have fallen in love with Zemfira, a Gypsy princess, in 1821; D. H. Lawrence idealized Gypsies as noble savages. Virginia Woolf dismissed them as mere savages. Caravaggio painted their wily fortune-tellers, while the German expressionist Otto Mueller employed them as models of an alternative, spiky beauty.

Yet what is a Gypsy? The word's origins begin with the distortion of *Egyptian*, a name stuck upon a swarthy people who began arriving in Constantinople around 1068. Europeans, upon noting these new tribes' dark skin and black hair and penchant for fortune-telling and living outside conventional society, surmised they were from Egypt. In fact, these weary travelers were refugees from the Indian subcontinent, forced out as Islamic armies from Central Asia invaded. Ian Hancock, a professor at the University of Texas, suggests that this migration took place over decades—perhaps centuries—and split

one carrying forth a community's beliefs and concerns. And the music they make is Europe's blues. Blues pianist Memphis Slim once told musicologist Alan Lomax that "the blues comes out of slavery," and, indeed, there is no music on the African continent as bleak as that produced by African Americans, just as no Indian musician has yet created a music so expressive of loss, desperation, hunger, and injustice as the Gypsies. For the Roma are too familiar with evil forces: from medieval tyrant Vlad Dracul, who enslaved thousands of Balkan Roma (thereby creating a system of slavery in Romania that only ended in 1864), to Hitler's *Schutzstaffel* squads, they've constantly encountered Europeans intent on oppressing, exploiting, even exterminating them. Thus, their greatest artists create a dark, raging blues.

For centuries, music has been the way the Roma have carried forth their culture, myths, and language. After the Berlin Wall fell, a feast of Gypsy music long unheard in the West suddenly became available. By the early 1990s Balkan Roma had been featured in acclaimed films by Yugoslav and French directors (*Time of the Gypsies*, *Black Cat White Cat*, *Latcho Drom*, *Gadjo Dilo*), while the West's world-music circuit embraced all manner of Gypsy music: wobbly rhythms, creaking violins, exploding brass. . . . Here was music full of living color, sounds conceived in a forgotten Asia, shaped by the bitter European experience, and sung in a tongue few can translate. This tongue would act as siren, luring me east, into Roma villages and *mahalas*. *Mahala* is Turkish for "closely built buildings," and across the Balkans *mahala* signifies "poor part of town" (i.e., the Gypsy ghetto). These were journeys of revelation, both joyous and extremely sad—the Roma possess a great lust for life, yet to encounter such noble people reduced to living in slums and shantytowns offers little hope for better tomorrows.

The Roma wish to be heard—why else raise their voices so loud in song? These voices, in song and conversation, shaped my book. Not that it's always easy to write accurately about a people who have few written records. Paradoxically, there's been surprisingly little written about such an emblematic community—a handful of academic books and human-rights tomes, a few books by those who have lived among them, but little else. Even among the many books produced on the wars and genocide that destroyed Yugoslavia, there were, it seemed, no Gypsies called upon to tell of their experiences, how they, as true internationalists, above and beyond the Slav feuds, came through the slaughter. In Kosovo, after NATO bombed out the Serb troops, it would be the

Roma community whom the returning Albanians would ethnically cleanse (a "Greater Albania" is an old fascist construct). But no war trials have been called for to bring these misdeeds to justice. Not that the Roma are ever surprised by this neglect—in the Nuremberg trials, not one Nazi was prosecuted for genocide against the Gypsies, even though they were the only ethnic group, alongside the Jews, that Hitler sort to exterminate.

*O Porrajmos* is the Romani term for the Roma Holocaust: the expression was one once used for terrible rape/abuse, and in recent decades academics, activists, and the few living survivors of Hitler's death camps have been fighting for official recognition. While there are no official figures of how many Roma were murdered, the Holocaust is believed to have destroyed over one million Romanies—more than half of Europe's Roma. Ian Hancock finally managed to get the Roma suffering recognized by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council (founded in 1979, but not until 1987 was a Roma given a place on the board) after much resistance. In his speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, the council's founder, Elie Wiesel, said: "I confess that I feel somewhat guilty toward our Romani friends. We have not done enough to listen to your voice of anguish. We have not done enough to make other people listen to your voice of sadness. I can promise you we shall do whatever we can from now on to listen better." Talk is cheap: in 2002 President Bush removed the Roma representative from the board.

This silence that surrounds both Roma history and suffering also extends to the music: for such a musical people, there's very little written material available on Gypsy music. Sure, you can find the odd musicological tome or biography of legendary 1930s and 1940s jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt, but no book existed that portrayed the musicians and their music in the way America's great blues, jazz, and soul musicians have been chronicled. For close to millennia they have formed Europe's largest minority yet remain the continent's "invisible nation," forever marginalized, often little more than footnotes to persecution. If history is written by the victors, then the Roma only ever win at music.

This ability to create great musical art is viewed with pride by the Roma; for them music represents a refusal to be vanquished, equivalent to that found in, say, the music of Billie Holiday or Miles Davis. A few examples: Macedonia's Dzansever, a young woman who has endured a life of unbearable hardship, sings in a low, masculine moan that speaks plenty about human

anguish. Romania's Taraf De Haidouks was formed around the formidable talents of the late violinist Nicolae Neacsu. His decrying of the dictator Ceaușescu is a harsh listening experience, his gummy voice contrasting with brilliantly dissonant violin playing.

While in Shutka, the Republic of Macedonia's fabulous city of Gypsies, I engaged in conversation with a local who commented on Esma Redzepova, the Macedonian singer once crowned Queen of the Gypsies by Indira Gandhi: "Esma is the voice of the village Gypsies and all the suffering we have known." *Suffering*. The music of the Roma, its eerie intensity and savage resonance, arises from this hurt, music offering a form of soul-making and, possibly, redemption. That's my take on an extremely foreign music, one capable of engagement and connection. Not that there's anything new in *Gadje* (the Romani term for "non-Roma") infatuation with Gypsy music. For centuries music has been the way Roma have carried forth their culture, myths, and language. Formidable musical talent has often led European

blood in Mexico. This came about through the Gypsies being slaves for the Spanish colonists then, later on, fleeing to the New World to escape Spanish racism. I think there's a link between the indigenous and peasants and Gypsies over time—they are poor, but also pariahs. For most Anglos, Mexicans are the Gypsies of L.A. They are treated like dirt, yet their music, food, and exuberance give the city soul."

Using Rodriguez's example of American distaste for Mexicans should help U.S. readers comprehend



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society to embrace the gifted few—a payment by the Duke of Ferrara (in northern Italy) in 1649 is recorded to a Gypsy stringed instrumentalist; the court of Catherine the Great made employing Gypsy musicians fashionable among European royalty; the composers Liszt and Bartók both paid serious attention to Hungarian Gypsy musicians, and France's world-conquering flamenco-rumba band, the Gipsy Kings, began their rise to fame by playing at the parties of Brigitte Bardot, Pablo Picasso, and Charlie Chaplin.

While musical genius has allowed certain Gypsy musicians contact with celebrated rulers and artists, most Roma remain marginalized, afforded little access to education, employed as farm laborers or tinsmiths. This outsider status has forced the Roma to exist on the margins of society; sometimes the persecution has been so intense that Gypsies have literally operated as a secret society. (Their language, called Romani, or *caló* in Spanish, has been adopted over the centuries by criminals, homosexuals, and other outsiders who don't want mainstream society eavesdropping.) Recently, Los Angeles author Luis Rodriguez told me, "Mexicans use *caló* for their slang talk since there is a lot of 'Gypsy' culture and



Top: Serbian singer Saban Bajramovic is widely recognized as the king of Gypsy song.

Bottom: Boban Markovic, Serbia's heavyweight trumpet master.

Europe's anti-Gypsy racism. I would also argue that the Roma have laid a foundation for the nonaggressive, culturally open, border-free movement many in the West now wish to emulate. And if music is the soul of human culture, the Roma should be celebrated for constantly fertilizing Europe's soul, for keeping the continent's culture fresh when so many are involved in marketing its more dehumanizing elements. They've received little praise over the past thousand years, remaining, to some degree, "the only group about which anything could be said without challenge or demurrals" (in the words of the late Palestinian writer Edward Said, a man who knew much about a people being demonized and exiled).

How to overcome such prejudice? In my book, I tried to present Balkan Roma communities as they are, humane and gentle even among extreme poverty. Obviously, the music helps this quest for social justice: when the likes of Yehudi Menuhin and the Kronos Quartet praise Balkan Gypsy violinists for their ferocious technique and innovation, only the truly obtuse could deny that the Roma are capable of great artistry. Right now, I would argue that no contemporary U.S. or West European jazz musician comes close to the Gypsy brass masters of the Balkans: the likes of Boban Markovic and Fanfare Ciocarlia employ their trumpets to blast a dissonant jazz brew that blends Europe with Asia, the ancient with the postmodern. John Coltrane surely would have understood. Would Wynton Marsalis? Perhaps, but the United States' jazz classicists would probably be scared by this fierce, organic brass sound. Put simply, few musicians anywhere are capable of creating music comparable to the great Balkan musical masters.

Today, Balkan Gypsy musicians may tour the West's most esteemed concert halls, welcomed onto the "world music" circuit as readily as Cuban mambo masters or Malian bluesmen. Still, back home their music remains communal property, created and played on the streets. This ability to invite everyone to the dance remains central to Gypsy music, an organic welcoming absent from too much of our society. Indeed, in an increasingly homogenized and regulated Europe and North America, Gypsy music and culture convey secret histories: the enigma and wisdom of these people remain little understood.

*Princes Amongst Men* travels through Serbia and Macedonia, Bulgaria and Romania. I chose these nations for their rich reservoirs of Gypsy music. Across the centuries, these Balkan states have formed a bridge between East and West; many civilizations, cultures, armies,

and religions have intersected here—the traces of their presence being especially strong in the music, music that blooms in brilliant colors across the Balkans, music shaped and spread by the Roma, the seeds they planted producing extraordinary fruit, one that survives all manner of war, oppression, and regime. Today, around 50 percent of Europe's Roma live in the Balkans. Hungary, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Spain, France, and Russia also possess sizeable Roma communities.

#### Books on Gypsy History and Culture

- David Crowe and John Kolsti. *The Gypsies of Eastern Europe*. Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1991.
- Siobhan Dowd, Ian F. Hancock, and Rajko Duric. *The Roads of the Roma: A PEN Anthology of Gypsy Writers*. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1998.
- Isabel Fonseca. *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey*. New York: Knopf, 1995.
- Ian F. Hancock. *We Are the Romani People*. Hatfield, Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002.
- Diane Tong. *Gypsy Folktales*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989.

Since Serbia, Macedonia, Romania, and Bulgaria rarely attract attention in the West—and if they do it's usually for the worst reasons (war criminals, crime syndicates, extreme nationalism)—this means the cultures the Roma exist among are rarely understood. And living in the Balkans, a region now a byword for senseless wars (the *Collins English Dictionary* defines *balkanize* as "to divide into warring states"), the musicians also become tainted, as misunderstood as that beautiful, tragic region. To let the Gypsies' voices rise is my intention. If I've done right by these Balkan sorcerers of sound, then I'll have encouraged the reader to listen.

London

The recipient of a Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council grant, two Qantas Journalism Awards for Best Junior Feature Writer and Best Sports Writer, and the *Guardian's* Best Music Writing award, GARTH CARTWRIGHT currently lives in London, where he is working on *More Miles Than Money: Journeys into American Music*. Born in Auckland, New Zealand, Cartwright is a world traveler who spent 2003 crisscrossing the Balkans, visiting musicians in mahalas and villages while noting accounts of injustice and hearing tales of ancient lore, resulting in *Princes Amongst Men: Journeys with Gypsy Musicians*, published by Serpent's Tail. For more information, go to [www.journeyswithgypsymusicians.com](http://www.journeyswithgypsymusicians.com) and [www.garthcartwright.com](http://www.garthcartwright.com).

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