Soulful music documentary. Five authentic Romany bands tour America in this celebration of the spirited Gypsy gene.

As the folk explosion continues to mushroom, the time seems right for another ethnolographic music doc to capture the public's imagination à la Buena Vista Social Club. Having already earned Brit director Jasmine Dellal three festival audience awards, this could be the one, especially with the added bonus of its built-in Gypsy chic.

Feature continues
traveling showcase for the world's finest Romany bands - Dellal's film joins the five virtuoso acts on a triumphant, six-week road-trip of sellout gigs across America. Hailing from Macedonia, Romania, Spain and Northern India (the birthplace of the Rom), the bands represent the rich ethno-cultural diversity within the 10 million strong Gypsy diaspora.

They're so different from each other, in fact, that it takes a while for them (and us) to recognize a musical connection between them, or an anthropological one for that matter. What links Maharaja's traditional Indian raga to the drunken brass oompah of Romania's Fanfare Ciocarlia? And how is the frenzied string wizardry of their countrymen, Taraf De Haïdouks, related to Esma Redzepova's Macedonian wailing?

Dellal reveals their common denominators by slipping away from the intoxicating atmosphere of the Caravan concerts (shot in part by legendary documentary filmmaker Albert Maysles) to show us the grim reality of the performers' lives back home. What becomes painfully obvious is that these Gypsy troubadours have a tough time of it no matter where they live, and naturally it's mirrored in their music.

Take Juana, the illiterate aunt of flamenco dance star Antonio El Pipa. We find her struggling to stay afloat in a Spanish sink estate as her family slides into drug addiction. When she sings with her nephew's backing band, her caterwaul reminds you of building irons rusting in concrete.

"Fierce tribal pride and a sweaty lust for life"

More from Billy Mowbray:
Full Review: When The Road Bends: Tales Of A Gypsy Caravan
Full Review: Clubland
Full Review: A Few Days In September
Full Review: Forbidden
Full Review: Pickup On South Street

See everything by this writer