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Daily Reviews



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In Rainbows

Perhaps you've heard of this?

-Derek Miller

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Businessmen & Ghosts

One of Britain's most talented new bands gets their debut (and more) finally released in America...

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Gyrate Plus

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Listeria / Mythbusting: The Ten Ugliest Artists Whose Careers MTV Failed to Kill



Still getting their money for nothing and/or chicks for free "And who did the people want to see? It wasn't Supertramp or Joe Jackson. In fact, it was the end of those guys' careers. People got one look at Joe Jackson, and they said 'Put the camera back on his shoes!'" -Dee Snider (paraphrased) on [...]

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Weekly Article



Basic Research: Lovely Music, Ltd. and the Universe in General

A small New York label with a name as simple and arresting as the album itself, Lovely Music, Ltd. is the home of some of the best "new music," a term used to roughly classify non-traditional composition after John Cage. The music on Lovely is "composition" that doesn't use intellect as an affront; it's cerebral, but humble, pedestrian even. This week, Stylus' Mike Powell explores the sounds of Lovely Music.

-Mike Powell



Features



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Jasmine Dellal

Stylus talks to the filmmaker behind *Gypsy Caravan* and *American Gypsy*...

-Nancy Keefe Rhodes



On Second Thought

Steppenwolf - Monster

Steppenwolf may be best remembered for its pair of ubiquitous hits, but the band had far more to say than that...

-Justin Cober-Lake

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New York Film Festival 2007, Part V

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Interview

Jasmine Dellal

Last month, buoyed by the brisk art-house business done since late spring by her concert tour documentary, *Gypsy Caravan*, Jasmine Dellal's New York City-based production company, Little Dust, was finally able to release her first film on DVD. That 1999 movie, *American Gypsy*, had opened theatrically and won a raft of festival prizes in the US and abroad, but its national PBS broadcast in 2000 brought the kind of widespread simultaneous audience that has fueled a steady stream of requests ever since for the film on VHS.

Gypsy Caravan recounts the World Music Institute-sponsored 2001 North American extravaganza—five bands from four countries, 35 musicians, nine languages, 16 cities in six weeks—and in doing so provides its own vivid illustration of why *Time Magazine* compares the current explosive popularity of Romani music with the birth of jazz.

The earlier film instead chronicles a very different kind of saga, the eleven-year civil rights lawsuit brought against the city of Spokane, Washington by Jimmy Marks. In objecting formally to a 1986 police raid on his family's homes and the manhandling of his female family members, Jimmy Marks broke radically with his community's customs of seclusion. He went further than that in deciding to let a young British filmmaker—a *gadje*, or stranger—into his home.

Dellal spent five years on *American Gypsy*—a time frame she'd repeat on the second film—and besides the tumultuous Marks clan, she profiles the work of University of Texas Roma scholar Ian Hancock and Minneapolis musician and US Holocaust Memorial commissioner Bill Duna. These latter two figures have made it their lives' work to translate and advocate with the larger society. But it's the Marks family journey out onto the skinny branches of encountering that larger US society that makes *American Gypsy* so special.

Shortly after *American Gypsy's* DVD releases, Dellal went to Europe. She returned the second week in October and quickly made good her promise for an interview from New York City by phone. Here's part of our conversation.

You've just gotten back from Europe a couple days ago. What was the reason for your trip?

I've been a lot through Europe and other places recently to play *Gypsy Caravan* and particularly to Eastern Europe because there are a lot of Romani populations there, so the audiences seem to understand the film very well. This most recent trip was to open *Gypsy Caravan* in the UK and in Poland.

Will you take *Gypsy Caravan* to Macedonia, where one of its stars, the singer Esma Redžepova, lives in Skopje?

I would like very much to. It's been invited once but there was a distribution issue so we had to wait Esma has already seen the film and she loved it.

I've watched *American Gypsy* twice now—when the DVD first came to me and then again last night because I knew we'd be talking and there is such a remarkable amount of research in both films. Just in the old films that you pull clips from, old pieces of music, the sheer bits of information. And you worked on each of them about five years.

That wasn't the plan, especially when I got to the second one. I thought I'd make it all much faster this time. It did take about five years. And I think that's because, you know, partly there's a lot of work in finding the information and the footage and the music to go into the film. And they are both very sort of complex films. Hopefully they feel simple to watch but in order to just get a lot of the background in there's a lot of weaving to do and that seems to be the most time-consuming thing in the editing.

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Recent Movie Reviews



American Gypsy

Let's talk about the issue of just getting access. Last night I was struck anew, watching Jimmy's mother Lippie—Grover's wife—kind of playing with you, where she tells you some things about Jimmy that you know aren't true, where you say to her, "You're joking me. He didn't really tell fortunes." This is when Jimmy first takes you to meet his parents and really they need to approve if you're going to make this movie.

[Laughs] Right!

Then you catch her in a contradiction and she laughs—she's kind of delighted that you caught her, I think. There must have been more of those kinds of interactions.

It was very difficult to gain access and trust, particularly from the family in the first film. I think more so in the first film than in the second film, simply because by the time I came to making the second film, I was dealing with people who are professional performers so they're used to the public. And they knew I had made the other film beforehand and some of them had seen it.

But with *American Gypsy* there was a lot of time spent with the family, doing things like making coffee and cleaning the floor and going to have manicures 'cause that's what girls do together—[laughs]—and it took a while for them to realize I am just another person. Maybe it took me a while, without realizing it, to see them as just another person. So maybe it worked both ways.

You've now dedicated at least a decade of your life to making films about the Rom. Where does that deep connection come from for you?

When I first started and people would ask me this question, I thought it had to do with images from when I was a kid, of Gypsies. I had this very romantic, very stereotypical fund of images of the Gypsies that would come and steal me away if I didn't do what my mom and dad told me to do. You know, it would be great! I wouldn't have to do homework or go to school or anything. Now that I've been doing it for about a decade, I think perhaps there is something more profound about it.

The Romani people I've met everywhere are really part of at least two identities, like the family in *American Gypsy*. They're some of the most American people I have ever met. They wear Stetson hats and cowboy boots and have white picket fences and Cadillacs and eat MacDonal'd's and most of them have never left the United States. So they really are hard-core Americans. At the same time they're not. They will always be seen as outsiders. And they will always see themselves as outsiders, and Americans will be something other than what they are, even though they are Americans.

So it's really this question of what it is to live on the edge of identity. I myself am from many different backgrounds—I live in America, I'm not American, I'm English but I'm not really English because my roots are Indian and they're Jewish and they're Iraqi and they're all kinds of things. It's a huge question that is very close to me.

You say in *American Gypsy* that you visited your grandmother in India and that there was a Gypsy village near her house—does reaching back to those roots have a profound effect on you as well?

I think they'll reach back to the Indian roots. There isn't actually a Romani or gypsy village right near my grandmother's house. But certainly, obviously, the roots of all the Romani people are somewhere in northern India. I think having a familiarity with the culture of India—or the cultures of India—has really helped bridge some gaps.

I just knew little things when I first went to visit people—about the way that you should behave with elders or expectations of women which might seem very, very backwards if you live in 21st century America but which aren't really backwards. They're just very different. I was very familiar with that because of having spent lots of time in India.

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The interview material with the scholar Ian Hancock was really fascinating. He's a fellow Brit—had you known him before you made this film?

When I first wrote to Ian Hancock I was terrified! He's not a scary person. I had pulled up a lot of articles about Gypsies—most of them had Ian Hancock in them. So I was terrified of this very lofty scholar. He turns out to be incredibly well-informed and very helpful. He'll argue with you if he disagrees with a point of view but at the same time he's very, very open to sharing his knowledge. Sorry—just to say, no, I didn't know him before.



American Gypsy

You also spoke at a conference, a film festival in March of 2006 in London or outside London, that brought together Gypsy films from all over the world, one of the first such film festivals.

It was the first film festival like that in the UK. There were a series of larger film festivals which had a kind of Gypsy film section over the course of a few years so. The Thessaloniki Film Festival [held in Greece in November] included a lot of films with a Romani theme—probably back in 2000 or 2001. *American Gypsy* played there. Then the Rotterdam Film Festival [in the Netherlands at the end of January] had a large Romani section a few years ago. *Gypsy Caravan* wasn't finished yet, but I helped them with seeking out some films.

I think the first film festival dedicated to Gypsy films is actually the five-year old Golden Wheel Festival held in April in Macedonia. It's run by the same guy who runs BTR-SAT—one of the two 24-hour Romany TV stations there. And it's a very grassroots, basic affair, but very heart-felt and it does bring together films about Gypsies from around the world. *American Gypsy* won the best documentary award there at the Golden Wheel a few years ago.

There are some films about Gypsies available here in the US—for example, some Tony Gatliff films on Netflix. And his newest film, from last year—*Transylvania* with Asia Argento—is out on DVD in the US now.

I think there is an international resurgence of interest in Gypsies and particularly Gypsy music at this point. I also think, as far as the films and the music go, I make the comparison between interest in Roma and interest in Cubans. Before *Buena Vista Social Club* you could go to any mega-store, wherever it was, and you could always find Cuban music. I happened to have Cuban friends at that time and I did find a lot of Cuban music. But people didn't look so they didn't know it was there. It must've been an underground core of people who were buying it. The same is true of Gypsy music now.

The concerts in the *Gypsy Caravan* tour were sold out. So obviously people knew they were coming. The footage is amazing—there's such a sense of celebration and happiness to be at those gatherings.

Yes. And Gypsies have been in American for, well—there are reports saying there were some Romani people rowing over on the boats with Christopher Columbus, so—since forever, let's say.

In *American Gypsy* there's a story about an "Uncle Noah" that you excerpt at different points throughout the film as a transition. What's the source of that?

That piece of writing I think is one of the most beautiful pieces of writing I have ever heard or read!



Gypsy Caravan

It's extraordinary.

Really extraordinary. And a line which I didn't dare put into the film because it would seem as though I thought the film could rise to that challenge, but it comes at the beginning—basically to re-cap, this is the story of a nephew speaking to his uncle about their culture, their Romani culture, and asking for permission, really, to speak about it to the rest of the world. And the line which I did not dare include in the film is when the uncle responds, finally giving permission. Because he's given many objections.

He says, "Write a work of such beauty that our enemies will be powerless against us." I really feel that piece of writing is such a work of beauty that it leaves any objector powerless. So I was lucky. Somebody stumbled on that in a collection of writings about religion—something that my grandfather had written in—and sent me a photocopy from India. It's by a Lebanese writer, Douglas Halebi. I actually hope to do something about making it available because I think the world should have access to it.

It's a beautiful piece of writing which shows I think the difficulties of what it is to keep your culture secret, which is very difficult, and how difficult it is to stop it from being a secret when secrecy has been your only protection. I used pieces of this writing to bring to life some of the larger themes that were affecting the Marks family but which also permeate Romani culture and many of the stories I've heard from around the world.

You dedicate *American Gypsy* to filmmaker Marlon Riggs, with whom you studied and worked for a while. Is there anything you'd like to say about your collaboration with him and how that affected your work?

Marlon Riggs was an absolutely phenomenal teacher. He was one of those people who never told any of us whom he was teaching what to do, but would ask you the right question in the right moment and when you were answering— something that felt like it was coming from left field—you would discover that you had found your way into whatever your problem was. So for me he was a tremendous inspiration.

He had a couple things which have always inspired me. One is that he insisted if his grandmother, who had worked as a domestic through her whole life, couldn't understand the film—in other words you really have to keep it real, keep it human at the end, whatever your big context may be. And Marlon emphasized to me also that in making *American Gypsy* I had a specific problem, which is that I was making a film about a culture I am not a part of. I had questions for myself about the authenticity of the author in doing that.

Marlon asked me various questions, to which it was clear that the answer was just that I had to be honest about where the film was coming from so that I didn't claim any authority I didn't have and allowed people to find their own authority and level of truth in the story. And that in fact is why I made the film— can I call it, "slightly in the first person." It's really not about me but we do know who the author is.

What are you going to do next?

I'm actually doing that indie filmmaker thing of spending a lot of time getting out the film that I've just made. *Gypsy Caravan* has played in cinemas in the States, in France, Poland, England—various countries—but I'm still working with the film to create the DVD and also to work with Romani communities and some grassroots outreach projects so that the film can get to work in helping people be respectful of Roma and Romani people being proud of some of the people who are in the film.

In each film, because you were with each group of people for the length of time you were, a patriarch dies—it's Jimmy's father Grover in the first film and in the second film it's the Romanian violinist Nicolae Neascu. What do you take from that as a filmmaker?

That I shouldn't make any more films with old men in them—or anyone I don't

want to die in a hurry! When I just had finished *Gypsy Caravan*, Al Maysles, who shot a lot of it, asked me if I would collaborate with him on his autobiographical film. I was incredibly honored but I was too swamped by what I was doing at the time to be able to say yes, and I would feel that I had let him down if I had. But afterward I thought, well, that's a good thing, isn't it? Because I really don't want to go around killing off people and it seems like the timing of both films has been that the older grandfather figure in the film has died before the end of the film.



Gypsy Caravan

I wonder if the Gypsies consider that a sign about you that you're trustworthy?

The fact that they allowed me to film the funerals, yes. And because that's not something I took for granted, that they took for granted. I have been asked a couple times by Romani people who've seen the film, how come they let you do this? Did I just sneak in or something? No, no. I was invited in both cases to do it. But I do understand that it's a tricky thing and not something one would take for granted.

How did you come to work with Al Maysles?

I met Albert Maysles at a film festival in Taiwan. When I told him I wanted to make the *Gypsy Caravan* film, he said to me, "I must shoot it!" I of course was incredibly honored but thought it could never really happen because he's famous and I'm not! [laughs] That I'd never be able to afford whatever his rates would be. But he was very serious about wanting to do it and said, "Oh no, don't worry, we'll figure all that stuff out." And we did.

We had such a fantastic time working together. He's such a charm to work with. He's also incredibly humble, which I suppose you can be when you have made it that far so well. You have nothing to prove. I think some of the footage that we got with Nicolae Neascu, the older man who did die eventually in *Gypsy Caravan*, is in part because he related so much to the man behind the camera—somebody, you know, who's not a spring chicken himself, whom he could joke with. That made a difference, I think.

Is there anything else that you wish I had asked you or you would want to say about your work?

Well, you asked me about one of my favorite scenes in *American Gypsy*, which is the scene with Lippie, the grandmother who starts laughing with me because I catch her lying. For me that was an incredible moment of honesty. It demonstrated a couple things to me, which I'm learning—I hope—as I go. One is that there is nothing like sense of humor to open people up for the serious things. I think in some ways perhaps you have to make people laugh more, if you want to get serious points across. Because otherwise people's barriers are up. I hope that I'll be able to continue to do something which makes people laugh more and more as I go.

The other thing that comes with the interview with Lippie is that you don't know what you've got until you look back at it in the editing room. I rejected that interview as rubbish when I was done with it because I didn't get the answers I was hoping for. It was only looking back at it—with a very good editor, Jody Francesca—that I realized it was gold dust. I didn't get what I was looking for—I got something much better! I got a demonstration of precisely how people can hide their culture and really not care what I think about whether she's telling the truth or lying. A few weeks before Lippie died actually I went up there to visit the family and to show the film there and I was at her son's house and I said to her, "Oh Lippie, you always make me laugh!" And I talked to her about that interview and she was crying with laughter! She just cared that she kept the yarn going. So it was all good stuff.

American Gypsy is now available on both VHS and DVD. Click [here](#) for the August 1st Stylus review of *Gypsy Caravan*.



By: Nancy Keefe Rhodes
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