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Gypsy Caravan

BY [AL HOFF](#)



Car horns: Fanfare Ciocarlia, on the road

Six weeks, five bands from four countries, 35 musicians, nine languages and one goal: to bring the diversity of Roma -- or gypsy -- music to audiences in the United States. This is the subject of *Gypsy Caravan*, Jasmine Dellal's film documenting the 2006 tour of the same name.

Traditional music from around the globe is enjoying renewed interest -- whether through an easy click on a Web link, world-music compilations available at chain stores or in some new hybrid form, such as global dance music. Yet most casual listeners will be surprised by *Caravan's* early revelation: how many musical styles come under the rubric "gypsy music," as embodied by the tour's four acts.

From Spain, there's flamenco music and dance, represented by the Antonio El Pipa Flamenco Ensemble; a brass band Fanfare Ciocarlia hails from Romania, as does Taraf de Haïdouks, a group of violin virtuosos. The "Queen of the Gypsies," the warbling diva Esmá Redžepova, is from Macedonia, in the Balkans, and Maharaja is a folk troupe from Northern India.

Toe-tappers, mournful laments, comic narratives, *ragas* and even a drag act share the stage -- and also common musical roots, the performers argue. It's up to more learned ethno-musicologists than I to make that case; when asked what all this music has in common, one Caravan performer, in halting English, manages, "Language ... rhythm ... feeling."

But Dellal finds some common ground, ironically by breaking away from the

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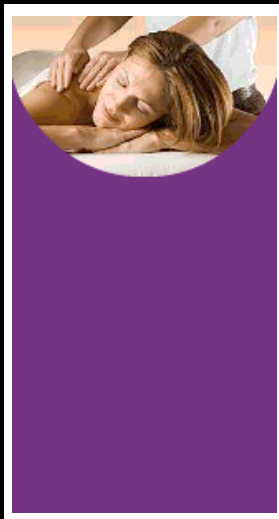


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group's shared tour bus and taking her cameras to visit the musicians in their hometowns. With few exceptions, the performers have humble backgrounds, marked by hardship and tragedy. (The headliners are middle-aged and up, though younger musicians help fill out the bands.)

And within their life stories are the defining features of the Roma people -- their statelessness and centuries of marginalization, persecution (many Roma perished under Nazism) and continuing discrimination. Even as the performers meet adoring audiences on tour, they recount other episodes of battling the ongoing stereotype that gypsies are shifty itinerant thieves. (Even today you can catch sporadic reports of "gypsy" con artists on the local news.)

Ultimately, the well-intentioned Dellal tries to cover too much ground, which results in truncated performances, repetitive backstage meandering and snippets of ethnic history that can feel disjointed. (The life of a young man in India isn't an easy corollary to the Eastern European who outlived Hitler and the fall of the Iron Curtain.) This doesn't mean *Gypsy Caravan* isn't an enjoyable two hours, though. And perhaps this fleeting glimpse into a misunderstood culture, with its lively buffet of sights and sounds, will spur a new journey of discovery for viewers. *In English, and various languages with subtitles.*



Starts Fri., Aug. 31. Regent Square

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MORE BY AL HOFF

A Conversation With Nigel Ash
[September 27, 2007]

The Kingdom
After an American oil-company compound is bombed, an A-team of Feds, led by Jamie Foxx, fly in -- against orders! -- to catch the bad guys. For a while, there's a slim hope that the story will forefront the awkward cooperation between the Americans and their conflicted Saudi counterpart. But the film quickly reverts back to car chases and explosions, culminating in a ballistic orgy of justice in which "terrorists" are mowed down by the dozens. The closing sequence might as well have been a video game but for its contrived coda, a "secret" provocative message. *The Kingdom* shakes a few headlines in our face, then delivers a vicarious romp before ameliorating its jingoism with a hastily appended caution. [2 out of 4 stars] [September 27, 2007]

In the Shadow of the Moon
In July 1969, America -- and much of the world -- held its collective breath during an arguably singular live TV event: man walking on the moon. (In our house, a television set was rented just for this moment.) Certainly the impact of that feat has faded with today's ordinariness of manned spacecraft. But David Sington 's documentary also suggests that the era's optimism and can-do drive has been lost as well. Eight of the nine surviving Apollo astronauts (Neil Armstrong didn't participate) retell the story of various moon trips, augmented with news footage and rare archival NASA films (some of which is so incredible that you have to remind yourself: This is not a sci-fi film). *Shadow's* strength is to let the astronauts simply talk, recasting this dusty scientific history into a vivid story of ordinary men doing extraordinary things. The former moon-men are an articulate and mostly jovial bunch, their square-jawed military stiffness mellowed with age.



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They are less touched by their technical or heroic achievement than by an odd fragment of it: Among all men, they alone have stood elsewhere and looked upon our home planet -- a distant blue orb so tiny that it can disappear behind an astronaut's outstretched thumb. [3 out of 4 stars] Starts Fri., Sept. 28.
[September 27, 2007]

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