

**Romani Routes: Cultural Politics and Balkan Music in Diaspora.**  
**By Carol Silverman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.**  
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**Companion Website. \$55.00, hard bound.**

*Brigid O'Keeffe, Brooklyn College*

In August 2009, international news outlets pounced on a story that had as much to do with the fickleness of a global pop music icon's fans as it did with ethnic politics in post-socialist Eastern Europe. On tour that summer, Madonna delighted audiences with concerts that featured Romani musicians. At a show in Bucharest, however, Madonna's audience raucously booed her when she criticized anti-Roma discrimination in Eastern Europe. The popular success of Madonna's ostensibly Gypsy-inspired music as well as the jeering she encountered in Bucharest combined to capture the tension at the heart of Carol Silverman's book: while Romani music has long inspired legions of ardent admirers and enterprising imitators, Roma have been historically despised as people. In this study of Balkan Romani music and its practitioners, Silverman interrogates the local and global politics of cultural production as conditioned by the profound inequalities—political, economic, and social—faced by Roma in a variety of historical contexts. Treating the Romani subjects of her inquiry as human beings rather than as window dressing for unexamined stereotypes, Silverman explores the centrality of music as identity marker, cultural glue, and/or commercial enterprise for Balkan Roma at home and in diaspora from the late socialist period through the present. The result is an uncommonly ambitious book that succeeds in de-exoticizing Roma—their histories, cultures, and musical styles.

The range of territory, both literal and conceptual, that Silverman covers in this book is enormous. Hers is “a transnational approach with an ethnography of community life in relation to music.” (2012:4) She provides historical ethnographies of communities of Macedonian Roma in the Belmont neighborhood of the Bronx in New York City and Šuto Orizari in Skopje. The history of Roma and Romani music in Bulgaria is treated more broadly, based on Silverman's fieldwork among a variety of Bulgarian Romani communities. As *Romani Routes*' apt title suggests, Silverman's focus is on the dynamic flow of people, music, and commercial profits through the transnational circuitry of modern mass media and across the shifting boundaries of nation-states and markets. Silverman examines wedding rituals, gender roles, state policies, immigrant experiences, slickly-marketed CDs, YouTube videos, Eurovision politics, Gypsy music festivals, and artists' biographies to thickly describe how music *and* discrimination have crucially shaped the individual and collective identities of Balkan Roma at home and in diaspora. Focusing on professional musicians in particular, she shows how music has variously served Roma as a locus of artistic creativity, professional advancement, “self-stereotypification,” Romani rights activism, crass exploitation, and—especially in the case of Bulgaria—exclusion from the nation. (2012:123)

Arguably the book's most productive question, and the one to which Silverman is seemingly most energetically committed, is how Roma themselves, and Romani musicians in particular, have negotiated representations of Gypsies. These are representations over which Roma exert anything but full control. Moreover, what do their varied choices tell us about the political economy of cultural production in the conditions of political and socioeconomic inequity that they have faced both under arts-regulating socialist regimes and capitalist schemes for maximizing the profitability of a hyper-real Gypsiness within a global market for "world music"? As a scholar, activist, and singer who has performed alongside Romani musicians, Silverman is candidly repulsed by marketing ploys, socialist and capitalist, that have crudely relied upon and profited from stereotypes. These include "the Gypsy:" stalwartly non-modern, sexually primal, flighty, dirty, impoverished, and quintessentially "other", and of a singular "Gypsy music:" uniquely "authentic," magically hybrid, unchanging and innate rather than the product of human creativity and artistic innovation, and—again—quintessentially "other." Yet she resolutely recognizes that "for Roma, professional music has always been about business." (2012:149) Before, during, and after socialism, professional Romani musicians have necessarily confronted audience hunger for Gypsy exotica as a particular Oriental fantasy. They have, Silverman shows, often and quite pragmatically sought to capitalize on that hunger by engaging in self-stereotypification, even if selectively. Meanwhile, Romani musicians are forced to adapt not only to changing market conditions and technologies but also to the increasingly fierce competition from non-Romani musicians and deejays who have recently catapulted themselves to profitable celebrity as purveyors of chalda, "Gypsy Punk" and "Balkan Beats." (2012:3)

For Silverman, the troubling question of both Roma and non-Roma's capitalization of Gypsy stereotypes is not one of endangered "authenticity" but of the further marginalization of Romani artists in particular, and of Roma more generally. The appropriation of Romani music seemingly threatens to professionally displace Romani musicians, while the enterprising deployment of Gypsy stereotypes also potentially worsens the socioeconomic and political situation of European Roma. When Romani musicians participate in the perpetuation of Gypsy stereotypes, Silverman underscores the artists' agency and sympathetically understands their professional and economic motives. Yet, she searchingly struggles to find in such work potential sources of Romani empowerment on broader social, economic, and political scales.

Silverman's expansive and meticulously detailed book is enriched by a companion website that hosts photographs, videos, audio clips, and text supplements that illuminate the material explored in *Romani Routes*. The website allows readers to watch performances, listen to songs, and examine marketing materials of the artists who appear prominently in the book.

*Romani Routes* is of interest to scholars of Roma and of East Europe generally, but also to anyone interested in the intersection of ethnicity, identity politics, and the production, marketing, and sale of music under both socialism and capitalism. Unabashedly dense, Silverman's book has as much potential to overwhelm general audiences as it does to enlighten specialists and activists.

Silverman warns readers from the start that her book is “not a tale of celebration; rather, it is one of...small victories within a framework of marginalization.” (2012:7) Silverman does not promise easy solutions to the difficult problems of inequality and representational politics that she confronts. In *Romani Routes*, her strength lies in the thoughtful diagnosis of ongoing dilemmas faced by Roma grappling with both discrimination and perilous economic terrain, as well as of the dilemmas greeting the producers and consumers of persistently popular “Gypsy music” as variously marketed by Roma and non-Roma alike.