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A Gypsy's Journey

By [Emiliano Garcia-Sarnoff](#)

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Get on board with the sounds of the Romani diaspora.

The new nonfiction film *Gypsy Caravan* is a journey that's edifying and wondrous, rhythmically engulfing and, if it weren't for a few directorial missteps, nearly mystical.

In the vein of *Buena Vista Social Club*, director Jasmine Dellal intertwines concert performances that showcase Gypsy bands, interviews with the musicians and impromptu jam sessions filmed in the performers' home countries.

The designation "Gypsy" was one given to the Roma people who are originally from northern India and whose diaspora began a millennium ago. Though the label originates from a mistaken belief that the Roma were of Egyptian origin, and has been historically pejorative, it has been reclaimed by the Roma as a term of cultural identity. At least 15 million Roma now live in nearly every part of the world, particularly in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. They have been universally persecuted, from general xenophobia to mass deportation, forced sterilization and attempted ethnic cleansing.



Fanfare Ciocarlia let everyone on the road know who's coming through.

The five bands in the caravan hail from Spain, Macedonia, India and Romania. There is the flamenco duo from Andalucía, Spain, raspily and agonizingly vocalized by Juana la del Pipa, and furiously stomped out by her nephew, Antonio el Pipa. Esmá Redzepova, the Macedonian diva dubbed the "Queen of the Gypsies" feels most understood when her voice brings men to tears. From the Indian city of Rajasthan comes the music and dance ensemble Maharaja, led by Sayari Sapera, a whirling and wildly-costumed dancer. The two groups from Romania are Taraf de Haidouks and Fanfare Ciocarlia, whose brassy sounds are the most up-tempo and invigorating of the assortment.

The groups' songs often tell tales of persecution and suffering. They are infused with sorrow, but also contain rich, contagious joy and are reminiscent of the complex and divergent emotional tones of blues and soul.

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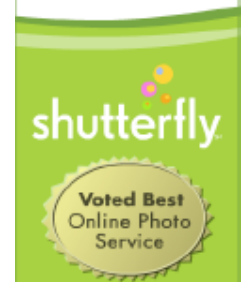


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Besides ethnic ancestry, this passion forged through suffering may be the only quality that links the musical traditions represented. Many of the musicians do not speak Romani. They have assimilated much of the dress, musical traditions and other cultural elements from the lands they now inhabit.

Issues of identity, of the historical happenings that have divided and differentiated the Roma, as well as those that have given them common cause, is the crux of *Gypsy Caravan*. At the beginning the bands practice their grand finale. They are frustrated, communicating poorly and out of sync. How will the sounds of flamenco, brass and Indian ragas ever meld harmoniously? Will the weeks of cramped quarters and shared wine, whiskey and laughs allow them to find ties, both cultural and musical? Unfortunately, the scene that answers these questions is predictable, and the final performance does not rank among the film's best.

There are also a few unfortunate directorial decisions that leave *Gypsy Caravan* short of magical. One is the ill-advised inclusion of an interview with Johnny Depp, who recounts his experiences inhabiting a trailer with some of the featured artists and who speaks in somber tones about the persecution of Gypsies. Another impediment to the film's flow is that lack of camera cohesion. The cinematographers were not well-coordinated, and their diverging styles are distracting even though some are remarkable.

Fortunately, it's not the end (or the cinematography) that's the real fun of *Gypsy Caravan*, it's the journey. The interviews with performers in their home countries are charming, raw and insightful. And, of course, it's the performances that keep the film fantastic. In one interview, del Pipa elucidates the meaning of the Spanish term, "*el duende*"; a word designating the chills and the impulse to cry sometimes caused by passionate music. It's an experience that will be had by many an audience member.

GYPSY CARAVAN

Directed by Jasmine Dellal
With Johnny Depp, Antonio El Pipa,
Juana la del Pipa, Esmá Redzepova

The Screen
110 min.
NR

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