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Friday, 08/10/07

Beautiful music wanders around in 'Gypsy Caravan'

 BY DANA KOPP FRANKLIN
 Staff Writer

You don't need Johnny Depp to tell you that Gypsy music is great.

Depp appears about halfway through *Gypsy Caravan*, a documentary about a U.S. concert tour that united five Gypsy bands from four countries.

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Gypsies, or the Romani people as they are more accurately called, migrated from northern India centuries ago and landed in many different countries, bringing along a tremendous musical culture but often being the victims of prejudice or even murder. (Hitler sent Gypsies to death camps along with Jews.)

Depp, who loves and promotes Gypsy music and is close friends with the Romanian band Taraf de Haidouks, tells us that these men

are fine musicians and wonderful human beings far removed from the stereotype of Gypsies as thieves and criminals, but who nonetheless live with the weight of bigotry every day.

It's a moving moment, but strikes a bit of a jarring note, since we've already seen the beauty of the music and some of the stories of the musicians' lives. For example, the members of Taraf de Haidouks tour to help support their entire village, even securing electricity for the town. Do they really need an endorsement from an American celebrity?

Nonetheless, *Gypsy*



Members of the group Fanfare Ciocarlia hit the road in *Gypsy Caravan*. (SHADOW DISTRIBUTION)

'GYPSY CARAVAN'

NOW PLAYING: Belcourt
RATED: No MPAA rating. In various languages with English subtitles.
 1 hour, 51 min.
STAR RATING: 3½ stars

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Caravan is a fascinating journey full of knockout music. Gypsy musicians from India, Romania, Spain and the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia perform and are the subject of short profiles by the filmmakers.

Each group of performers is remarkably different (because of the Gypsy diaspora, they speak different languages), but they are also similar, with a passion for music and a history of endurance in the face of poverty and oppression. Most play music to survive, but also because it expresses the soul.

Unforgettable figures include Esma Redzepova, also known as the Queen of the Gypsies for her impassioned singing. A star in Macedonia and beyond, she seems to be a diva in the best sense of the word, confident in her own talent and power as a symbol of Gypsy culture. She claims that she and her husband adopted and raised 47 orphans, training them to be skilled musicians. That must have been some household.

Then there's Juana la del Pipa of Spain, who belongs to the Antonio El Pipa flamenco ensemble with her nephew Antonio. Juana's gravelly but soaring voice aches with feeling.

Particularly memorable is Harish Kumar, a member of the troupe Maharaja from India. Harish was a student until his parents died, and now he supports his siblings as a dancer of remarkable athleticism, shimmering and swirling in traditional female garb.

Director Jasmine Dellal hasn't exactly produced a seamless account of her subject. She's stingy with background and context, never giving any sort of time frame for the footage, and though the movie is less than two hours, it sometimes lags.

Legendary documentary man Albert Maysles filmed some of the scenes, but other segments occasionally look downright cheesy.

However, the gorgeous artistry of the subjects more than makes up for a lack of mastery on the part of the filmmakers.

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(Hitler sent Gypsies to death camps along with Jews.) The reason that this sentence is in parentheses is because it has no place in the article.

Posted: Sat Aug 11, 2007 2:19 pm

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